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Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

(SUBCOMMITTEE)

Reference: Education of students with disabilities

WEDNESDAY, 3 JULY 2002

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SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS, SMALL BUSINESS

AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 3 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.

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Subcommittee met at 9.02 a.m.

BOOTH, Mrs Lynn Catherine, President, New South Wales Chapter, Australian Guidance and Counselling Association

THOMPSON, Mrs Joy, Area Representative, Australian Guidance and Counselling Association

CHAIR—Good morning. I declare open this public hearing of the subcommittee 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 the 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 its committees is a breach of privilege.

I welcome all observers to this public hearing. Also, I welcome the representatives from the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association. The committee has before it your submission No. 106. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make to that submission?

Mrs Booth—If I could just refer you to pages 8 and 9, it is possible that I overstated the case in compiling the original submission when I indicated there that children with disabilities who are enrolled or who are identified after the closing date for applications receive no support. This has happened in some cases, but there does appear to be a contingency fund for children with demonstrable needs in both systems. It can be a bit variable.

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 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 a brief opening statement.

Mrs Booth—I will make a brief statement on behalf of the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association. We are a group of about 400 people in New South Wales from cross-sectorial systems, almost all of us educational psychologists, working with schools and families, and with students in the schools themselves. We probably represent one of the largest groups of people working with these children, apart from the members of the Australian Association of Special Educators. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you.

Our views today should represent country and city people, they should represent private schools and they should represent people from a number of different areas, but those views are not necessarily available at all our committee meetings. The views expressed today are from those on the committee, who are mostly city based. It is very difficult to get information about the situation in the country.

We do see a lot of good things happening in our schools for the education of students with disabilities. Again, they are variable. Some of the really good things that we see happening are: very good assessment and diagnosis of students with disabilities, so that thoughtful planning can take place; needs based assessments, so that programs are educationally appropriate; good liaison with parents, so that cooperative planning can happen; and adequate funding support for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. Sometimes there is very good liaison with NSW Health and the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care to support students with disabilities in schools. There can be good therapy supports for students with physical and language difficulties. We see not only lots of good and appropriate professional development for teachers who have these students in their class but also good cooperative consultation going on among all people working with these children.

But we also see what happens when the supports are inadequate: late diagnosis of conditions that impact on learning, such as children with communication disorders being identified at school entry because they have not been picked up by NSW Health earlier on. This even applies to those with sensory disabilities, where children who are profoundly deaf have not been picked up. We see huge class disruption when children with behaviour difficulties are insufficiently supported; students from low socioeconomic or other disadvantaged backgrounds being less well supported across learning and particularly therapy areas from their peers in more advantaged areas—we find this very unjust and inequitable; lots of teacher stress due to coping with high-support-need students when resources and/or training are inadequate; very dissatisfied and quite angry teachers at being required to teach such students when they have not been trained to do it. Sometimes we actually hear teachers saying, ‘I’m not going to teach these children. I’m not trained and I am not going to do it.’ And we see huge amounts of counsellor

stress about making detailed applications for numerous funding programs for students and then not getting the funding support because there is a lack of money. Sometimes they do, but often they do not.

We are rather hoping today that you will ask us to help you explore the areas where things are working successfully and areas where they are failing and that we can help you from the perspective of a professional observer—the guidance officer, the school counsellor, the educational psychologists—offering, perhaps, a fairly unique perspective as colleagues to teachers, supports to parents and advocates for students. Thank you for asking us to appear, and we hope we can answer your questions.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Your submission’s strength, from my point of view, is the way in which you have linked the question of socioeconomic disadvantage with learning disabilities and other forms of disabilities. You say that various types of disabilities can be defined within existing definitions, but not necessarily at all appropriate levels and that this has quite serious funding implications. Could you enlarge on that point?

Mrs Booth—Are we are looking at page 4 here?

CHAIR—It is actually pages 5, 6 and 7 where you start to develop that point.

Mrs Booth—Could you go over the question again?

CHAIR—How adequate is the process of assessment and what are the implications of getting the assessments wrong?

Mrs Booth—If you look at areas of disadvantage, even getting an assessment done for a student can be very difficult. Families in poor socioeconomic groups or families who come from other countries and who are not aware of what our system has to offer often do not get any assessments done at all. The department of school education is fairly well placed across country areas in that there are school counsellors who are psychologists in all schools, or as many as we can find staff for which is mostly all. They, at least, have the services of a psychologist to assess children for intellectual disabilities, but there may be difficulties finding assessments for children with other disabilities, for example, autism. It can be very difficult to get those assessments done. You need someone from the Autism Association of New South Wales and that is expensive—it can be $400 to $500 for an assessment. There are difficulties there for people who do not have that sort of money or who do not have access to those services.

CHAIR—You indicate on page 5 of your submission that in the Catholic education system there are problems with access to educational psychologists. Given that you have had direct experience in that system, can you enlarge upon that issue?

Mrs Booth—Catholic education in New South Wales crosses 11 dioceses. Some of those are wealthier than others, some put a particular priority upon having people to do assessments and others do not, and some pay for outside psychologists to do assessments. Very poor dioceses such as Wilcannia-Forbes do not have access to those services. They have to rely on community health and often that is poor, so they end up not getting any funding. The children are not

identified; therefore they do not meet the criteria for Commonwealth funding, and therefore they do not get funded.

CHAIR—The Commonwealth provides very large sums of money for the Catholic education system and when you combine it with the state system it is argued that it is, in fact, in excess of 100 per cent of the average cost of government schooling. How is it that some dioceses do not receive that money for this particular purpose?

Mrs Booth—I cannot answer you on that because I do not have access to that sort of knowledge. The figure you are quoting is different from the figure I have heard which is that we run at about 80 per cent.

CHAIR—Yes, but there are state moneys as well for the purposes and there is a range of other—

Mrs Booth—We do not get state integration funding.

CHAIR—You do not get any state moneys for recurrent grants?

Mrs Booth—Yes, we get recurrent grants.

CHAIR—Is there no money allocated through this process? Part of that recurrent grant money, surely, is to provide assistance in this area as well?

Mrs Booth—The extent of my knowledge here, given that I normally work as an educational psychologist and not as a financial person, is fairly limited but it is still my understanding that the figures we get are approximately 80 per cent overall of what is given to state schools.

CHAIR—All right. Mrs Thompson, you have worked in the state school system. Are you finding similar sets of problems?

Mrs Thompson—I think there is a very good framework there but the state services are stretched to the limit and definitely the need is great—in some areas more than others. For instance, in the area of speech assessment, in some districts counsellors have reported long waiting periods. The connection with the local health services is a very important one and they are under strain in terms of the number of students who present with their families to be assessed. Given that the funding will go with the allocation of a disability, it is very important that these community health services are more accessible to parents. They are under considerable strain.

CHAIR—Your submission, as I said, on page 5 and 6 draws attention to people who are less well off, people in low socioeconomic groups, people from migrant backgrounds and Aboriginal groups. There is a layer of disadvantage—over and above that which you would normally face—as a result of economic position in society. How much of an impediment is one's social position to getting access to early intervention programs?

Mrs Booth—Perhaps I could fill that in from my point of view. Our diocese covers quite a range of socioeconomic areas—from quite poor, large migrant intake areas through to quite wealthy areas. I know that in the wealthy areas of our diocese, for instance, a student might be able to get continued case management through a psychologist as well as ongoing speech therapy in blocks, say several times a year; whereas a recent communication from a community health centre further west said that they could no longer see children over the age of three for speech pathology services. So, really we are looking at parents who do not even realise their child has a speech problem by the age of three and who then cannot access services; yet, in a more wealthy area, parents can. That seems to be the case across Sydney. I find that absolutely appalling. It is the area that I work in, and it is my families who are suffering from that. Often the parents do not even realise there is a problem until the child starts school and then the community health service says, ‘We can’t see this child,’ or, if they can, ‘You’ll go on a waiting list for a year.’ Special educators will tell you that the development of reading and other literacy skills depends so much on the development of oral language that you can virtually predict that if a child has language difficulties when they start school they will have huge difficulties in the entire literacy area. So we have kids who are disadvantaged in every way, right from the start, with no redress outside.

CHAIR—So if the Commonwealth were to take more active measures in regard to early childhood development, do you think that would facilitate a better understanding of these issues amongst parents as well as assisting students directly?

Mrs Booth—I do, and I think initiatives like Families First may well help to make quite a difference there. But then there are other things that are happening—this is more at a state than a Commonwealth level. Local community health centres have traditionally had nurses based in schools or visiting schools who do early school screening, so every child in kindergarten gets a hearing test, a vision test and a very brief language assessment done. That has been progressively dismantled. They are now saying, ‘If you think a child’s got a problem, you can refer them to the nurse.’ So we are putting onto teachers the need to become diagnosticians and to say, ‘I think this kid’s got a hearing problem,’ ‘I think this kid’s got a vision problem,’ or ‘I think this kid’s got a language problem.’ I think teachers have enough to do without becoming medicos as well.

Senator ALLISON—I wonder if I can go back to the question of assessment, in order to be clear about what happens in New South Wales with regard to school counsellors. I think you were suggesting that in every school in New South Wales there is a school counsellor; is that correct?

Mrs Thompson—Access to a school counsellor. School counsellors have a district; it usually comprises 1,200 students. That might be divided between a high school and primary school, or three primary schools in metropolitan areas. That of course varies in the country, but that is the proportion. So they have access to a school counsellor and district guidance teams.

Senator ALLISON—That is determined by the department of education on some sort of formula?

Mrs Thompson—Yes, that is right.

Senator ALLISON—What size would a school be—you might know this; otherwise, we can ask the department later—to warrant a full-time counsellor?

Mrs Thompson—In one I know, the numbers are something like 1,400 or 1,500. They would have to be fairly large. That is a large metropolitan high school.

Senator ALLISON—So these are quite busy counsellors?

Mrs Thompson—Very, yes. One school has two counsellors sharing a large metropolitan high school. But that is rare. Most high schools have around 1,000 students.

Senator ALLISON—Are there any other factors that come to bear—for instance, the number of non-English-speaking background students or measures of disadvantage? Do these add to or subtract from the allocation of counsellors?

Mrs Thompson—These are taken into account when allocating the needs of the school. I am not sure what the ratio is, but certainly if a school's needs are great then the counsellor time would be increased.

Senator ALLISON—And in New South Wales schools do not have global budgets out of which they must make decisions about whether or not to have a counsellor or an art teacher?

Mrs Thompson—I am not able to answer how that is done.

Mrs Booth—You are usually appointed at the state level.

Mrs Thompson—Yes. It is appointed at a state level.

Mrs Booth—It is not up to an individual school to choose.

Senator ALLISON—That is my question.

Mrs Thompson—No; sorry.

Mrs Booth—The counsellor role is more than just assessment, too. That is only a tiny bit of it. There is also all the counselling and educational advice. A lot of stuff goes on. It is not just counselling.

Senator ALLISON—They do not end up doing careers advice and placement of kids on work experience?

Mrs Thompson—No, but they work very closely with other people, obviously, like the careers adviser, because transition programs involve many personnel at the school. They are part of the school's support learning team, and that means that there are many people involved in assisting students with needs.

Senator ALLISON—What exactly is the process of assessing? Say a student is suspected of having a learning disability: does the school typically provide that assessment through the counsellor? There is an enormous variety of approaches to assessments between states, and lots of complaints from parents are that this can cost many hundreds of dollars and they have to pay that amount. What is the situation here? Is it a mixed bag? Is it a question of parents knowing what they are entitled to?

Mrs Thompson—Schools have access to a learning difficulties teacher, and that person does screening at various levels and would be able to assess students with particular learning difficulties. In addition, the school counsellor may do further testing if warranted, and then, with others, help with an individual education plan, ideally.

Senator ALLISON—You said learning difficulties. I wonder if in your mind there is a distinction between learning difficulties and learning disabilities like dyslexia?

Mrs Thompson—That is true. Learning difficulties is an area that all teachers address in their classrooms, whereas a learning disability is something that is permanent that requires more assessment and assistance. There are difficulties within a system because those students are not as well assisted, perhaps, as students with, say, physical disabilities or other specific disabilities.

Senator ALLISON—Can you explain the process that a parent today will go through with a child with a learning disability suspected by, say, grade 1 or 2? Typically, what would parents have to do?

Mrs Thompson—Speak to the teacher and ask for the teacher to talk with the support learning committee. That would involve the special learning teacher. The principal or deputy, perhaps, whoever is on that committee, asks for the student to be monitored and perhaps asks the school counsellor to be involved in that committee observation. There is monitoring for a period, doing an assessment in the classroom, and then more non-reference testing. So it is collecting data, I suppose, first of all, and together working on some individual education plan which might involve accessing help at a district level if that was required.

Senator ALLISON—For assessment?

Mrs Thompson—For assessment, yes.

Senator ALLISON—For help with assessment at district level?

Mrs Thompson—Yes, if the school was not able to provide it.

Senator ALLISON—So it is decided to go to district level. What then happens?

Mrs Thompson—You are able to put in a request for assistance, for consultancy if the school is unable to provide what is needed, but, in general cases, the school has the resources to work with that student through the STLD, and the school counsellor and remedial reading.

Senator ALLISON—At what stage—and who pays for it—is the assessment done of a child that is going to cost hundreds of dollars, whether it is for autism, dyslexia or something else?

Mrs Thompson—If we are talking about learning disabilities and the school counsellor is able to do the appropriate assessment, that would happen.

Mrs Booth—And that is free in the state system.

Senator ALLISON—Okay. So you would expect no parent in the state sector in New South Wales to have to pay for their child's testing for a learning disability.

Mrs Thompson—I think they have access to the school counsellor and would be able to have some assessment done.

Senator ALLISON—And you are confident that all school counsellors have the capacity to do this testing?

Mrs Booth—Yes, they are all trained.

Senator ALLISON—Thank you; that is helpful. I was interested in the part of your submission which talks about the over-reliance on the scores of tests with no reference to the functional needs of the student. Can you tell the committee what you think about recent trends towards testing and benchmarking, and how you see that sitting with the need to identify the needs of these students?

Mrs Booth—Benchmarking is very broad. Certain percentages of children are expected to reach certain levels, so that always leaves you with some children at the bottom who are not going to be achieving, or certainly not get average results. We have to remember all the time that 50 per cent of the cohort is going to be below average. That is part of it. I guess what we are saying, and what most parents and special educators are saying, is that you can get a score on a test and you can be catered for. If you have a mild intellectual disability, perhaps, or a borderline IQ of 75, which would put you in the bottom five per cent of the population, you are still able to attract some sort of funding or support. Some of those children are an absolute delight and a joy to have in class. You can easily modify how you are teaching them and you can easily give them what they need within the mainstream classroom setting with a bit of modification of what you are doing and a bit of additional attention. But some other children who may actually score higher than that require huge amounts of assistance. So the scores on an IQ test, while they are useful in one way, are not the way to make judgments about kids in terms of their level of need. And that needs to be addressed in other ways.

I have been looking at the process the Department of School Education uses to look at how needy a child is, and I am very impressed with what they have set out there. But what our group of people in the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association are telling us as well is that that is interpreted differently at different levels. So there is a bit of a push, because people have limited amounts of money, to say, 'Maybe that child isn't that needy.' I have also heard some parents say that if you are a really good advocate for your kid you can push that level higher so that the child gets more funding. So if you are very vocal, very verbal, very able to present your child as very needy, you are likely to get their neediness exaggerated—'Oh, he's not really a

two; he's really a three because he can't do this and he can't do that and he can't do the other.' Less advantaged parents are less likely to be able to do that, particularly parents from non-English speaking backgrounds or parents for whom school systems can be a bit intimidating. They do not have that ability.

I think benchmarking is a good idea across a system but it is not going to address the needs of individual children, and we need to look more at what are the needs of an individual child. What is going to help this child to be the very best that they can be within a classroom setting? In our system there is an actual funding cut-off point: at 75 you get funding and at 76 you do not. There is no meaningful difference between a child with an IQ of 75 and a child with an IQ of 76—no meaningful difference at all. You could test them on another day and they might come out at 73 or they might come out at 77. There is no meaningful difference but there is the cut off-point, and you do not get funding if you are 76 but you get it if you are 75. As I said, that child with the 75 IQ might be a dream in the class, might do really well and work to the best of their ability and be very easy to teach, but a child with an IQ of 80 with dyslexia, say, could require huge amounts of input, yet we are not funded for that.

Senator ALLISON—You are not funded additionally for children with learning disabilities?

Mrs Booth—Absolutely not.

Senator ALLISON—And many of those can have quite high IQs. That is the point you are making.

Mrs Booth—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—Integration aides for children with disabilities: what is your view about their training and their effectiveness? Is there some improvement that can be made? I gather that in New South Wales there are at least courses that they can and are required to undertake. But is that good enough? Is this an area that we should be looking at in terms of better preparation?

Mrs Thompson—They are a very valuable resource. Training is taking place. I am not sure whether it is mandatory, but I know there is certainly training at the district level. Teachers find the aides invaluable. They are an enormous resource for the schools.

Senator ALLISON—I have heard that some are not so invaluable.

Mrs Booth—You can get duds in any position, can't you? In our particular system, in the Parramatta diocese, our teacher assistants have not been trained. They are employed through the money we get from Commonwealth grants, which is very small. I am talking about a child with a mild intellectual disability attracting less than $600 a year to be spent on aide time. With respect, that is about 30 hours a year, and you might as well not bother, it is only because the aide funding to a school is aggregated that it becomes a useful resource to the school. We are setting up the certificate III in teacher's aide (special) training for our aides for next year. We are in the process of doing that. Previously we ran some courses ourselves but there has been no formal training or formal recognition of it. Quite often the people who come in are mums who have been helpful in the reading program and the principal thinks that they would be really useful and helpful and they approach them in a more formal way when they need a teacher

assistant. There is then a job interview process. There has not been formal training for them. It is a lack that they feel and we feel, and we are making moves on that in our diocese to offer training to all of them next year.

Senator TIERNEY—When I was teaching there was usually one counsellor for a high school and all the feeder primary schools. Is it still the same system?

Mrs Thompson—Yes.

Mrs Booth—It has got better. They gave us some new positions a few years ago—about 90 or so.

Mrs Thompson—Yes, they have increased the numbers.

Senator TIERNEY—How did that work out in the system?

Mrs Thompson—It certainly helped, and access is easier. In some areas I would think that the waiting time to get through referrals is still higher than you would hope.

Senator TIERNEY—How did they place the 90?

Mrs Thompson—Across the state. They have also recently employed 19 new district guidance officers, again in an effort to assist.

Senator TIERNEY—What about out in the rural and regional areas? Do they get any extra assistance there? Is there any recognition of the fact that there are obviously many more feeder schools to a high school in the country? Is time spent in the car for the counsellor recognised, for example?

Mrs Thompson—Yes, it is a difficulty for the teaching profession generally.

Senator TIERNEY—Did that change with the 90 extra?

Mrs Thompson—I am certain that all schools in New South Wales have access to school counselling services and that the 90 positions helped the situation. Another 90 would be even better.

Senator TIERNEY—I was speaking about a time span of 30 years ago. Given what has happened in schools with increased behavioural difficulties and the increased welfare role for teachers that has developed over that time, it does not seem to be a great increase or a great recognition of the changing needs. Has your association pushed to have a better ratio of counsellors in the schools? What has been the reaction of the department to that?

Mrs Booth—It has been an ongoing thing with the association over the years. There was great rejoicing when we got the extra 90 positions.

Senator TIERNEY—What year was that?

Mrs Booth—About three or four years ago. Sorry, I have been out of the department for 10 years, so I am a little hazy on some of these things. Yes, there was great rejoicing, and then there was a need to find the bodies, and this was the difficulty. School counsellors in New South Wales are pretty special people in that they have all got teacher training, they have all worked in front of a class for a minimum of two years, and they have all got a postgraduate qualification in school counselling, which is at least a year of full-time study afterwards. They are a very highly trained group of people with a lot of expertise across a lot of areas. Finding people who have those qualifications has actually been very difficult for the department to the extent that they are now offering things like scholarships to complete your psychology studies as well as scholarships to do your postgraduate studies in school counselling.

Senator TIERNEY—Who is offering those scholarships?

Mrs Booth—The Department of School Education.

Senator TIERNEY—In those specific areas?

Mrs Booth—In those areas, yes.

Senator TIERNEY—How many a year do they offer?

Mrs Booth—They are training 35 school counsellors this year. That literally means that those people are on full pay and are doing full-time study. The department are paying all their university fees, and they are supporting them with full pay. It is a very generous offer because they want people.

Senator TIERNEY—Because they presume that, if they advertise in the marketplace, there are just not the people who have the skills?

Mrs Booth—That is right—not with those qualifications. One of the things our organisation will fight for quite strongly is maintaining those qualifications.

CHAIR—So you should.

Mrs Booth—Yes, we see the value of having had that teaching experience.

Senator TIERNEY—Sure. You mentioned earlier that there used to be a system where students would be diagnosed as having particular learning difficulties, and you mentioned that it is increasingly coming back on the classroom teacher to identify particular learning problems. What is your assessment of the level of skill of general classroom teachers in diagnosing children with disabilities, learning difficulties or particular problems?

Mrs Booth—When I referred before to teachers having to become diagnosticians, I was talking more about them having to pick up things in the hearing and vision areas, which they have not had to do before. In general, we find that teachers are very aware when a child is achieving at a different rate or a different level in their classroom. There are some who are not as good at picking it up, but in general teachers are fairly aware. But they may not know why a

child is behaving like that. They might say, ‘This child isn’t achieving as well as his classmates. He doesn’t seem to understand what’s going on in the class. He can’t follow the directions.’ That is where we see people from our organisation as having a role in helping the teacher to tease out what it is. Is it, for instance, that the child is not understanding language very well and therefore they are not following directions because they do not understand the language, or is it because they have an intellectual disability and they are not following directions because they really have no comprehension of what the directions entail? That is not really a job for the teacher, and we discourage teachers from doing it in some ways. Otherwise, we have teachers saying, ‘I want you to see little Johnny; he’s autistic,’ or, ‘We want you to see Mary; she’s ADHD,’ and making diagnoses with no training to do so. As psychologists, we try to dissuade people from making those diagnoses but encourage them to say, ‘This child’s different. These are the behaviours I’m observing. Can you help?’

Senator TIERNEY—But surely they are not making the diagnoses.

Mrs Booth—They try!

Senator TIERNEY—Surely they are making an assessment and then getting a professional to confirm what—

Mrs Booth—Yes, but as these diagnoses become more common and as people become more used to them you are getting teachers doing that, and we are trying to dissuade them from doing it.

Senator TIERNEY—I am a bit surprised they can, because the evidence we have received so far is that it is all a bit hit-and-miss whether they get any of this at all in their teacher preparation.

Mrs Booth—That is right. There is supposed to be a compulsory unit of study in special education for teachers. In some cases, I have certainly heard it referred to as a mickey mouse course. It is too broad anyway. What can you do in one unit to cover all the possibilities that you might face as a teacher?

Senator TIERNEY—What do you think should be in the preservice preparation in terms of the length of the course?

Mrs Booth—You could probably train them for six years! That is what it feels like sometimes when you look at what you would like a teacher to learn. If I could go to my own experience, I was experienced as a science teacher and, when I went to do my school counsellor training course, I can remember looking at the person teaching us about behaviour management and thinking, ‘That’s where all that psychology falls in. That’s how it makes sense in the classroom.’ I had had four years of study in psychology but had not related it to my classroom practice until this specialist stood there and said, ‘This is what you do.’ It clicked and all made sense. Until you have been in front of a class, perhaps, it is very difficult to make sense of it too. But the one thing that I think is missing more than anything else is behaviour management strategies, and that is what is destroying the teachers—the children with high behaviour needs who are pulling their classes apart. The teachers do not have the strategies, and behaviour people are too thin on the ground sometimes.

Senator TIERNEY—And they were not taught anything at all or had little preservice preparation?

Mrs Booth—Very little.

Senator TIERNEY—There seems to be a major shortcoming in that sense. We heard yesterday from people from Sydney University, which does have a compulsory unit, but they were indicating that there are other institutions where there is no requirement to do anything in these areas.

Mrs Booth—I thought it actually was a requirement in New South Wales.

Senator TIERNEY—Who makes that requirement?

Mrs Booth—I do not know. I had thought that it was some sort of state government requirement, because it is supposed to go across all universities, but I could be entirely wrong and speaking through my hat.

Senator TIERNEY—I would be interested to see how they could actually enforce that. They have legislative powers so I suppose they could if they wanted to. We might check that out, but I do not think it actually exists.

Mrs Booth—Maybe it is meant to be the employer who says, 'You will have this if you want to be employed,' but I do not know if that is happening either.

Senator TIERNEY—So it is a bit hit-and-miss in the preservice area, and you indicated that some classroom experience is useful in developing these sorts of diagnostic and learning strategies. What is your view on inservice training in relation to this across-the-state system? If teachers are not getting it in their preservice training, what is happening in inservice training?

Mrs Booth—I cannot speak for the state system. I do not know.

Mrs Thompson—I think it is very difficult for teachers to have that release time. There is a lot of inservice training going on within schools—they do as well as they can, given their resources—but it is definitely linked to funding.

Senator TIERNEY—I will turn to children who often enter school with a double difficulty in that they might have a disability and also have an ethnic background so they have language skill difficulties. Can you draw us a picture of what assistance students in those categories get that is over and above what normally happens with someone with a disability in a school?

Mrs Booth—I think in most systems there is an ESL component or a new arrivals component built in to cater for children who may not have a first language of English or who come into our schools not speaking English. If they also have a disability, it is often very difficult to assess that. For instance, if I were asked to see a child in kindergarten or grade 1 who had come into school not speaking English, I could not give a valid IQ test to that child because they might not understand the instructions I was giving them and certainly would not understand the language

well enough to be able to respond adequately. The most I can do is say that, if I do this test with the child, it gives me an indication of their current functioning in class and why they might be having some difficulties. Then, in our system, you might say to them that you think this child also has special educational needs as well as language support needs through ESL, and they may have other needs as well. Then we attempt to address as many of those needs as we can, perhaps through a learning support committee or a number of specialist people through the school and access to funding supports if they are available.

Senator TIERNEY—When school counsellors are confronted with a situation in, say, a primary school where quite a number of children who cannot speak English have come in from other countries, when do you get involved in assessing IQs? Do you wait several years until they have picked up their language skills? What happens?

Mrs Thompson—You can do an assessment of their non-verbal abilities, which does not require a language component, and that will give you some indication.

Senator TIERNEY—It would be a pretty rough indication though.

Mrs Thompson—It would be pretty rough. Generally, you are looking at their language needs as first priority.

Mrs Booth—I guess it again comes back to what the needs of this child are rather than what an IQ test says. What does this child need right now? This child needs lots of language support and they look like they need simplified lessons, small group work and an individual education plan, and they are the sorts of things that should be put in place. Ideally, they are put in place but in some cases they cannot be.

Senator TIERNEY—So, in New South Wales, where schools have high populations of these students, are they treated any differently in terms of staffing or resource support to take into account the fact that these children do not have a level of English skill that is sufficient to that point? Is there is some way of advancing that?

Mrs Thompson—They have more ESL resources available to them.

Senator TIERNEY—That is the theory, but does that actually happen?

Mrs Thompson—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Does it happen in each of those schools where there is a high population of these students?

Mrs Thompson—Yes, where they have identified the need.

Senator TIERNEY—How does that manifest itself? Is an itinerant support teacher available, or what happens?

Mrs Thompson—No. In a high school ESL teachers would run classes for those students.

Senator TIERNEY—What about in primary schools?

Mrs Thompson—I cannot answer for primary schools. I believe that ESL teachers are available there, too, but there might be more itinerant teacher support.

Senator ALLISON—The subject of students with ADHD and inattentiveness—that general sort of group—has come up and, of course, we have seen highly increased levels of medication being applied to students in recent years. Is it your experience that in New South Wales principals or teachers are requiring certain students to be on medication? What do you think of this trend? It is certainly happening in the US.

Mrs Booth—I have heard of it happening in the US, yes. There are times when I think you would dearly like a child to be medicated, but if the parents choose not to that is their absolute right. We should not be querying that, and we should be looking for alternative ways of managing things. We have to acknowledge, too, that for a child where a diagnosis has been appropriate and medication is appropriate it works about 80 per cent of the time and makes a dramatic difference to that child. You would present all that information to the parents. You might request that they go and see a paediatrician and talk it over with them, but if the parents' decision is not to medicate their child that is their absolute right.

The only thing is that, if you have a child whose behaviour is so disruptive and so unmanageable, then alternative placement in the end might be required. If the child cannot be managed in a mainstream setting with alternative behavioural treatments—it is very sad, but that does happen—then in some cases you need to look for an alternative placement. I am not saying by this that, if the parent will not medicate the child, you are going to kick them out. I do not mean it in that sense, but some children whose behaviour is just so off the planet do not respond to any of the therapies that you might use or to any of the normal behavioural interventions that you would expect to happen in a class. In my past, principals have said to parents, 'We think your child needs very specialised help and very specialised assistance, and when their behaviour is more settled they are welcome back here.' Then there are alternative placements such as Redbank House, which we use here, which is attached to a hospital and a psychiatric unit. They have a school there, and they have live-in facilities for parents and families so that they can go and live together to work on these problems. Then they can reintegrate the child into the home school or into a new school, if they have blotted their copybook so severely that going back to where they came from is not a possibility. But that right of the parents has to be respected if they do not wish to medicate their child.

Senator ALLISON—Are you able to explain why we have such an enormous variation of medication levels, state by state and electorate by electorate? For instance, the WA figure is 43 students per 1,000 head of population compared with well and truly less than 10 students per 1,000 head of population in most other states.

Mrs Booth—You do build up cultures among parents. For instance, they might say, 'My child is medicated and this is what happens.' Some doctors are more willing to make a diagnosis of ADHD or, because they are doctors and can prescribe medication, will say, 'I do not know much about behaviour management, but I know how to prescribe a pill, so that is what I will do.' And they do. We have heard cases of parents who walk in to see a doctor and the doctor

says, ‘Your child is ADHD, is he? Okay, here is a prescription for Ritalin.’ There is no examination at all. There are certainly issues there.

I know that some people mapped the number of prescriptions around local doctors and found that they could do this very clearly with a little bar graph that showed the doctor who was prescribing for every child who walked in the door. We see our role, if we are referring parents to paediatricians, to choose ones who are going to give a thorough examination and a very good diagnosis and explore possibilities for parents.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming today.

[9.51 a.m.]

EVANS, Dr David Greig, National Vice President, Australian Association of Special Education

GRAY, Mrs Geraldine Mary, National Councillor, Australian Association of Special Education

CHAIR—On behalf of the subcommittee I welcome the Australian Association of Special Education. Are there any changes or corrections that you would like to make to your submission?

Dr Evans—There are no fundamental changes to our submission at the moment, 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 now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Dr Evans—I would like to thank the committee for inviting the Australian Association of Special Education to be here this morning. The Australian Association of Special Education is a research based, non-categorical organisation which represents and consists of members of teachers, parents, educational administrators, therapists and university researchers. The provision of educational programs for students with special education needs includes those students with disabilities and, as such, raises for us a number of issues with regard to eligibility criteria and teacher training for teachers who work with these students. AASE promotes a non-categorical approach by focusing on those variables that educators have direct impact on—curriculum: what we want students to learn; instruction: what teachers do to assist students to meet curriculum outcomes; and the environment: those variables within the learning environment in which the student is currently placed.

Existing eligibility criteria focus on variables over which many teachers and schools have no direct control or influence. Current eligibility criteria make a number of assumptions: for example, all students diagnosed with a specific disability have a set of common characteristics. Tests used to identify disability are able to reliably and validly discriminate between those students with a disability and those without. A non-categorical approach focused directly on the needs of the student makes an assumption that all students are not the same and hence have differing educational needs. Students with a disability are not different: in fact, one could argue they are more in common with their disabled peers than different. An example of that are students who are diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability who have many educational needs that are very similar to students in a mainstream classroom, yet specific intervention in terms of curriculum design, instructional adaptations and environmental adaptations can assist those students meet those educational needs along with the other students in the class.

The use of tests based directly on the curriculum are best able to identify the needs of the student. When the student’s current level of performance is significantly discrepant from

another student's in one or more areas then special education provisions may be needed. Using curriculum based assessments—assessments that are designed based on the content of class curriculum—and functional assessments that take into consideration the environmental features in which the student is receiving their education maximises the validity of the assessment process. It also provides direct links to the classroom program, informing the teacher and school community on the effectiveness of instructional interventions. Provision of educational programs is best designed as part of a problem-solving approach. A problem-solving approach is based on data taken from the curriculum and includes specific decision making points along the way regarding the student's needs and how they are being met, and emphasises the use of functional and multidimensional assessment procedures. This process also permits inputs from people central to the welfare of the student, including the student where appropriate. AASE is committed to the provision of quality special education programs including to those students who are diagnosed with a disability. It believes this inquiry is critical to enhancing the quality of educational programs for students with special education needs. AASE would like this inquiry to know that they would be willing to provide ongoing input and feedback to this inquiry and future government program development.

CHAIR—You have indicated that your organisation is research based. What is the source of your funding for that research?

Dr Evans—The association does not receive funding per se to conduct research. The association through its members, across all states within Australia, takes research conducted by others, examines it, critiques it and summarises it as part of its policy decisions and policy making and the disseminating of information to its members, many of whom work directly with students with disabilities.

CHAIR—I see you are at the University of Sydney. How much of your funding base would come from recurrent grants?

Dr Evans—We do not have any recurrent grants. Any moneys that we have are through membership.

CHAIR—The only source of money is from membership subscriptions. What is the budget for your organisation?

Dr Evans—It is not a figure that I am aware of per se. I could get back to you.

CHAIR—I would be interested to know what sort of money you are able to call upon for this sort of work and where it comes from. Does it come from state governments?

Mrs Gray—No, we are a voluntary organisation. We give of our own time as educators. We hold conferences and we organise our journals with our own source of funding.

CHAIR—This in addition to your normal work as academics and other jobs that you do?

Mrs Gray—That is right.

CHAIR—Your primary source of income, in effect, would be recurrent grants through the university; is that correct?

Mrs Gray—No, this is totally outside our normal occupations.

CHAIR—I mean you as individuals are doing this in a voluntary capacity. But you normally would work in the universities?

Dr Evans—I happen to work in the university but there is no direct link with my current position.

Mrs Gray—I am an educator and there is no link.

CHAIR—Is it just a coincidence that you are based at the University of Sydney? What is the connection?

Dr Evans—That is my current substantive position in terms of paid employment.

CHAIR—You pick up the university in that capacity?

Dr Evans—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Your submission argues for curriculum based assessment measures—functional assessment as opposed to the current system of utilising criteria such as tests, cognitive abilities and psychometric assessments. In a nutshell, could you explain why you think we should move from the current system to what you are proposing?

Dr Evans—One of the fundamental beliefs that we hold, and we believe that this is well supported by the research and I have referred to that in the submission, is that current psychometric assessments, while being in themselves highly reliable in coming up with the same result over and over again, have only a very minor or indirect impact on the specifics of what actually goes into determining the needs of the student and what happens in a classroom or an educational setting to help teachers and others meet the needs of that student.

The use of curriculum based measures and functional measures—'functional' meaning observing in the playground, for example, a student whose behaviour has come under scrutiny because of the impact on others around them or on the child personally—permits those working with the student to identify characteristics and behaviours that the student may need to develop or behaviours that the student may need to enhance. Having that direct link to the actual nature and the current needs of the student means far better and more direct links to program design, resourcing and the implementation of resources for that particular student.

Senator TIERNEY—You have given an example of functional assessment. What about a curriculum based assessment? Can you give me an example of what you mean by that?

Dr Evans—I will take an example out of research on curriculum based assessment in the area of early reading. Early on in their schooling, students can be identified as being at risk through

particular aspects of the curriculum. Phonemic and phonological awareness have been shown to be highly predictive of what will happen to those students down the path. If we use those measures to say, ‘Okay, we have these students who are falling behind certain criteria in regard to phonemic and phonological awareness development,’ then we can up the ante in terms of the intensity of the program to ensure that those students’ needs are actually being met. That is in regard to trying to prevent problems down the path.

Senator TIERNEY—In the current system, the psychometric assessment and cognitive ability tests are usually applied by professionally trained people?

Dr Evans—That is correct.

Senator TIERNEY—What you are suggesting, I take it, is that a classroom teacher does this.

Dr Evans—We are advocating that a classroom teacher as part of their preservice training and ongoing inservice training be equipped in the use of these. But there is also the role of special educators. These are the people who come with the specialist skills in assisting schools and individual teachers to design and implement these measures.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you feel that there are sufficient numbers of those people available in the system to assist teachers to do that?

Dr Evans—Currently, there are not enough trained special education teachers. At the moment, one of the association’s concerns is that there are many teachers who are working with children with disabilities and specific educational needs who do not have the specialist training. We would strongly advocate the improvement and enhancement of the skills of these particular teachers.

Senator TIERNEY—If we move to a system where the teacher does it, how confident are you that teachers have any skills in this area that are based on preservice or inservice courses?

Dr Evans—I would be hesitant to place the responsibility solely on the teacher.

Senator TIERNEY—But isn’t that going to be the case if these support people are not around in sufficient numbers? Isn’t that often going to be the case, particularly when you go out to rural and regional schools that are a little more remote from the big cities?

Dr Evans—I would agree with you. I come back to the notion that I do not see it as being solely the responsibility of the classroom teacher. As we put in our submission, a problem-solving process would be a team of people—a small group of people within the school—who would facilitate the identification of specific needs, work with classroom teachers and, in some cases, actually bring in an advocate for the resources in terms of personnel and expertise to come in and enhance and contribute to those particular sessions.

Senator TIERNEY—That is of course in an ideal world. Teachers are incredibly busy. In reality, wouldn’t it often come back to the classroom teacher your models follow in terms of doing functional assessment and curriculum based assessment?

Dr Evans—Yes. I would also put the point that these sorts of assessment are part of existing classroom practice and that it is not a great step forward in terms of workload.

Senator TIERNEY—But how confident would you be, using those techniques—given the inadequacies often of their training in preservice and inservice—that the teacher would be able to use that for the purposes that you are suggesting?

Dr Evans—Given the current preservice teacher—

Senator TIERNEY—I am talking about the real world.

Dr Evans—Given the current preservice teacher education, I would have some hesitation in teachers being able to meet those needs. That is why we have a very heavy emphasis on preservice teacher education—that needs to be substantially strengthened—and on the ongoing inservicing of teachers. It should not just be one-off workshop type things; it needs to be an ongoing process of assisting teachers to develop and enhance their current knowledge.

Senator TIERNEY—I will come back to that in a moment. Mrs Gray, do you want to make a comment?

Mrs Gray—I agree with David in that the reality at the moment is that teachers probably are not able to, but the movement of syllabus requirements and general requirements of teachers is towards outcomes based assessment. This fits in very nicely with it. The key to it is professional development. If we are going to be realistic about it, then we need to improve what we have now so that it can happen. I do believe that the feeling of teachers is that we would like to be able to do it. We do have a burden of time, like all of us, in whatever position we hold. But with respect to the aim in looking at the needs of the kids, we are showing that it can happen. The association has tried very hard to present examples of best practice to show teachers that this is possible and that we can do it, rather than sitting here and saying that the reality is that this is just going to be too hard.

Senator TIERNEY—If we go to preservice training, and let us stick with New South Wales, what preservice training do students get in order to have the skills to do any of this?

Dr Evans—With respect to preservice training in New South Wales, AASE was instrumental in encouraging the New South Wales government at the time to put forward—I think it was a parliamentary requirement—that all preservice teacher education contain a mandatory unit on the education of students with special education needs.

Senator TIERNEY—When you say a ‘unit’, are you talking about a semester?

Dr Evans—A semester length course—36 hours.

Senator TIERNEY—So every person training to be a teacher must do that course?

Dr Evans—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Are we talking about a 15- or 16-week course? How many hours are there in a university semester nowadays? Face to face, how many hours a week would it involve?

Dr Evans—Face to face, 36 hours.

Senator TIERNEY—What is your view of 36 hours as being sufficient preparation to undertake this sort of task, apart from everything else that would have to be included in those 36 hours?

Dr Evans—Thirty-six hours is not a large amount of time. It certainly does not cover all of this. One of the features of preservice teacher education that the association is currently striving for and working towards is ensuring that we see these practices included across all other curriculum areas and other domains within the education program that students receive. So it is not just a matter of getting, in term 3, semester 1, this 36-hour unit and then forgetting about it; it is there and then they see it permeated through and brought back into programs.

Senator TIERNEY—How confident are you that that happens?

Dr Evans—I am not confident but the association is working towards trying to enhance that and push that forward.

Senator TIERNEY—In most programs doesn’t this course tend to take place towards the end of their training?

Dr Evans—I cannot speak for individual universities but it tends to be around midstream.

Senator TIERNEY—I think Sydney University told us that it was in the final year in their institution. I just wondered how it permeated through in the first three years, if you have not even got to it at that point.

Dr Evans—Can I correct them and say it is in year 3.

Senator TIERNEY—So they do not start picking it up until year 3?

Dr Evans—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—In what year did that come in—the mandatory requirement?

Mrs Gray—It was in the early nineties.

Dr Evans—Yes, in the early nineties.

Mrs Gray—We could let you know.

Senator TIERNEY—The average age of a teacher is heading up to 50, so there are huge numbers of people who would have gone through their preparation when it was not a mandatory

requirement. What happens in those classrooms which have teachers who have not had any of that training at all? What is your view on the real state—not how it should be in theory—of in-service to bring teachers in New South Wales up to scratch on these skills?

Dr Evans—There are many teachers in our schools—across all systems and sectors—who have not been through this process. We see ongoing professional development as a necessity, as an important part of their professional growth. At the moment that is not happening significantly.

Senator TIERNEY—It is not mandated, is it? Schools do inservice courses on what they want to do or on what is occurring with a particular change in curriculum.

Dr Evans—Yes, or on what is dictated to them. I would argue that within this problem-solving approach, for example, schools can enhance the professional development of teachers by focusing on the needs of students and what has to be brought to bear to assist those students move through the curriculum and meet the specific outcomes. That, in practice, means that the teachers are hearing about it, they are being inserviced on it, implementing it, talking about it with their colleagues and getting feedback. That actual theory to practice nexus, I believe, is a very strong inservice component of a teacher's duties.

Senator TIERNEY—It is a bit hit-and-miss, isn't it, whether a child with learning disabilities lands with a particular teacher who might have had that training? There would be a pretty good chance that they had not—probably better than 50 per cent chance, I would say—had the preservice training or any meaningful inservice training. Inservice courses these days are usually pretty brief affairs anyway. From what I understand, sometimes the school sends some teachers to a course and they come back and tell everyone else. I have little faith in the transfer effect of that sort of approach, even when those courses occur.

Dr Evans—The association would argue that these one-off workshops are perhaps reinvigorating for teachers on a short-term basis, but for the long-term haul inservice teacher education needs to look at the ongoing enhancement of teachers. A recent article in the association's journal looked at a particular project over a year. Experts in the area of beginning reading, for example, commenced the year by taking teachers through program development, curriculum adaptation and instruction and then came back at intervals to allow the teachers to reflect on what was happening and to further their enhancement. At the end of the year not only were students as a cohort doing better than previous cohorts but also the teachers in themselves felt far better equipped to meet the needs of students.

Senator TIERNEY—How many teachers were involved in that?

Dr Evans—Over 100.

Senator TIERNEY—A pity for the rest who were not involved. That is my point: these things tend to be pretty small scale when they happen.

Mrs Gray—The association would support using things like the quality teacher program, which is an example of a project that has enabled ongoing educational support of teachers. We support utilising that sort of money that comes down to states to do this sort of thing. I believe

that there is a project that is about to commence that targets this area. It would be a good opportunity to do something like that, which is more ongoing, and try it out to see if there are any benefits. We are quite sure that there would be benefits from ongoing and well-based projects.

Senator TIERNEY—I am sure there would be if it were done.

Mrs Gray—In the next year perhaps we can find out.

Senator TIERNEY—Are there any shining light examples around the country? Is any state or region currently doing this sort of thing well?

Dr Evans—I can think of some individual schools where this is being utilised. I can think of a district that I have personally professionally worked with regarding this sort of a set-up. I believe that, in its early stages, it is having an impact on teachers and the way that they do things. In particular, in the case I am thinking of, the learning support teachers are being impacted in the way that they work with classroom teachers. There is capacity building of those teachers to work with other teachers to enhance teacher outcomes.

Senator TIERNEY—But it often depends on the enthusiasm of particular people, doesn't it—for example, where the school principal, someone on the staff or the district superintendent really thinks it is incredibly important and therefore pushes it?

Dr Evans—My view on that is, in the words of Professor Sharon Vaughn, that you need 'to go with the goers' to get that infection going. To see that succeed, I believe we need to go where the strengths are.

Mrs Gray—Those schools that we would think of as utilising best practice would be the schools where the principal is the core of the push for that to occur so that, when we talk about the professional development of teachers, we actually include all executives. We have seen, where that knowledge is there, that that can happen.

Senator TIERNEY—The whole thing is pretty hit-and-miss, isn't it?

Mrs Gray—We have got to think positively, haven't we?

Senator TIERNEY—No, I think we have got to look at it realistically. It is potluck for parents who are putting their children that have these difficulties in school.

Senator ALLISON—I must say I was puzzled by your submission. I could not determine whether it was a radical departure from the status quo or whether it was an academic exercise in the self-evident. I guess you have explored a bit of that today so far. Is it radically different from what is currently happening, or is this just about better education for teachers in dealing with students with difficulties and disabilities?

Mrs Gray—It is probably about better education of all teachers in dealing with all students, including students with special needs, but in doing that it is also looking at resourcing and linking it. It was asked whether Australia has attempted to do this. There are a number of states that

have attempted to look at resource based funding matching needs rather than linking it to what we seem to have at the moment with gatekeeping, where you have to have a disability to get through the gatekeeping. There is an example of an attempt to do that, of moving towards it, and also of linking it to the good outcomes based practices of syllabus development. We are trying, and I do not think it is terribly radical, to match what educators do and do well—that is, to teach—and push that on. If asked, we could come up with examples of situations where behaviour improvement and interventions were not necessary because effective instruction was put in there in the first place.

Senator ALLISON—So you are not arguing that there should not be assessment of students' abilities?

Mrs Gray—No, we are arguing for utilising services in a way that you can meet the needs of the student in the setting.

Senator ALLISON—Do you have to know the underlying cause of the problem with the student in order to embark on your preferred model?

Mrs Gray—Initially, no. Initially, if you can identify the need and what needs to be done to support it—

Senator ALLISON—How does that work with, say, dyslexia, which seems to remain hidden in a lot of children until well into their primary schooling?

Dr Evans—I would probably ask for a definition of dyslexia and what that means. The example you are talking about in terms of reading is the inability of students to become functional, fluent, accurate readers with good comprehension.

Senator ALLISON—You are not suggesting that there is no such thing as dyslexia?

Dr Evans—I am suggesting that, in terms of the curriculum, there is a group of students who find it very difficult to learn to read. Reports like *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*, put out by the National Academy of Sciences, indicate that for those students who are diagnosed as dyslexic—students who find it difficult to learn to read—there are essential elements of reading programs that need to be fundamentally in place.

Senator ALLISON—You do not argue, then, that there is a particular teaching technique which might address that once you know what the underlying cause is? You do not accept that?

Dr Evans—No.

Mrs Gray—No. You go and look at what is happening with that individual to progress to levels of intervention to ensure that—

Senator ALLISON—So this is a radically different approach, essentially?

Dr Evans—I do not think it is. If a student is identified as part of a problem-solving approach where a group of people come together and say, 'We are concerned about eyesight, that the student may not actually be seeing what is on the page', then we would engage in getting the professional who has the expertise in that area to assess and report on what the student's need is.

Senator ALLISON—That is a simpler problem to solve. It may involve wearing glasses. You may solve the problem of the vision impairment.

Dr Evans—But even people from the dyslexia association, for example, in some of the work coming from there, are making the point that many of these students are still not meeting the requirements in terms of phonological awareness, alphabetical insight or oral language background that they can bring to a reading situation. They are fundamentally what are in the curriculum. I do not think the research supports that they are totally different from other students.

Senator ALLISON—You do not think they need a different approach. There are no circumstances in which a different kind of teaching is warranted?

Dr Evans—Again I think the instructional strategies and the approaches taken are part of that problem-solving approach—'We have tried this; we have monitored it.' Taking the notion of responsiveness to any intervention is, I suppose, the way that we are looking at it.

Senator ALLISON—In our last inquiry we looked at education for gifted students. We came up with lots of approaches which said that teachers must teach to the ability of the child, whatever it is, and that may mean very different things, different programs, essentially, for every student in the class. As a former teacher I can see some of the practical logistical problems of doing that, particularly in secondary school where you do not have the same class each period. I can accept that teachers need to look more at the effectiveness of their teaching methods—I think we do that poorly in many schools—but how realistic is it for teachers to be able to identify very precisely the needs of every student?

Mrs Gray—Looking at it in a problem-solving manner, and accepting the fact that you need to call others in to support that, the fact that you will need a specialist probably attached to the school in some way, a trained special educator—

Senator ALLISON—We are not talking here about the school counsellor?

Mrs Gray—Possibly, if that is seen to be a link in the difficulty. But the schools that I am thinking of where there is best practice have a specialist link; they have a learning support team approach; in an ongoing way they look at what is needed for training within that school to look at that effective instruction, and they are actually achieving quite sound results, I think. If you look at the tests that everyone is using, the benchmark tests, for example, then the evidence is there that this can progress and can happen. Education, like everything else these days, is not easy. We are looking for better ways of doing it, and we believe that this is the way to go.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming today.

Proceedings suspended from 10.24 a.m. to 10.48 a.m.

BOSCO, Brother Cyril, Deputy Chair, National Independent Special Schools Association

CLAYTON, Dr Mark, Chairman, National Independent Special Schools Association

TODD, Miss Emily Mary, Committee Member, National Independent Special Schools Association

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from the National Independent Special Schools Association. The committee has before it your submission No. 33. Would you like to make any changes or corrections to that submission?

Dr Clayton—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any requests 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.

Dr Clayton—On behalf of the association I want to thank you for the invitation to appear at the hearing today. We hope that from this inquiry there may be some action taken to improve service delivery for children with disabilities in Australia.

CHAIR—I notice in your submission you say that there are particular funding difficulties for students with disabilities. Can you enlarge upon your concerns about the funding arrangements.

Dr Clayton—NISSA believes that there are significant inequities in how non-government special schools are funded. Part of the inequities arise from the fact that we believe there is a perception that all non-government schools are the same and therefore perhaps are similarly funded. For instance, the recent debate about the King's School and the AGSRC recurrent funding formula is a case in point, and we have made that point in our submission. Even though the AGSRC funds non-government special schools at 70 per cent, it is actually based upon the level of funding provided to regular students attending a government school rather than on students with disabilities attending a government special school.

Part of the inequity arises because in many non-government special schools the quantum of students is very small. We are talking about schools that might have 13, 14, 15, 20, 30, 40 or 50 students, not 900, 1,100, 1,200 or 1,500 students. Therefore, when students at a large non-government institution attract recurrent funding, they might be bringing $4 million or $5 million into the organisation, whereas students at a non-government special school obviously would be bringing in a great deal less than that.

Non-government regular schools have a teacher for every 30 students; non-government schools for those with disabilities have one teacher for six children or one teacher for four children. So even though people might think we are well funded in relation to the AGSRC, in fact our level of funding is grossly underestimated in terms of the current recurrent funding base.

CHAIR—Dr Clayton, this argument has been presented in almost identical terms by a number of organisations representing the non-government sector. I suspect you may well have had a bit of a caucus on this. The language is very precise. And that is fair enough; that is the way the political system works. I will put back to you some of the questions I have put to others. No doubt you will have more than satisfactory answers for me. My first question goes to the relationship between choice and efficiency. At what point do you think the Commonwealth should not have an obligation to fund all conceivable choice? I will put it another way: is it the Commonwealth's responsibility to fund all conceivable choices—for instance, schools of one?

Dr Clayton—Maybe that is a decision which the Commonwealth has to make. My belief—and I will let my colleagues speak on this issue as well—is that all children in Australia should be provided with the entitlement which they deserve in relation to meeting their educational needs. The argument about whether it is a state funded responsibility or a Commonwealth funded responsibility I think is a moot argument. I think the issue, quite clearly, is that if children are not able to receive an appropriate entitlement, then at least at the Commonwealth level, which has a responsibility to ensure that all citizens of Australia are well served, if there is one child that has a need, that should be met.

CHAIR—So it should be funded at the full whack?

Dr Clayton—That is another issue. No, not necessarily. I do not think we would believe for a moment that all our schools should be fully government funded. I do not think that is the case that we are arguing.

CHAIR—So you are not arguing for 100 per cent?

Dr Clayton—No, not at all. What we would be arguing, and what we have argued in our submission to you, is that if the current AGSRC is based upon what it costs to educate a regular student in a government school—which is my understanding of it—then to educate a non-government disabled student should be based upon the cost of educating a government student with a disability in a government special school.

CHAIR—I see the point you make, but the truth of the matter is that the AGSRC is a formula based on a whole range of parameters, not just the average cost of education. It is not a CPI matter. There is a whole range of factors that go to that, including the support given for strategic assistance and various other forms of funding. Already built into that formula is an indexation amount for special needs. In a sense, the non-government sector is already getting additional funding for these purposes. To what extent do you think non-government schools should be funding these special needs out of their recurrent grants?

Brother Bosco—Our schools are scattered throughout the nation. We have schools in very isolated settings; we have schools in regional towns; we have schools in cities. The majority of these schools have very small enrolments, ranging from 20 to 40 or 50. Our argument is that we believe students with disabilities in the independent sector need to be funded at the same level as our counterparts in the government sector. Because we are stand-alones, we have additional costs in terms of the plant and facilities. A number of settings within the government sector are connected with a larger school with a larger school-based population, so not only are we

meeting salaries and the needs of students; we also have a number of costs that deal with the upkeep of the plant. That is not funded by any source at all.

CHAIR—What about private contributions? How important are private contributions to non-government schools?

Brother Bosco—At my school, St Edmund’s at Wahroonga, last year we ran a deficit of 13 per cent of our budget. That needs to be met by the private sector. We do that through donations and bequests if we receive any. We do that by having a whole series of events. We are looking at a significant proportion in terms of dollars and cents, and our parent body just cannot support that.

Dr Clayton—At my school it is 50 per cent.

CHAIR—What school would that be?

Dr Clayton—Giant Steps, Sydney.

Miss Todd—The same. We run at a deficit and we have to make it up.

Dr Clayton—Could I add something here? There is a perception, too, perhaps, that all non-government schools are well-funded or well-endowed by parents and old boys’ associations and things like this. This is not the case with the special school sector. Cyril I think charges $20 a week. He is probably lucky to get that.

Miss Todd—Shall I tell you mine? I am at a very small school. We have 13 students in our school. We are in a regional and remote area in Cootamundra. The closest would be Wagga. We charge $3.50 a week from parents, and I am lucky if I get half of those parents to pay. Most of them come from very low socioeconomic backgrounds, so we get very little actually coming in from parents, bar those fundraising parents who are just wonderful.

CHAIR—You are asking this committee to bear in mind the sharp differences within the non-government sector. You mentioned The King’s School, which is the one that lots of people associate with the non-government sector. Under this formula you would see them get a significant increase in funding. How would you quarantine out the very wealthy schools from schools such as yours?

Dr Clayton—I do not think we would quarantine out.

CHAIR—So you would see them get an additional money allowance?

Dr Clayton—I do not think our argument is about what King’s gets. I think our argument is that we are different from King’s, and we are different in many ways from children who can walk into their classroom and sit at a desk which is provided by their school, and maybe even have subsidised laptops, to children who require a $5,500 wheelchair to sit appropriately at their school and who may require a touch-talker or some form of augmented communication device which can only be purchased from North America or Germany for perhaps $3,000 or $4,000.

Most parents do not have the sort of money to buy those sorts of very basic pieces of equipment, just so that their child can attend and look at a teacher or a therapist. It is extraordinary that you fund walking and talking students into high schools and primary schools at the same level as you fund our schools.

CHAIR—Dr Clayton, some schools in the non-government sector charge fees of up to $20,000.

Dr Clayton—Yes.

CHAIR—You are not seriously suggesting that the Commonwealth should provide them with additional moneys.

Brother Bosco—Senator, that is not our argument. Our argument is that for whatever reason parents have chosen to enrol their students at our special schools. We know for a fact that these students have high needs. We have a small enrolment base. We have a very expensive service and we try to provide a service in response to parental choice. We believe our students are entitled to receive adequate funding just as students in selective high schools across the nation are entitled. That is the first point we are making. We also know for a fact that government schools receive at least three times the public funding that independent special schools receive. That is the point that we made in our submission.

CHAIR—And you are part of the system? You are a part of the independent school system?

Brother Bosco—We are an independent, stand-alone school.

CHAIR—So you are saying you have no other source of funding. You cannot call on the Catholic Education Office or any other—

Brother Bosco—Yes, I am connected to a system. I am connected to the Catholic education system. I am part of that system.

CHAIR—Why aren't they providing you with assistance?

Brother Bosco—They do provide capital funding. They do provide recurrent funding according to the formula, as they do for special needs students right across the systems they are responsible for. But it is never enough in terms of meeting the needs of students in an independent special school. We are a stand-alone school, basically; we are attached to a system.

CHAIR—I understand the point you are making. I have trouble following this line of argument. I understand the needs argument. The Commonwealth provides the Catholic education system with an extraordinary sum of money. When you combine it with the state's funding it is in excess of 100 per cent of AGSRC funding. But you cannot get hold of that, and that is what troubles me.

Brother Bosco—No. A large percentage of that funding goes to special needs students within the various dioceses across the Catholic system. The school that I represent is a small school of

40 students and their particular disabilities are in the areas of sensory disability—blindness—and intellectual disability. Those students cannot be accommodated in regular schools for a variety of reasons.

CHAIR—I accept all that. I am not arguing the case of need—do not misunderstand me here. I acknowledge the need argument. There is a question about which method should fund it. That is the matter under discussion today. There is an argument about efficiency—that is, whether or not you can afford to run little schools like this and ask the public to fund them—and whether or not funding is provided already through other sources and you are not getting access to it. If you are not, I think we are entitled to know why that is. The Commonwealth is currently appropriating $24 billion for schools, in excess of two-thirds of which goes to the non-government sector. We are talking about very large sums of money.

Dr Clayton—I think the majority of that non-government funding goes to support children with disabilities and learning difficulties in regular schools, not in special schools.

CHAIR—Why can't you get access to some of that?

Dr Clayton—I think this has been the crux of the problem over a number of years. Over a period of time the issue of integration and inclusion, which we are very strong supporters of, has actually dominated the issue of providing services to students with disabilities to the extent where children who cannot access regular schools for a variety of reasons are actually at a disadvantage. I suppose there has been a greater proportion of that provided to supporting regular schools in their determination to try and integrate children and, to a lesser extent, providing funding for our particular schools.

CHAIR—You are recommending that the Commonwealth should establish an office for special education; is that correct?

Dr Clayton—Yes.

CHAIR—How would that assist you?

Dr Clayton—I think there is a need. You are saying that you understand the notion of needs. I am not sure that need—we like to use the word 'entitlement' or what a child is entitled to—is actually well understood or standardised across New South Wales as children move.

CHAIR—They move across Australia. It is not confined to one region of Australia.

Dr Clayton—That is right.

Miss Todd—We have schools in Western Australia and their children have exactly the same entitlements, yes.

Dr Clayton—I think that some form of national standards would be appropriate. In other words, what does the Commonwealth see as an appropriate standard of entitlement for a child, say, with severe physical disability? Do you understand that? Who determines that? In New

South Wales it can actually be different between different departments. If you go to a different state, they will see it in a different way. So a national standard would help clarify the picture across Australia.

CHAIR—The English have a national legislative code. Would you support concepts such as that—a national legislative code to encourage the states to meet a framework in terms of recognition of needs?

Dr Clayton—Definitely.

CHAIR—That would require some understanding of definitions. Is that the sort of thing you would have in mind?

Ms Baker—Yes.

Miss Todd—Yes.

Brother Bosco—Yes. Currently MCEETYA is undertaking a review, and our recommendation is that we would hope that the Senate would review the recommendations that come out of that committee and possibly accept those recommendations in terms of a national code so that there is uniformity across the states.

CHAIR—Do you want to see it in legislation?

Dr Clayton—Definitely. Part of the issue in New South Wales—and I cannot talk about other states—is that, even though our Education Act provides for both government and non-government schools, we do not see equity in how non-government schools are treated with government schools. When you provide funds to the states we believe that we should be sharing in those funds on a reasonable basis. We have also argued, for instance, that professional development of staff, which is incredibly costly for non-government schools that have very few funds, should be shared more equitably. Why can't we be part of that pool of money that comes to the state governments to provide support for all teachers rather than just teachers in government schools? There is an unusual and, I think, quite disruptive competition between the government and non-government sector and it should not be the case. Parents send their children to our schools because they are dissatisfied with a government service. They are seeking something that a government service cannot provide. There might be religious reasons why a parent might want their child educated in a Catholic system, for example.

Miss Todd—Location. We are the only special school within a hundred kilometres of where we are.

Dr Clayton—At the previous school I ran, we ran an early intervention program. It is very attractive for parents of very little children because government schools are not registered to provide education below the age of four years. That is something we submitted as well. We would like to see early intervention as part of that generic continuum of educational services.

CHAIR—So let me be clear about this. In terms of the work that this committee can do—rather than trying to run the state government of New South Wales—you are saying that you want to see a national code in legislation, you want to see the Commonwealth take a more

to see a national code in legislation, you want to see the Commonwealth take a more serious interest in teacher development, and you want to see an early childhood education program run by the Commonwealth. Are they the three areas?

Dr Clayton—Not necessarily run by the Commonwealth, but as part of the educational service delivery. Why does age five all of a sudden become important in a child's life? For some reason we have decided that when you are five you will benefit from an educational program but prior to five you cannot. In fact, early intervention has argued quite clearly that from the moment of birth when you can see that a child has been diagnosed with a disability you can put various services in place.

CHAIR—In Queensland there are early childhood programs tied to the schools and in South Australia there seem to be developments in that area.

Dr Clayton—In other states there are not. You have to get them through DOCS or Family and Community Services or—

CHAIR—So you want to see that within education?

Dr Clayton—Yes.

Brother Bosco—Within education, because at the moment there is a mismatch between the legal requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and the way in which funding is accessed through the various states. The code would encompass that.

CHAIR—You are certain about legislation?

Dr Clayton—Definitely.

Senator ALLISON—I would like to explore the funding a little more. Obviously, you have different fees depending on the capacity of families to afford fees. Is it the case that all of the students in your system receive the maximum level of funding from the Commonwealth? Your students are assessed in a particular way. Do they tend to be the most profoundly disabled and therefore attract the maximum amount? If so, how much is that per student?

Brother Bosco—In dollars and cents I cannot really answer that. Our students are assessed in terms of their disability and, as a result of that, we do access the highest level of funding as per the guidelines.

Senator ALLISON—So that is the case for your schools as well?

Dr Clayton—I can give you ballpark figures. For primary age students you are looking at about $3,500 a year, and for secondary age students it is about $5,000.

Senator ALLISON—That is Commonwealth funding?

Dr Clayton—That is Commonwealth funding.

Senator ALLISON—Is there any funding from the state?

Dr Clayton—Yes. We get per capita funding. It is not as high as the Commonwealth.

Brother Bosco—About 65 per cent of our funding comes from the Commonwealth, and about 20 per cent comes from the state.

Dr Clayton—But, in terms of the per capita funding, we are looking at about $1,200 for a primary age student and $2,000 for a secondary age student. Then, for some of the schools, there is a supervisor subsidy. The supervisor subsidy in New South Wales provides the salary of a supervisor for X number of students. If you are in a school with children with moderate to severe disabilities, you will get a supervisor for every six children with a severe disability. If you are in a school for children with recognised autism, you will get one to four. So some schools are provided with an additional state subsidy. This is in New South Wales, by the way, not in every state. In fact, I think New South Wales is the only state that provides the supervisor subsidy. Part of the problem we have in New South Wales is that that has been a bit of a cross dangling over our heads. We are constantly threatened with it being removed.

Senator ALLISON—Do you have to apply for it each year?

Dr Clayton—We do. At the beginning of each term we submit the number of children that were enrolled in our school for the previous term and we get the amount of funding based upon that number of children.

Senator ALLISON—Is it fair to say that your schools are something of an historical anomaly in the education system in that schools like them were probably set up as charities back at a time when no services were available to students?

Dr Clayton—That is correct. For some reason, in New South Wales anyway, the state government assumed responsibility for about 70 schools over a period of 20 years. It was called the assumption of responsibility program. In fact, the state government special schools now are primarily ex-charity run schools. But they left a few, and those schools were left for a number of reasons. They approached my organisation, for instance, but they said, ‘No, we don’t want to be assumed. We’ve been here for a long time. We want to run our own program.’ For religious reasons or for reasons of philosophy and historical significance they decided to keep them. I would probably argue with you that perhaps in some cases that was the wrong decision to have made at the time.

CHAIR—You may not argue that too strongly!

Dr Clayton—No, but it was done for some good reasons. That assumption of responsibility program no longer exists and the state government might say, ‘If the school’s having a problem, we’re not going to assume that problem for you.’

Senator ALLISON—When did this assumption take place?

Dr Clayton—During the seventies and early eighties. There was a Labor government in New South Wales at the time. Ron Mulock and Rodney Cavalier—do you remember those names?—

ran this program because basically parents had said, ‘Look, it’s about time our children were regarded as requiring a government education as well.’ They took over lock, stock and barrel: they took over the whole school and staff, or sometimes they took the children and staff and put them in another environment, or sometimes they just took the children and nothing else.

CHAIR—If that was reinstituted, how many schools do you think would take up the offer now that they have had the experience of going without?

Dr Clayton—I cannot answer that. Some in a particular situation might say, ‘This is better for us now. We’re doing other things.’ They might be running adult services now, whereas before they were running only child services. It might be costing them too much to run both. But some schools, I imagine, would say, ‘Yes, that’s something that we would consider.’

Brother Bosco—For the record, we do not just enrol families who have students that belong to the Catholic system. We are non-denominational in terms of enrolment; we take anyone. If a child has a vision disability and they access the service, we try to provide that service.

Senator ALLISON—You may not know the answer to this question, but I will ask it anyway. What are the funding arrangements for those schools that have been assumed? Do they receive the same per capita amount, and do they get the same sort of supervisory commitment?

Dr Clayton—They are totally government run schools now.

Senator ALLISON—I realise that, but how are they funded? I do not mean by whom, but how? To what extent are they funded?

Dr Clayton—They are fully funded.

Senator ALLISON—What is the cost?

Brother Bosco—We do not have access to that information.

Dr Clayton—I can give you an idea of the cost at my previous school where children had severe disabilities. The average cost for each child was about $28,000, and they were children with severe levels of intellectual and physical disability. Prior to deinstitutionalisation, you would find that the majority of those children and young adolescents would have been in institutions. Where does that cost come from? In the main it comes from providing aide support, teachers and therapists. I would say that 99 per cent of the funding that we get from state and Commonwealth government goes directly to salaries. Whatever we raise over and above that will pay for maintenance, wheelchairs et cetera.

Brother Bosco—That is our difficulty. It costs us $25,000 to educate a student per year. We do not receive that type of money in terms of—

Senator ALLISON—That was my next question, because just looking at those figures in your submission it seems that you have available somewhere between $7,000 and $12,000 from government sources. If the cost is $28,000—or, Brother Bosco, you say that it is $25,000—it

seems implausible that you can offer the same school service as a school which is able to spend $28,000 per student. Assuming that you receive, say, $10,000 and you fundraise another $10,000, that is only $20,000, and you still fall short of what appears to be the average cost, which is much higher. How do you save that money? How do you run a school at a lower cost?

Miss Todd—I can give you an example in our school of just little things that we have to do. We are in a position where things like therapy are very hard for us to get. It can take up to six months for us to get an occupational therapist—or psychologist, now—otherwise we would have to pay to get somebody to come in. We have to provide assessments to the government to get a lot of our grants, and it can cost us $500 just to get one of those, and they have to be updated every two years. Unless we want to sit on a waiting list for six months, we have to pay for that. Another example is that we make a lot of our resources in our school, which is not good enough but we have to make do with that. For a lot of time work—as in teaching to tell the time—and for all of those life skills which are so important for our students, we develop many resources, going off things that we have seen in other schools, and we make them ourselves.

Senator ALLISON—Do you work your teachers out of hours?

Miss Todd—Yes, you do it because you know that is how you are going to get by. That is fine, but our students are entitled to get good resources.

Brother Bosco—At one level we depend on the generosity of staff; we rely on that in order to ensure that the school does run. And we depend to a large extent on the wider community. It is the wider community that is requesting the service, and they support the school in a variety of ways.

Senator ALLISON—They volunteer time?

Brother Bosco—Through private fundraising.

Dr Clayton—That is difficult; donations have really dropped off significantly in our sector because there are so many people competing for the donor dollar these days. We run golf days, sausage sizzles and those sorts of things.

Brother Bosco—So it is correct that we can increase our fees, but we do that to the detriment of families.

Dr Clayton—I did that. We went from $5 a day to $13 a day 18 months ago, and five parents walked out.

Senator ALLISON—To what extent are parents effectively making a choice? Miss Todd, your school is obviously in a different category. What choices are available to parents? Do you find some are coming to your school instead of choosing integration? To what extent are parents making that choice?

Dr Clayton—I can talk about two school settings because I am familiar with two. For one school setting with children with severe disabilities, they would choose to come there because we provide full-time therapy support, whereas in the government school sector the state

government does not provide therapists. They access therapy through the Department of Community Services, who might provide a consultancy to that school once a month. So we choose to do that because we know that the level of need that our children have requires that ongoing occupational physiotherapy and speech therapy support. We have had one or two parents who have left a state government school because they have not been happy with the level of support that their child has been getting, so they have come to our school. With the other school, which is a school for autism, why do they come to Giant Steps and not to one of the association schools? Because there is a different approach taken, quite clearly.

Senator ALLISON—So the choice for parents is a special school in the government system or a special school in the non-government sector. There is not another choice; you are not catering for students who might otherwise be integrated? There is a debate going on about that.

Brother Bosco—Yes, we do that. We provide a very small itinerant service, where I send one or two teachers out to support students in an integrated setting.

Senator ALLISON—No, that is not quite my question. Are parents coming to your school because they see it as an alternative to integration?

Miss Todd—I have had two parents just in the last year who have tried putting their children in the local state school. They spent 12 months there and it was a disaster. They just could not get the education they required, the child was falling further and further behind—therapy services and things like that—so they came to us. If I feel that a child is capable of being included, by all means I encourage them to go and try that. But in some cases, like in the case of these two particular families, it has not worked, and they have come back to us.

Brother Bosco—Families are supporting integration, but their experience is that their child is not receiving the level of support that is required for the disability. The regular school, irrespective of what system it belongs to, is supportive of the enrolment, yet they do not seem to have sufficient funds to support the staff and students and provide the specialist resources that are required.

Senator ALLISON—At the end of the day what is the process for making that decision? Do the parents just say, 'It's not working out, we'll take our child to a special school,' or do people sit down and talk about it? Does the school get involved in that decision?

Miss Todd—We certainly do. I have a very close relationship with the local Catholic school. They call me in often to advise them on how to improve things for a particular child in their school—what programs that I know of might be able to be used in their school to help a particular child. The parents are usually involved in that, too. We often try as best we can to do as much as we can to have that child included in the school. After six months or whatever it may be—it is usually up to the parents—if it is still not working, they tend to come over to us.

Brother Bosco—We are not in competition with our counterparts in the regular school system. We try to provide a service where a service is not being provided.

Senator ALLISON—Do you provide opportunities for students to spend two or three days a week in your schools and then in a regular school for the balance of the week?

Brother Bosco—Where possible yes, we do that.

Senator ALLISON—How common is that?

Dr Clayton—In Giant Steps that is the formula. We have children attending for mornings, and they will go to their local neighbourhood school in the afternoons. We have some children who are there four days a week and they come to Giant Steps for one day, and we provide the support to those children in the regular school.

Brother Bosco—At a cost to us.

Dr Clayton—Yes, at a cost to us.

Senator ALLISON—So how does that funding work? Do you receive partial funding on the basis of the proportion of time in the school?

Brother Bosco—Theoretically, yes, but in practice, no.

Dr Clayton—It is all funded by us. Most of us drive integration. Most regular schools do not drive integration; it is usually driven by special schools. It is one of the great ironies that integration is actually supposed to be an inclusive concept.

Senator ALLISON—If you have a child and you think this child could be integrated for part of the week in a regular school, what happens to the money then? Say you are receiving funding of $3,500 per year for a primary school student and this child is attending three days a week: what happens to that $3,500?

Dr Clayton—It goes to support that child from our school into the regular primary school.

Senator ALLISON—So you take Commonwealth funding, you go with that to the school—whatever school it is—and say, ‘Here is what we get for this student for that three days; that is now yours.’

Dr Clayton—No, because we are providing the staffing to support that child.

Miss Todd—We might send a staff member with that child.

Dr Clayton—The problem comes when we have to withdraw our staff because when you send a staff member that leaves your resource base in the classroom with less staff, so you cannot do it for ever and a day. You might do it for a period of time until you think the child can be better supported by the regular school, and so you start to withdraw that resource. That is where the problem starts to occur: they say, ‘Hang on, we will not integrate unless you provide the staff,’ but we do not get funded to do that.

Senator ALLISON—I am trying to work out what happens to the $3,500 under all of those scenarios.

Brother Bosco—It remains with the special school. It goes towards supplying the transfer costs, the additional staff and any specialist support that is required.

Dr Clayton—But you are raising a good issue, Senator. We believe that if children were funded to their entitlement then parents could make choices between special schools and regular schools or whatever. They could take those funds with them. So if they spent some time at Cyril's school and then Cyril said, 'Right, we had better start integrating,' then over a period of time that pool of funds would travel with that child and they would support that child in the regular school program. That would be ideal.

Senator ALLISON—If they get to the regular school and they are there for three days a week, how is their place in the school funded? Or is it not funded at all?

Dr Clayton—The school should then apply for integration support funds.

Senator ALLISON—So there is something that comes on top of that?

Dr Clayton—That is right.

Senator ALLISON—I understand. That is all very interesting.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming along today.

[11.29 a.m.]

FORD, Mr Adrian John, Chief Executive Officer, Autism Association of New South Wales

ROBERTS, Dr Jacqueline Margaret Anne, Director of Education, Training and Research, Autism Association of New South Wales

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from the Autism Association of New South Wales. The committee has before it submission No. 166. Are there any changes or alterations that you would like to make?

Mr Ford—No.

CHAIR—The subcommittee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the subcommittee will also consider a 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 now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Mr Ford—We want to draw to the attention of this subcommittee the particular needs of students with autism in this country. In New South Wales there has been a tremendous growth in the realisation of how many children there are with autism. For instance, we estimate that in New South Wales between 5,000 to 15,000 children have an autism spectrum disorder. If that is converted nationally it ranges from approximately 16,000 to 48,000 students across the country. That figure is based on a range of epidemiological studies that have been done over the last few years around the world. That has not been done in this country, to be fair, but it is the best knowledge that we have. There has been tremendous growth in realisation about how many children there are with autism spectrum disorders in the last few years. That is because there has been better diagnosis, particularly of children with what is called Aspergers disorder, which is at the high functioning end of the autism spectrum. Twenty or 30 years ago, when they were counting the very severely needy children, the thought was that there were four in 10,000 children with autism. We have learned in the last five to 10 years that there is a wide spectrum of children with these needs. They are complicated needs which affect their education quite markedly because some of these kids also have intellectual disabilities and some also have significant psychiatric disabilities. It makes their needs special and complicated, and systems need to be ready to address that.

Our association as a whole was, last year, able to reach only 1,000 people, of whom about 900 were under the age of 18. You can see, from our point of view, that there are many, many people whom we need to reach, which is our goal, but there are many who are in other systems which may or may not suit their needs. The focus of this submission is on children and their educational needs, and I will hand over to Dr Roberts to briefly highlight some of the key educational issues faced by children with autism spectrum disorders.

Dr Roberts—The point that Adrian made about the expanding category of diagnosis of autism is really important. It is also important to stress that the children who are being identified have a range of associated intellectual disability with their autism. The biggest group that we

now know about is the Aspergers or high functioning group who may have severe characteristics of autism but who do not have an associated intellectual disability. We also have the autistic disorder group of whom 75 per cent have an intellectual disability which can range from mild to severe. All of those subgroups of children on the autism spectrum have high support needs educationally. Children at the top end of spectrum, the high functioning Aspergers children who form the bulk of the number of children with autism spectrum disorders, are predominantly in mainstream settings. They are struggling because the characteristics of autism are not being recognised or, if they are being recognised, they are not being understood and met adequately. A lot of those children are presenting difficulties for the government and non-government systems that they are in, and they are also still suffering a huge level of distress, fear and anxiety and not reaching their learning potential because their needs are not being met. Obviously that has a huge effect on the families of those children as well.

So one of the things that we have been doing over recent years is expanding our work at that top end of the spectrum, setting up transition type classes for children with autism in mainstream settings. On average, children stay in those classes for a year and a half and then they are able to take their place in mainstream settings. Often, though, they need additional support at particular periods. Transition times are hard for children with autism so when they move from primary to high school, for example, they need extra support. Quite often, because of the characteristics of autism, children who are very intellectually able fail badly at high school. They could do well in the HSC but they do not, because of the distress, the anxiety and the problems they have, which result in a high level of comorbid psychiatric problems, anxiety and depression disorders. There is some good Australian research to support that, which we have cited in our submission.

Another thing we have been working on, on a very practical level, is the development of a suitable curriculum for children with autism. We have been working on a curriculum that synthesises, for example, the key learning areas from the primary curriculum with a set of outcomes that are related to the characteristics of autism, particularly the social and communication characteristics. Some of the behavioural characteristics of autism are core to the disability—for example, the need for repetitive, ritualistic behaviour for those children to manage change. But a lot of the behaviour that is associated with autism, for example, self-stimulatory behaviour—the finger-flicking, rocking—or acting out aggressive type behaviour, which presents lots of problems in educational systems, is the result of the child's autism not being understood and of their needs not being met. That is, if you like, a secondary behaviour of autism, not a core one. So we are working on developing a specialist curriculum.

We are also working with other education systems. We have our own schools but we are very closely linked with both the non-government and the government systems, particularly the Catholic system and the department of education here, really promoting with them the need to provide specialist consultants for children with autism. These children can function and can learn in, for example, mainstream settings or other more generic supported settings such as support classes or special schools if they get the right kind of support. And that is not just dollars; it is expertise. In the sense that dollars can buy expertise, that is really important, but it is no good throwing extra integration money at a child when you are employing a teacher's aide who does not understand autism and the teacher does not understand autism. The resources, to

be effectively used, have to be targeted to the provision of that specialist consultancy type support and direct training for staff who are working with those children.

Those are the things that have been preoccupying us over the last decade or so. I think we have made great gains. But what we still see a need for is for all education systems to be more aware of the needs of children with autism and to meet those needs more effectively.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that. That is a very interesting introduction to this session. There are a few questions that come to mind immediately. You say that you are primarily a non-government specialist provider. Where does the money come from to fund the services?

Mr Ford—To fund our educational services?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Ford—We get the majority of our money from state government, just over $5 million. We also get $2.8 million from the federal government to fund our schools, which is DETYA funding.

CHAIR—Under what program is that funded?

Mr Ford—Which—the federal or the state?

CHAIR—The federal.

Dr Roberts—We get special schools funding; we get recurrent general education funding.

CHAIR—So you get recurrent and capital funding?

Dr Roberts—Yes, we get capital funding when we apply for it.

CHAIR—Do you get strategic assistance moneys?

Dr Roberts—That is not one I am familiar with. We get literacy and numeracy funding if we apply for it and integration funding if we apply for it. It depends on the circumstance.

CHAIR—So there is a whole series of Commonwealth funding, and the total is $2.8 million.

Mr Ford—From the federal government, yes.

CHAIR—And that is pretty stable, is it? You have had no trouble with that?

Mr Ford—Over the last year there was a forecast increase over the next four years that we understand will come from the federal government under its new funding for non-government schools, so we benefit from that, yes.

CHAIR—How do you benefit from that? How do they categorise your service?

Dr Roberts—We are categorised as level 12, special schools at the highest—

CHAIR—So they have given you an SES rating around 85 or thereabouts, have they?

Dr Roberts—For the highest.

CHAIR—The highest funding model.

Dr Roberts—Yes.

CHAIR—That is an interesting idea when you are a service rather than a school. I must ask about that.

Mr Ford—I guess we provide six schools within the association. We get lots of grants for all sorts of services that we end up providing, but that money is specifically applied to providing the educational services.

CHAIR—So they are treating you as a system, in effect?

Dr Roberts—The schools are all separately registered, but we have been looking at the idea of moving towards—

CHAIR—It always amazes me how the Commonwealth has these extraordinarily tough guidelines which seem to be bypassed whenever they need to to fund special circumstances like yours, and it is obviously fortunate that that occurs. Thank you for that. Your submission points to the number of children suffering from autism in New South Wales as being between 5,000 and 15,000.

Dr Roberts—True.

CHAIR—How is it there is such a broad estimate? Why are you not more precise?

Mr Ford—It is a very good question. The majority of epidemiological studies are suggesting that it is around one in a hundred people who are affected by autism. There is a range of studies from Europe, Sweden and America which give these sorts of numbers. They have done proper epidemiological studies of whole populations and found out how many people have autism in that group. There is a big need in this country to do a similar study, but that has not been achieved as yet, so as to have proper evidence at a national level. The 15,000 represents that one in a hundred, but, to take account of all the factors, a study recently completed, in 1999, looked at all the epidemiological studies which have been done around the world and threw out the ones that they did not think were all that crash-hot methodologically and pulled the good ones together. They came up with 27 per 10,000 as the lowest possible number of people with autism, and that is where you get the 5,000 number. That is based on research that has been done over 10 and 20 years at a time, as Jacqui was saying, when there has been an increasing understanding of the spectrum. The spectrum in the same period has grown substantially from

classic autism, which was first diagnosed in 1943, to understanding that there are many more people with autism, high functioning people with autism—Asperger's disorder—which has come in only in the last few years. When we put together all these studies, the confounding factor is that you have got all sorts of different definitions.

Dr Roberts—Some take account of Asperger's, some do not.

Mr Ford—That is why we are giving you the most conservative number of 5,000 children in New South Wales or 16,000 in Australia. The reality is that there is no way that any system in this country is dealing with even those numbers, but certainly our system is not.

CHAIR—How many did you say in Australia?

Mr Ford—Using the same statistics, 16,000.

CHAIR—Minimum of 16,000?

Mr Ford—Minimum of 16,000.

CHAIR—So you have got 5,000 to 15,000 in New South Wales alone?

Mr Ford—Alone.

CHAIR—And a minimum in Australia of 16,000.

Mr Ford—Of 16,000, with a likely number of 48,000.

CHAIR—And that is just autism.

Mr Ford—Just autism.

Dr Roberts—Or autism spectrum disorders, which includes autistic disorder it.

Mr Ford—Which is a huge number.

CHAIR—It is a staggering number.

Dr Roberts—It is scary.

Mr Ford—Which is not being tackled.

CHAIR—You say that you are catering for 900 people below the age of 18.

Mr Ford—That is beyond—

CHAIR—The spectrum?

Mr Ford—Yes, but it is not just in our educational services; we also have intervention programs. The number of kids who are actually going through our schools is 320.

CHAIR—So there are only 320 in school.

Mr Ford—That is right.

CHAIR—What is happening to the rest?

Mr Ford—That is a good question. The rest have to be in special schools, state-run special schools or non-government schools, and we know that they are because, increasingly, other systems are recognising children with autism. Or else, as Jacqui is saying, there would be numbers of children that would be seen as perhaps being a little different, a bit on their own, may not be recognised in any way, but are just sort of—

CHAIR—In terms of the assessment and disability criteria that are currently operating, is it your submission that there will be children in this state—presumably that could be extrapolated across the country—who are not receiving assistance?

Mr Ford—Definitely.

CHAIR—Would you say it would be a significant number of that 48,000 for this group?

Mr Ford—Yes, I think so.

CHAIR—What sort of guess would you make?

Mr Ford—It is very tough. For instance, in New South Wales the education department has now just started autism-specific classes. There is a very small number. There are nine classes in regular or special schools—

Dr Roberts—Mostly regular, but some special.

Mr Ford—run by the department of education in New South Wales. So there are 50 kids.

CHAIR—So there may be several thousand in this state alone?

Mr Ford—Yes, definitely. And there are other systems you have heard from—Giant Steps.

CHAIR—All up, you think there may well still be several thousand students that are not receiving assistance.

Mr Ford—Yes.

Dr Roberts—What happens often with those students is that they will receive some behaviour support services when their behaviour deteriorates to the extent that they are a problem for the school. Whether that support is appropriate or not is another question entirely.

That is an important issue. That is why we are saying that we need people in all of the systems with the relevant expertise.

CHAIR—Do you hold the view that behavioural problems in school may well be a reflection of other matters, not necessarily just kids playing up?

Dr Roberts—In the case of students with autism spectrum disorders, you have a student who is completely literal, for example, who takes everything literally and who does not understand all the nuances of social body language and that kind of thing. They are going to get into an awful lot of trouble at school. They are often targets for bullying and teasing which, in turn, can cause them to act out and to get very distressed. They may have sensory overload, and that is something that is often overlooked or not understood at all. So a child in a playground who cannot cope with the noise and maybe the light will lash out. He will immediately then come to the attention of the behaviour support people, who do not understand why he is behaving the way he is behaving—assuming he is a difficult student, he is noncompliant and he is aggressive. It is usually boys, so that is why it is fairly safe to say ‘he’; it is a 4:1 ratio.

They will put in place programs that are targeted at that noncompliance or aggression without understanding why it is happening. The program will not be effective because the child goes back into the playground situation or back into a situation where a teacher is saying something that he does not understand because it is a bit subtle, and the same thing will happen again, because the actual cause of the behaviour is not understood. That is the point that we are making.

CHAIR—You have talked about the distress, fear and anxiety that are created in these circumstances. There are a lot of people who are undiagnosed; there are a lot of people without support. You also go to the issue of the social inequalities that occur in this context—people from working class backgrounds, migrants and Aboriginal kids. Is there not in fact another layer of inequality here that we are not picking up? Would you agree?

Mr Ford—Yes. One of the issues that we face, although we deal with it on a person by person basis, is that we also charge some fees to be able to meet our costs. We do not make that restrictive in the sense that we are cognisant of the needs of some families. Even though the fees are relatively minor, it still can represent significant dollars for people. So there may be some people who do not even approach us, for fear that they are not going to be able to meet the cost. Another issue that we face in autism is that there are also small programs that are entirely self-funding which are extremely expensive. But parents will go to the nth degree to try to meet these expenses because they are so desperate.

The other issue that we are concerned about in our situation is that we have services that basically are on the eastern seaboard. We occasionally are able to do some work in rural and regional New South Wales, outside the eastern seaboard. But there is a huge need out in the country where people are more isolated, as you well know. So if you need an autism specific service and you are out in the country, and you put that on top of all the other isolation factors that people experience in rural and regional New South Wales, you have major issues.

CHAIR—Other witnesses have advised us that in some parts of the community—people who are not so well-off, whose involvement with authority may be somewhat less than others—par-

ents are not always as well equipped. Their class background may further disadvantage students. Is that your experience? Are you finding that the areas of greatest need are actually the poorer areas of the city of Sydney?

Dr Roberts—As Adrian said, we are very aware of a huge amount of unmet need in rural and regional areas. It is variable in Sydney.

Mr Ford—We have schools in northern Sydney, western Sydney and southern Sydney. There is need in all those suburbs. I guess that is one of the things about autism: once people are aware that there is a service and the need could be addressed, people put up their hands.

CHAIR—But even within those suburbs, what sort of parents are coming into the centres? You can have a well-off area but there are still always going to be people less well-off and there are people, I would have thought, who are disadvantaged who live on the North Shore in this fine town. Are you able to access those communities?

Dr Roberts—We get referrals from the major diagnostic and assessment centres. So we get referrals from Westmead, Royal North Shore and Randwick, Prince of Wales. The way that those families come through is pretty even handed. It is not dependent on socioeconomic background. As Adrian mentioned, we really bend over backwards to avoid disadvantaging a child because the parents cannot afford to pay. So there are mechanisms that we have.

CHAIR—Do you exempt them from fees?

Dr Roberts—We can reduce fees or, if necessary, exempt fees, yes.

Mr Ford—I think the issue is that we are overwhelmed by the number of families that are seeking our service. We have substantial waiting lists. They go through an eligibility assessment and they are ranked in terms of need. When a space becomes available, in fitting the child for that particular school or class in terms of where they are on the spectrum, what the place can offer them and where they are on that waiting list, we will meet that need. There are more than enough children; that is the issue.

Dr Roberts—Our goal is to move those children through. Our goal is to give the children the skills they need to manage in a less specialised educational setting. We have a very active transition process. For example, the vast bulk of our school population is aged under six. Our aim is to get that child and that family to a level where they can then cope in their local school. It might not be their local school, but the closest local school that is going to be able to provide a program. It might be a support class in their local school. So we have this flow through our services all the time. As I mentioned before, in our support classes that we operate in mainstream schools, the average length of stay is 18 months.

Senator ALLISON—Can you give us an indication of the range of fees that you charge?

Mr Ford—Yes, it is $1,800 a year. We use a formula, which is based on a combination of the disability allowance and the child allowance for one child. When you combine that the formula is based on about 60 per cent of that.

Senator ALLISON—Would you be philosophically opposed to full government funding for your school?

Mr Ford—No, no, no!

Dr Roberts—The fees are actually a fairly small proportion of the overall income for the schools, as you have probably guessed from the kinds of figures we are talking about.

Senator ALLISON—I will not pursue it here but I think the subcommittee might be advantaged by having a breakdown of where those figures come from. I think it might be useful for our work to know precisely what sorts of funding you need to rely on.

CHAIR—This subcommittee has found it difficult to establish where the money goes, but more especially where it comes from—apart from everyone coming here saying they want more of it.

Senator ALLISON—To change the subject of funding for a moment, the Australian Association of Special Education appeared before us. Is your association a member of that association?

Dr Roberts—Yes, we are.

Senator ALLISON—I must say, speaking for myself, I was a bit surprised at the basic premise of that organisation. It seems to run at odds with yours, which is that there is not—to paraphrase it—a need for identifying the disability and that instead we should look at what the requirements are in order to meet the curriculum requirements and that that becomes the highest order priority. You seem to be saying, 'No, you do need to understand a child with autism and with that knowledge provide specialised support.' May I invite you to read their submission and give us some feedback on it?

Dr Roberts—I am aware of their position. I think the issue is when you are looking at the child's needs, which is what the special education association would say, and what we are saying is that children with autism have some very specific needs which are often misunderstood. The behavioural example I gave before is a good illustration of that kind of issue. From our point of view, we do not really care what you call it. We are not saying that all children with autism have exactly the same needs. We certainly agree that you need to assess, on an individual basis, what those child's needs are. Some children at the top end of the spectrum do survive the system and do quite well. Not all of those children in the top end figures that we have been citing from the research will need support, which is an important consideration. What we are saying is that yes, we want to see this population's needs accurately identified and accurately met. In order to do that—because we have seen so much misunderstanding and so much of a failure of the system to do that in the past—we can see no alternative but to have people who are specialised and skilled in that area. These people can go and say, 'Children with autism have these kinds of problems. I will do an observation and then I can tell you what is going on for this child. He is super sensitive to that particular squeaky noise that that bike makes in the playground. That makes it intolerable for him and he will bash up anybody to get into the time-out room.' This is the sort of thing that happens but, unless you understand the sensory sensitivities of autism, you are going to miss that. That is what I would

say to the special education association, too. We have had quite a bit of involvement with them in the past, and we have had staff who have been quite senior office bearers in the special education association. We have always pushed that point and we have had good debates.

Senator ALLISON—I understand. We also heard this morning from the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association who, while not suggesting that the system is perfect, say that at least in New South Wales every school has access to a counsellor and that those counsellors are trained such that they are able to identify autism, I think they said, but certainly learning disabilities and any other barrier to learning. Do you have that sort of confidence in school counsellors? What I think you are suggesting is that there are a great number of children who have not been identified.

Dr Roberts—There is a variation in the level of expertise and resources. Certainly, the experience that we have had is that children have not been able to access the sort of support they have needed in the vast majority of cases. It is only recently that the Department of School Education has actually recognised autism spectrum disorders as a specific group. Before that, counsellors did not identify those children at all. That was the policy.

Mr Ford—It was not that many years ago.

Dr Roberts—It is only the last four years that school counsellors have actually written reports identifying children as having autism spectrum disorders. Before that they did not, because there was no service.

Mr Ford—We have been actively involved with the education department here in terms of offering training, and they have actively taken that up. Both teachers and guidance officers have been involved in that, but there is still a way to go. The other experience that I would reflect on is the experience that we get through our help desk, where parents of kids of all school ages and earlier—preschool ages—talk to us about people not understanding enough about the needs of people with autism and where to get help. They are quite desperate about it. There are some tremendous examples of fabulous understanding and, as Jacqui is saying, other examples where it is somewhat limited.

Senator ALLISON—So you would support professional development for all teachers?

Mr Ford—Definitely.

Dr Roberts—Absolutely—as part of undergraduate courses and ongoing professional development.

Senator ALLISON—I guess every learning disorder has a call on part of the course to explain to teachers the particular diagnoses and the response required. What in your view would be a minimum time frame in which to give undergraduates sufficient knowledge to at least make a guess at identifying such students and then turning their teaching process and classroom around to deal with such students?

Dr Roberts—It is difficult to say and I know how little time there is for special needs, but I would say you would need at least two four-hour blocks. I would like to see a program looking

at the identification of autism and understanding the characteristics of autism and another block of strategies for practical classroom management strategies.

Mr Ford—As a minimum basic standard.

Dr Roberts—To go into the undergraduate program. We are actually developing one at the moment for Canberra University, which is part of their postgraduate certificate, diploma, masters program that they are running at the moment. We are doing a two-day presentation on those and that is the first day, but I think you could condense that into four hours.

Senator ALLISON—Is there an argument for, let us say, primary school teachers in particular to do a one- or two-day minimum practicum in special education?

Dr Roberts—Absolutely. If teachers are going to have children with autism spectrum disorders in their classrooms—

Senator ALLISON—It is pretty much guaranteed, isn't it?

Dr Roberts—they should have some professional development, because otherwise it is just commonsense that it is going to be very difficult for everybody.

Senator ALLISON—This may be difficult, but what are the long-term implications for a student with autism and the likely difficulties they will have as adults if they do not have early intervention—if they do not have an education system or experience in schools which recognises that problem?

Dr Roberts—We certainly know that a lot of able people with autism do not reach their learning potential; for example, the HSC here in New South Wales is stacked against them because of the compulsory English component, which makes it very difficult. We are working with the Board of Studies and the Universities' Admission Board on that at the moment. So, you have a question of people with a lot of potential who are not able to meet that potential.

In severe cases you can have situations where people fall foul of the law and end up in the judicial system because of the characteristics of autism. For example, a young man was picked up recently. He had had problems at home and he was riding the trains, which was a particular obsession for him. He had been on the trains for five days when the railway police picked him up. Obviously by that stage he was looking pretty dishevelled. They asked him if he had any needles in his bag, thinking he was a drug addict. He had a sewing kit, so he said yes, he did. Of course they searched him and found the sewing kit and then roughed him up because he had given them cheek. He literally responded to their question. So you can have problems like that occurring, too, with the more able group. With the less able group, if their needs are not met adequately, you can have people ending up in institutions because their behaviours are so unmanageable that they need the institutional setting. That is pretty grim, but that is certainly what—

Senator ALLISON—But avoidable.

Dr Roberts—Definitely avoidable if the behaviour is managed properly. I have been in the business for a long time. The way that we manage children with autism now, with a positive approach to behaviour management, for example, has made such a difference. Whereas before we used a lot of punitive measures—time out is one I have already mentioned, or restraint—with the use of positive behaviour management from a really early age none of that happens any more. None of it is necessary. So you can certainly turn that around. You do not have situations of severe self-injurious behaviour or aggression towards other people. It can be managed, and it can be managed without drugs educationally.

Senator ALLISON—Why do you not open up new schools since there is such a long waiting list?

Dr Roberts—We do. We have been adding a couple of classes a year.

Mr Ford—We have been adding satellite classes and support classes. For us to be able to open up a new class we need to get the support particularly of the state education authorities.

Senator ALLISON—So you do not build new schools any more; you try to put a class into—

Mr Ford—At this stage we have not built another new base school. The last one was about nine or 10 years ago.

Dr Roberts—We have actually been leasing department of education classrooms for some of our base schools more recently, because it is very expensive to build. Capital development is very expensive. And infrastructure—we have realised that we cannot expand indefinitely without addressing the infrastructure issue.

CHAIR—That makes better sense, does it not—collocating with a government school.

Mr Ford—That is right. Because of the change in the spectrum as we understood it, there is a need now to focus on numbers of children that are in existing systems and do not need a special system as such. Our aim is not to pull kids out if that is avoidable, so we have been gradually growing a school outreach service which works with kids, particularly on the Asperger's end of the spectrum, and helping the staff, helping the family and helping the young person themselves deal with their behaviour management issues, their learning issues and training up the immediate environment around them so that they can actually do things a whole lot better. That has been tremendously successful. This very small team worked with over 800 children last year in the regular school system. In terms of trying to meet some of the needs of this huge population that we have got that seems to be an effective strategy. Then we encourage and build the capacity in the local community to be able to more effectively respond to this person. The other thing is that we could go on building schools and more schools. We will never meet the need. We are working in partnership with other systems. We are developing a number of relationships with the Catholic Education Office in this state. We have started up two high school classes with the Catholic Education Office in a number of schools in New South Wales, and we have one in the state system in high school, because these kids are moving on into high school and the need is becoming much more apparent. Some of them need class system supports that enable them to be able to meet their potential. By working in partnership we are

able to spread more quickly and efficiently than going to all the expense of building whole buildings.

Senator ALLISON—That is understood. I congratulate you for your work; it sounds fantastic. But obviously there is still a great unmet need.

Mr Ford—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—What would you say are the main barriers to solving that problem?

Mr Ford—I think one of the main barriers is recognising people with autism. Needing to have that recognition is most important. It comes back to that. Once people are identified you can say, 'Look, we have got to have this response by our system, be it government, non-government or whatever.' I think there will be a great deal more push from the parent body across this particular disability group in the coming years because the need is there and we know there needs to be quite intensive support. In our school the ratio is one teacher to four children and half an aide per class, so it is a very intensive involvement if they are in a special school, and they need substantial aide support in other systems. I think that will put the pressure on governments, both at state and federal level, to say that they have got to offer more. The need is intensive. We know by offering that in particularly the early years of education there are results, and then we can see kids more confidently moving into regular settings so that money is actually saved, perhaps, in the system. But one never sees many savings.

Senator ALLISON—Indeed. Thank you very much.

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

Proceedings suspended from 12.11 p.m. to 1.28 p.m.

DURHAM, Associate Professor Marsha, Dean of Students, University of Western Sydney

NORRIS, Ms Sandra May, Head, Counselling and Disability Services, University of Western Sydney

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the University of Western Sydney. The committee has before it submission No. 31. Do you wish to make any alterations to that document?

Prof. Durham—No.

CHAIR—The committee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the committee will also consider any requests 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.

Prof. Durham—Thank you. I have put forward a written statement. I will not be reading it out in toto; I would like to make a few brief comments from that statement. Do you have a copy of that?

CHAIR—Is it additional to your submission?

Prof. Durham—It is just a written statement.

CHAIR—We will table that document. Please continue.

Prof. Durham—I want to make a few comments from that statement; that is, that although there are many factors that require consideration if students with disabilities are to have a fair go while at university, the most significant is funding. Currently universities tend to provide funding to accommodate the needs of individual students. We believe that greater benefits could be achieved if there was a more systemic approach that involved inclusive teaching and learning practices and a focus on a broader range of support throughout the university. That would help reduce the reliance on one-off strategies for students.

The cost of services for students with disabilities usually comes out of universities' operating budgets. It does fall more heavily on universities that are proactive in their recruiting of students with disabilities or on the universities that attempt to do more than provide base level services and programs. Support costs increase for multicampus universities, because students with disabilities expect to have technologies and other services available to them at the campus of their choice. Universities that are located in low socioeconomic regions also grapple with increased support needs when students with disabilities also have financial challenges in accessing and participating in higher education.

The government could assist students with disabilities in having a more integrated educational experience and reduce the support costs for and of individual universities if they took up a number of initiatives either at the state or national level—I have listed those initiatives

in the document—such as a central transcription service, a clearing house for collecting and distributing materials in alternative formats, more training for Australian sign language interpreters and greater investigation of innovative educational practices. Finally, at the end of that document I have listed in a pie chart the kinds of disabilities that we were dealing with last year on two of our campuses that are representative of our six campuses.

Senator ALLISON—What is the percentage of students in your university with identified disabilities?

Ms Norris—It is about two per cent.

Senator ALLISON—Do you regard that as reasonably representative or do you think there is a higher percentage that the university should be aiming for?

Prof. Durham—I think we should be aiming for a higher level. We are under the state and national percentages.

Senator ALLISON—For universities?

Prof. Durham—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—Which is not what you would expect in a university in the western suburbs, is it?

Prof. Durham—There are a number of issues that might lead to that figure. One is possibly the difficulty with transport to access the University.

Ms Norris—There is also the added expense for students with disabilities to study at university. There is the issue of attendant care; students themselves are responsible for providing that. We provide accommodations to assist students to access lectures but there are a whole of other services that we are not in a position to provide. Because a lot of students with disabilities also come from the lower socioeconomic groups, the expense involved in studying at the tertiary level can be prohibitive.

Prof. Durham—Compared to the other single campus universities, even though we do provide support, there are difficulties in having six integration rooms and making improvements on six campuses to provide all sorts of support for students.

Senator ALLISON—Are those you count in the 800 students with disabilities solely self-identifying? Are they mostly physical disabilities? How do you know you have 800? You say that some of the students with disabilities at universities do not disclose their disability. How do you actually arrive at that figure?

Ms Norris—They would be students who have self-identified as having a disability and who have come forward to have an integration plan established for them. An integration plan is basically the plan that the university's disability advisers work out and it sets out the educational accommodations that will be provided.

Senator ALLISON—Do they come to the university under special programs? Presumably you have intakes of students—perhaps mature age students—who do not go through the normal HSC process. Is that right or not?

Ms Norris—Yes, we do have those types of programs but they do not specifically target students with disabilities.

Senator ALLISON—What can we conclude from that? Is it likely that most students with disabilities have physical disabilities—in other words, intellectually and cognitively and so on—and they are not disabled?

Ms Norris—I am sorry, I do not understand the question.

Senator ALLISON—Your students with disabilities mostly have physical disabilities, not intellectual, cognitive or other—

Ms Norris—No, probably 20 per cent of our students with disabilities would have a learning disability of some sort. We would have probably 15 to 20 per cent who have a psychiatric disability.

Senator ALLISON—Yet they have come through the HSC process, other than those that are mature age students for special programs, so they have been through all those hoops. I understand.

Prof. Durham—Or through alternative entry but not specific to disabilities.

Senator ALLISON—So what are the alternative entries? I am just trying to tease this out. How do most of them get into university?

Ms Norris—We have, for example, a regional entry scheme, a test which prospective students who reside within the greater Western Sydney region can undertake. It actually allows entrance to university on a lower mark, basically. There have been various preparatory programs for people to come in and they were largely people from lower socioeconomic groups, equity groups.

Senator ALLISON—Once enrolled and self-identified as having a disability, what then is the process for the university?

Ms Norris—The student would meet with the disability adviser and, having provided appropriate medical documentation of their disability, the disability adviser would work out an accommodation plan for that student. For example, depending upon the type of disability, it might be that, if the student is hearing impaired, the student may require an interpreter. He may require access to a note taker. If it is a physical disability, if it is a hand impairment, for example, the student might require a scribe. There is a whole list of accommodations which we can make available to a student and the disability adviser attempts to put together a plan for the individual student, depending upon the disability and the course that the student is seeking to undertake.

Senator ALLISON—Does the university have a budget for such accommodation?

Ms Norris—The university does have a budget.

Senator ALLISON—What happens when the budget is breached?

Ms Norris—There is much creative toing-and-froing. The university is guided by the principle of having to provide what is called ‘reasonable accommodations’ and that is one of the most slippery concepts, if you like, because what is a reasonable accommodation? It is supposed to be an accommodation which will allow the student with a disability to equally access the academic endeavour. So the budget is always an important issue for disability advisers. I do not think we have actually ever not provided a service that a student has required, but it has often meant that we have had to take money from other areas or that we have had to find more creative ways of meeting the student’s requirements.

Part of the problem for us is that we are currently in the process of restructuring how we provide services for students with disabilities, but we are still at the stage where most of our services target individual students who self-identify. So that means putting together, just before the beginning of each semester, integration plans for many hundreds of students. It is very much on a one-to-one basis. At UWS we are attempting to bring about ways of working in a more systemic way and one of the large things there of course is more inclusive teaching practices. The university is currently looking at how it can move to having, for example, more of its course material routinely available online and that would have implications for our budget in relation to note takers. It is about working towards having inclusive teaching practices so that a whole range of accommodations do not need to be negotiated for each individual student.

Senator ALLISON—One of the criticisms which has come up in a number of submissions in relation to people with low vision or who are legally blind is that universities fail to meet their expectations with providing braille material or if they do it is three months after the assignment was due. Can you indicate to the committee how well your university is dealing with that particular need?

Prof. Durham—Some of that has to do with students. If they come forward with sufficient planning to say that they do have this need then it is relatively easy to get the textbooks.

Senator ALLISON—Or if their teachers give them enough notice as well.

Prof. Durham—Yes. I think the worst-case scenario is when students show up right before classes start and say that they have particular needs that need to be met. But outside that extreme case—

Ms Norris—It is partly a demand for the transcription services—and I note some of the other submissions which have been made specifically addressed this—because the turnaround time can be up to three months. So there are many stages in the process of being able to provide a student with appropriate materials and that is certainly the case for the visually impaired. There are many stages where the system can fall down if somebody does not fulfil their obligation. It can start with the academic—the person running the course—not notifying us with sufficient lead time what materials will actually be available, so difficulties can start there. It could be that

we are told a certain textbook or certain materials will be used and then for whatever that needs to changed, yet we may have started the process of having the book transcribed; or it may be, as Professor Durham indicated, that students do not actually finalise course selection with the appropriate lead time.

Senator ALLISON—Do you have staff preparing that braille or do you contract it out to others?

Ms Norris—We contract it out. You would have also heard that the demand on the turnaround time for the brailling services can be up to three months.

Senator ALLISON—Have you had a chance to look at types of disability to be able to put—for budgetary purposes—some sort of cost associated with those disabilities? Are you far enough down the path to be able to do that?

Prof. Durham—We have done some work in that area. Ms Norris probably knows more about that than I do.

Ms Norris—We have done some work on that, but because to date we have largely provided an individual service we have not actually proceeded through 'class of disability'—we have looked at individual students. Associated costs can vary dramatically, because students typically may start off taking a full study load and then drop back or they may, if they are a hearing-impaired student, study part-time, depending on what type of course they are doing. The costs to provide interpreters for tutorials and scribes for lectures may be different if they require practical assistance in science based or computer based areas. We would have a band, but it is incredibly loose.

Senator ALLISON—The committee is interested in the cost of your provision of this service. If you have not done that sort of analysis it would be useful for us either to know your budget or an average figure for students.

Prof. Durham—Is that the overall figure?

Senator ALLISON—The overall figure and how many students access that figure.

Ms Norris—I can tell you that for our peer and professional note taking, readers, interpreters and exam supervisors, we have a budget of $184,000. Our total budget excluding staffing costs is $180,000.

Senator ALLISON—How many students with disabilities do you have?

Ms Norris—It would be 694 to 800 students.

Senator ALLISON—Do you go to students at the end of their course or the end of the year and ask them to evaluate the support services they have received?

Ms Norris—Yes, we do evaluate our services.

Senator ALLISON—Generally speaking, what is the response?

Ms Norris—Until this year, the response has been very positive. This year we have been in the process of restructuring and bringing about many changes, and there has been an increase in student dissatisfaction. We have a number of key staff members who are on leave and we are introducing new technology, an interactive computer program, which we think will eventually streamline processes. We do actively seek feedback and until this year I would say that was overwhelmingly positive.

Senator ALLISON—You have not had a series of appeals by students against the amount of services that you can provide?

Ms Norris—No formal appeals.

Senator ALLISON—Is there a process for doing that?

Ms Norris—Yes, there is a complaints process.

Prof. Durham—I should also say that as part of our budgeting for disabilities there is the staffing, with three disabilities advisers that operate on the six campuses and support staff for them as well.

CHAIR—Could you tell us what is the total budget for disabilities within the university?

Prof. Durham—I can say what the total budget is for the area of disabilities. There are obviously some more support costs in IT and that sort of thing that we have not chased down, but for my area, which takes in disability support, it is $435,000.

CHAIR—The Commonwealth has recently announced a program of $8 million over three years to support 1,500 high need students. Do you have access to that money?

Prof. Durham—I believe we will have access when we provide the information.

CHAIR—So you do not have access at the moment?

Prof. Durham—No.

Ms Norris—Are you talking about the new funding arrangements for high need students?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Norris—That money will be provided retrospectively as a contribution and a recognition of the high costs to universities of providing services to high need students. We still have not received from the department the final outline of how they want that data provided, but we will be providing it at the end of each semester.

CHAIR—It is due to start this month.

Ms Norris—That is right. We will need to provide that information.

CHAIR—And they still have not provided you with the guidelines on how to apply for it?

Prof. Durham—No, not that we know of.

CHAIR—It was put to me that it is to cater for 1,500 high need students. Do you have any definition of 'high need' from the Commonwealth? Has anyone given you a definition of 'high need'?

Ms Norris—There is a definition of high need.

CHAIR—Does that apply to this program?

Ms Norris—Yes.

CHAIR—All right. It is mainly, but not exclusively, for students with a print disability. Is that the case?

Ms Norris—I am not sure of that. It is my understanding that 'high need' is really based on what it costs to maintain the student and to be able to provide reasonable accommodation. It can actually be up to $20,000 a semester to provide for a visually-impaired student.

CHAIR—Is this money allocated on a per capita basis? Are you aware of how it is going to be allocated?

Ms Norris—No. We are still grappling, as a service, with what impact that will have on our budget. We know that we will receive some money but, as you have pointed out, it is due to start this month and we will need to provide the department with figures. We are working out the process to be able to do that.

CHAIR—I have a few simple sums. If it is for 1,500 students, which I understand is the national program, that is the equivalent of $1,778 per student per year or $889 per semester. I have seen the best estimates from the blind societies, if you like. They calculate that the minimum cost is equivalent to $2,000 a year for transcription services and the like, so that is $1,304 short per student. Is that the sort of calculation that you would make? Does that seem like a reasonable figure?

Prof. Durham—Our understanding is that it would be per student. We have been doing some calculations of our higher cost students, although we tend to consider our budget in terms of the services provided rather than per student.

CHAIR—That is how it would work though?

Prof. Durham—Yes, that is our thinking.

CHAIR—What is your view of the Commonwealth programs for disabilities? There is money under HEEP—the Higher Education Equity Program. Are you familiar with that program?

Prof. Durham—Yes, we use the HEEP funding every year.

CHAIR—How much money do you get from that?

Prof. Durham—I am sorry, I would have to take that on notice and get back to you.

CHAIR—We can put that on notice. Can I get some assessment from you on how well that is working from your point of view?

Prof. Durham—From my point of view, it is a very positive advantage to the university because it allows us to take that money and run seed programs or develop initiatives which we might not otherwise be able to do out of our operating grant. It enables us to try out some new initiatives, see if they are workable and report to the government on that.

CHAIR—I understand that there is a base grant of $80,000 and then additional funding based on the number of students within the equity group, the targeted group. Is that how it works?

Prof. Durham—I would have to say I am not sure how it works.

CHAIR—Can you confirm for me whether or not that is the case in your particular institution’s experience?

Prof. Durham—Yes, I will.

CHAIR—Also, the Commonwealth provides funding for regional disability liaison officers. Do you participate in that program?

Prof. Durham—We do.

CHAIR—How many officers do you have? Are they the three staff you are talking about?

Ms Norris—No. The University of Western Sydney hosts one of the regional disability liaison officer positions. Their role is to facilitate transition through the various stages of education and into employment. So the RDLO does not specifically work with university students only. Our disability advisers are the staff that are employed by UWS to work specifically with university students—so that is different.

CHAIR—I have a list of universities here, and you are not on this list. I take it the university does not directly employ the DLOs?

Prof. Durham—We employ the DLOs; we do not employ the RDLOs—the regional people. But we host that person.

CHAIR—How many do you have on the DLO list?

Ms Norris—Our DLO is equivalent to our disability advisers. We have three of those, and they are based across the six campuses.

CHAIR—So they are the three persons you spoke of earlier?

Ms Norris—Yes.

CHAIR—And that is Commonwealth funding?

Ms Norris—That is our operating grant.

CHAIR—That is out of the operating grant?

Prof. Durham—Yes.

CHAIR—It is not out of any special program?

Ms Norris—No.

CHAIR—That is good. Do you have any sense of what the situation is across the sector? Based on your experiences, can you provide the committee with any information on how you think the Commonwealth disability support programs are actually working?

Ms Norris—My first response is probably that it is largely reactive; that most universities provide—as we have in the past and currently still provide—services to individual students. Because of the DDA legislation, most universities operate with a mind-set of not being sued, basically. So it is always a case of juggling to work out what are the minimal reasonable accommodations that can be applied for individual students. From my perspective, one of the main changes that needs to happen is that we begin to work more systemically rather than dealing on a student by student basis. As to how it is working across the sector, I would probably say it is largely reactive. Money is always the issue. A lot of institutions have wonderful ideas about using more of the assistive technologies, but it is very expensive to do that. There are other universities for whom the simple things like physical access are still a problem: universities with old buildings which still do not have appropriate lifts, lecture theatres. There is no specific funding for that, and that is obviously potentially a huge cost out of a university's budget.

Prof. Durham—Also, part of that systemic approach is to embed it more into the university's way of doing things and into the way it supports people. We have three disability liaison officers or advisers and we have six campuses. They physically cannot do all the work that is involved with developing integration plans—talking to the exams branch, talking to academics—and we are working on trying to change that so that that is a shared responsibility across the university.

CHAIR—In essence, though, the Disability Discrimination Act, which was passed in 1992, has lifted the bar, has it not, in terms of people's expectations of what they can rightfully expect from educational institutions? Do you agree with that?

Prof. Durham—Yes.

CHAIR—That is not an unreasonable thing, is it?

Ms Norris—No, it certainly is not unreasonable.

CHAIR—The question then is how it is going to be paid for. That seems to me to be the nub of the problem here. My reading of the situation is that the current administrative arrangements are that, in effect, the Commonwealth expects the financing of services for the disabled to have generally come from operating revenue, apart from these small, rather superficial grants that would appear to be available, such as the employment of a regional liaison officer. Is that the case or not?

Prof. Durham—It is the case, but the university would have other groups that it uses its operating grants for as well.

CHAIR—I am not saying that that is exclusive. That is the source of funding; that is essentially how it works.

Ms Norris—But the universities are not provided a significant other pool of funding to be able to even set up the infrastructure which would make it easier for students with disabilities to access tertiary education.

CHAIR—You could apply for an exemption because of unjustifiable hardship. Has the university ever considered that?

Prof. Durham—No.

CHAIR—Do you think it would be illegitimate to claim that?

Prof. Durham—I would think the only area that would do that would be a very small local area.

CHAIR—I am pleased to hear that. Other educational institutions do not take the same view. You are saying it is your responsibility to actually fulfil these obligations.

Prof. Durham—UWS has a strong social justice philosophy.

CHAIR—I am very pleased to hear that. The Commonwealth equity scholarship program which was discontinued in 2000: what sort of impact has the closure of that particular program had?

Ms Norris—That provided another source of funding for students with disabilities. It was another small kit of money that, for individual students, made a lot of difference.

Prof. Durham—The university is now setting up its own scholarship program for equity students, because the Commonwealth funding is not available.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Senator TIERNEY—What is the number of students at UWS?

Prof. Durham—Around 33,000.

Senator TIERNEY—You have identified 800 out of that 33,000 as being people with a disability. How did you come to identify them? What was the process?

Ms Norris—That 800 would be identified through self-identification. There are probably more students with disabilities attending all institutions. That number is identified only through self-identification; some students choose not to make their disability known.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you ever get referrals or assistance from academic staff who identify people who they think have a particular disability or perhaps need assistance? Is any identification done that way or is it all self-identification?

Prof. Durham—As Dean of Students I handle complaints about students and from students. I am not sure if I would call them referrals, but sometimes academics will get in touch with me about various issues in the classroom, where they express concerns about a student. In very few cases we have found that there has been a connection with a disability.

Senator TIERNEY—The students undertaking courses are obviously there to learn, and there are students who have disabilities that impinge on that process, so are the staff given any training in learning to be aware of these sorts of issues and in what mechanisms should occur?

Prof. Durham—There are workshops that staff can be involved in. I would have to say that most staff do not really think about it until they are actually facing an issue, and then the disabilities advisers are there to work with staff and to help them make various arrangements or accommodations.

CHAIR—How many lecturing staff are there in total at the University of Western Sydney?

Prof. Durham—There are about 1,000, I believe. I will have to check on that number.

Senator TIERNEY—1,000?

Prof. Durham—Maybe it is 1,000 staff—I will have to check on the number, I am sorry.

Senator TIERNEY—How may would undertake such workshops a year?

Ms Norris—I think our submission said that to date we know that 150 have attended the specific workshops conducted for academic staff. There is also a program—not a formal program—through which the DLOs are available for individual consultations with academic staff. A lot of that happens on an informal as well as a formal basis. If an academic finds that he or she has a student with a disability within his or her class, often they will seek out the advice from the DLO.

Senator TIERNEY—As Dean of Students, what pastoral care arrangements are in place at the university? Are there course coordinators who have some duty of care? What happens with students? Is there someone they can go to for advice on various things? How does that work at the University of Western Sydney?

Prof. Durham—Students with disabilities would mostly go to the disability liaison officers or advisers. They tend to be their main reference point. We are using some of the HEEP funding to develop more pastoral care in the schools and colleges because we feel that a lot of the issues that students need some help on are academic issues, so it is probably more relevant to have an academic working with students and providing those answers.

Senator TIERNEY—That is what I meant as perhaps a first port of call. Do you have a course coordinator system where the person would go to their course coordinator, whether it be an academic issue or whatever issue; is that sort of structure in place?

Prof. Durham—Yes, we have a course coordinator system, but we are trying to set up something that is specific for students with disabilities so that they have someone who can assist with the academic accommodations that some need.

Senator TIERNEY—I think you mentioned that there were three specific officers for six campuses?

Prof. Durham—Yes.

Ms Norris—Students with disabilities are also, of course, able to access the university's other mainstream support services. The university also has a counselling service. There are 12 counsellors spread across the six campuses. There are also learning skills support people, student associations have welfare officers and chaplains are active on each campus. So there are other more mainstream support services which students with disabilities also access.

Senator TIERNEY—For the 800 identified people with disabilities you have a ratio of about one to 280, and those are self-identified people; that is not the total pool. Do you think that is adequate?

Ms Norris—The way our DLO positions operate is to work out the educational accommodations required for the students. If the students require additional support, they are referred to the other services. Wherever possible, the students are, if you like, mainstreamed back to general support services. Rather than having a counsellor-welfare type position specifically for students with disabilities, if they require personal counselling they are referred into the counselling team, if they require academic support they may be referred back to their faculty or to the learning skills area.

Prof. Durham—The DLO really works as a link so that the students are accessing our regular mainstream services but with that extra bit of help.

Senator TIERNEY—So if they were referred back to the faculty and the specific problem relates to their disability and the way in which that is affecting their learning, what sort of assistance do they get at the faculty level?

Ms Norris—They would not be referred back to the faculty if they were experiencing a problem with the course that related specifically to their disabilities. We would see that as a role for the DLO to help the student negotiate with the academic.

Senator TIERNEY—Could you give me an example of the sort of extra assistance they would then get: a particular disability is identified, they have seen the DLO and they go back and talk to the lecturer. What would happen that is different for that student compared with someone in a mainstream position?

Ms Norris—It would depend upon the disability. The student might have a disability that requires that they be given extra time to complete exams, for example. At the beginning of each semester, each student will have an integration plan written for that student. The plan is sent to the relevant academics who can then see at the beginning of the semester that this particular student will require these additional things. One of the recommendations might be that the student receives copies of any overheads the lecturer uses; it really depends upon the nature of the disability. That happens at the beginning of the semester. Where the student may need to come back to the DLO is if, even though the lecturer has received an integration plan, for some reason he or she does not follow through. For example, it might be recommended that lecture notes or overheads are provided and the lecturer may not do that. We encourage a high level of independence among our students, so we would be saying, ‘Have you approached the lecturer?’ If for whatever reason the overheads are not forthcoming, the DLO has a role to mediate.

Senator TIERNEY—A DLO has an identified average caseload of about 280 students. Would you describe their role as case management? Do they oversee a certain cohort, say on two campuses each? Is that the way it is structured?

Ms Norris—Basically it is structured so that each DLO is placed on a busy campus and a less busy campus. We have three relatively large campuses and three smaller ones. The DLO’s role is full-on at several times during the semester. The beginning of semester and the lead-up to exams are peak periods. What we are attempting to do is change our procedures to streamline the process. One example would be that we are about to roll out a new interactive computer software program. This will enable the DLO, sitting at their desk, to create the integration plan as they are talking with the student and then send it straight out to the relevant points that it needs to go to. Previous to that software package what would happen would be that an interview would happen with the student and an integration plan would be written and then it would be posted out to the various points. We have invested a lot in developing a program that will streamline that process. While a DLO may be dealing with 250 students, not all of those students will be high need in terms of the type of accommodations they require or, indeed, the amount of time a DLO needs to spend with them. For a percentage of students they will have their integration plan written, it will be forwarded to the relevant academics and it will all flow

smoothly. The bulk of the DLO's time would be spent with that relatively few per cent of students for whom the system is not working.

Senator TIERNEY—The high need people. Do the students fill out any sort of assessment on the support, or how do they assess the support these 800 students are getting? Do they give you any feedback in an informal sort of way?

Ms Norris—No. We routinely seek feedback by surveying students.

Senator TIERNEY—You do a survey where they actually fill out a form to give you that feedback. Okay. You mentioned a budget, apart from the staffing budget, of $180,000, which comes down to about $225 a student. I assume that is not spread evenly.

Ms Norris—It is not.

Senator TIERNEY—What sorts of things would that be spent on?

Ms Norris—It would be spent on note takers, for example. If a student has a hand injury or if a student is deaf they may require somebody to take notes for them during lectures. Students who have various learning disabilities, and obviously some visually impaired students, will need access to readers, people to read material for them. There are interpreters for hearing impaired students. There are exam supervisors. Lots of students with disabilities require very specific examination provision, so it may be that the nature of their disability is such that they cannot remain seated for very long, so one recommendation in that case would be that that particular student take his or her exams in a room on their own so they can get up and stretch or lie on the ground for 10 minutes or whatever it is.

Senator TIERNEY—When these people come to university they have obviously got a history of difficulties with learning over many years before they get to the university. What happens at that transition point? What records move across the system between the secondary and the tertiary system?

Ms Norris—None.

Senator TIERNEY—Nothing whatsoever?

Ms Norris—And that is a problem.

Senator TIERNEY—Is anyone addressing that? Is there any plan to address that? You would think it would be useful for your three DLOs to at least have the history.

Ms Norris—Yes. There is no formal mechanism for that to happen, and I think that is one of the things the RDLOs are looking to. The RDLO positions are actually positions which—

Senator TIERNEY—The RDLOs?

Ms Norris—The university employs DLOs—disability liaison officers. The RDLO positions are not owned by any one institution. They are regional disability liaison officers. That person actually works with students throughout the different educational sectors.

Senator TIERNEY—Who employs them?

Ms Norris—They are employed through DEST funding. New South Wales I think has two of those positions. I think there are 10 throughout. I am not sure of the exact number; I would have to check.

Senator TIERNEY—One per educational region or something like that.

Ms Norris—Not even educational region.

Prof. Durham—There is one for the Western Sydney region, and we are hoping—

Senator TIERNEY—Such a person surely could undertake that sort of a role, couldn't they?

Ms Norris—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Of course, not everyone comes from Western Sydney and goes to university.

Prof. Durham—That is right.

Senator TIERNEY—They could do a fair bit of it.

Prof. Durham—Their job is to take up initiatives to bring about the connections between schools, TAFE, universities and employment agencies in other areas.

Senator TIERNEY—Over the last 20 years there have been lots of provisions put on by government for all organisations, not just universities—for example, people with disabilities to have wheelchair access and this sort of thing. Universities, like other institutions, pick up a cost. When whatever government enacts legislation—and it could be incredibly worthwhile legislation—do you think the body that actually creates that legislation, whatever government it is, should actually provide the funding to implement the legislation?

Ms Norris—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—Do you think the fact that they do not do that means that that legislation—and let us stick with the area of disabilities—is perhaps not implemented to the extent that it could or should be because of budgetary constraint?

Ms Norris—Yes. UWS attempts to be very creative with the budget specifically targeting students with disabilities.

Prof. Durham—It does mean that if you do not have that funding there is a tendency in universities to undertake changes in the environment based on individual needs. So if there is a visually impaired student on one campus that is the time when the steps get painted for visual differentiation and that sort of thing.

Senator TIERNEY—So when there is a specific need they might roll that funding out to support that?

Prof. Durham—There would be a tendency to do that, rather than making the whole university environment accessible not only to students but to staff and visitors as well.

Senator TIERNEY—But you are a relatively new university and most of your buildings were presumably built since those sorts of access requirements came in from government, which was in 1992—or was it earlier?

CHAIR—It was the Disabilities Discrimination Act in 1992.

Senator TIERNEY—It was 1992—so it has been ten years. I assume that when those buildings were put up from 1992 on they would have met those standards.

Prof. Durham—We have had very few buildings built since 1992.

Senator TIERNEY—Is that right?

Prof. Durham—When you think that Parramatta has the oldest three-storey building in New South Wales, we do have quite old buildings.

Ms Norris—Heritage listed.

Senator TIERNEY—The University of Western Sydney keeps expanding and expanding. I would have thought the number of buildings would have been going up as well. So you still have a reasonable stock of old buildings. I know that out at Hawkesbury and places like that you certainly would have.

Prof. Durham—Yes, at Hawkesbury we have lots of sixties and seventies buildings.

Senator TIERNEY—Presumably not every building is up to scratch in terms of disability access, but is there a systematic, ongoing program that is part of the budget of the university to keep upgrading each year or is it a bit hit-and-miss?

Prof. Durham—I am not sure about that. I would have to take that on notice and get back to you.

CHAIR—Thank you for coming today. It was a very good submission, by the way.

[2.23 p.m.]

CRIMMINS, Mr Peter Aloysius, Executive Officer, Australian Associations of Christian Schools

NASH, Mr Phillip John, Deputy Principal, Pacific Hills Christian School, Australian Associations of Christian Schools

O'DOHERTY, Mr Stephen Mark, Chairman, Australian Associations of Christian Schools

CHAIR—I welcome representatives of the Australian Associations of Christian Schools. Mr O' Doherty, you are no stranger to these proceedings. I am sure you will be familiar with them as a former member of parliament. The subcommittee has before it submission No. 76. Are there any changes you wish to make to that submission?

Mr O'Doherty—We have provided some additional material, which I have given to the executive officer.

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 now invite you to make a brief opening statement.

Mr O'Doherty—We firstly want to thank the committee for taking on this very important inquiry. There is hardly a more important issue that is raised by members of the Australian Associations of Christian Schools than this issue to do with their ability to equitably deal with the needs of students with disabilities. So thank you indeed for the inquiry and thank you for calling us to give evidence and allowing us to do so.

I want to first give you a context. Christian schools educate students with disabilities as part of their ministry and mission. Since the time of Christ himself the Christian community has been at the forefront of providing services and compassionately providing for the needs of people with disabilities. The Christian church and its various associated agencies have through the years provided a great many—perhaps, indeed, the bulk—of the services provided for people with disabilities. It is in that context that we educate. We educate because we believe that all students, all people, are created in the image of God, that he highly values every single one of them, and that our school communities are not complete unless they have within them all of the people that God has created. So part of the foundational philosophy of Christian schooling is the integration of students with disabilities.

Some of our schools, such as Pacific Hills, were specifically founded with that idea in mind, and Phillip will address that later. Pacific Hills was specifically founded by someone who could not find a school where his disabled and non-disabled children could attend together. The school, which now has 1,300 students or thereabouts, was founded on that guiding principle, and is not alone among our schools. Our schools are not selective. They do not discriminate and they do not seek to discriminate. They do not want to be selective on the basis of disability, but

they face difficulty in the funding of students with disabilities who come to our schools. The funding is inadequate overall and we find it inequitable.

The end result of that is that students with disabilities are denied the choice of other Australians because of the way the funding works. A student with a disability does not have the same choice of schooling as does, by right, other Australian children. Our primary submission is to call for the same additional funding for each student regardless of where they attend school. So, where additional funding is provided to a student, whether it is a state school or a non-government school, that funding ought to be the same. In practical terms, in very round figures—I think you have probably received submissions from others about this as well—the additional cost is about $20,000. Students in non-government schools—in Christian schools—will receive on average around $2,000. That is a huge inequity, which means very practical problems.

I have given you two case histories. One of them is a young student, Emma Richardson, who wrote to the Premier of Victoria. She wrote that, through kindergarten and primary school, because of her disability, which is cerebral palsy, she received $23,950. She was at a state school in suburban Melbourne. When she went to secondary school, she chose Flinders Christian Community College in Tyabb. She said:

> Reasons for my choice are: this school meets my needs for my further education in the fields in which I wish to pursue, has a small number of students, an environment in which I feel safe, happy, content and comfortable in.

She also said that many of her primary school friends were going to that school. So these were very genuine and good reasons to choose a school. However, the school did not receive $23,950 in additional funding to continue Emma's needs in high school. It was able to receive only $3,000 in additional funding. It did not not enrol the child—it did enrol the child—and it provided that additional funding out of the other resources available to the school. When she raised that matter with the Premier of Victoria, Mr Bracks, he wrote back saying:

> Victorian Government funding for disabilities and impairments is provided to the major organisations, the Catholic Education Office and the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria. These organisations also receive funding from the Commonwealth Government. They then put these funds together and decide how best to spend them to meet the needs of all students.

In other words, it was a non-committal response to a student who was simply asking, 'Mr Bracks, why is it that I cannot receive the same funding?' In her words:

> Mr Bracks could you please tell me why?? I believe that this is unfair to all children with a disability, it denies us the right of choice as all able bodied students get.

It is not a Victorian problem alone; it is an Australia-wide problem. Emma's story is by no means exceptional. It is happening in Christian schools right across Australia today.

Finally, the number of students with disabilities in Christian schools at the moment is 1,200 in round figures. We calculate that if schools are providing, let us say, $10,000 additional value-add for that student's education—and, given the figures that I have quoted, a $2,000 provision compared with $20,000 in the government sector—that is a value-add of about $12 million for students with disabilities from the resources coming from the Christian school communities. If

they were putting in more than that, it would obviously be much higher. So we are seeking that the additional component of funding follow the child.

Senator TIERNEY—I am quite interested in this concept that you have just raised. You mentioned a figure of $2,000 for your schools. What was the figure you gave for public schools?

Mr O'Doherty—It is hard to calculate, but the accepted figure seems to be around $20,000 in round terms. Emma's case would certainly bear that out: she had $23,000 support in her primary school, a government school, and $3,000 was made available through the non-government schools process when she chose a non-government secondary school.

Senator TIERNEY—I take it that you are suggesting that, when a student is identified with a particular disability, funding is then, in effect, attached to that student. Wherever that student lands in the system—public or private—that funding would then become available.

Mr O'Doherty—That is what we would like to see. That is not the case at the moment.

Senator TIERNEY—I am talking about your plans. Have you put that to the government in any form?

Mr O'Doherty—We have had discussions.

Senator TIERNEY—I was just wondering what the reaction to the concept has been.

Mr Crimmins—The reaction of the government, in principle, was that it is a realistic proposal. That was from both the current coalition government and the former Labor government. However, the Commonwealth government did not feel—and we understand why—that it was their sole responsibility to meet that additional cost.

Senator TIERNEY—So another possible way of doing it is for private schools to factor into their total costs that they would have a certain proportion of children with disabilities, spread that across the system, and then allocate it in an uneven way, I suppose. And in the example you gave, I assume it is of course what would have happened.

Mr O'Doherty—In practical terms that is what happens. It might be instructive for the subcommittee to hear from Phillip Nash as the deputy of one of our large K-12 schools, which has a deliberate policy of a single integration student per class which would be, I would think, equal to any commitment of any school—government or non-government—in the country. Phillip might like to speak about that.

Senator TIERNEY—And it is probably pretty much in line with the proportion nationwide as well.

Mr O'Doherty—Yes.

Mr Nash—We do seek to enrol in a way that reflects the mix of students across the general community, so we reserve a place in every class from kindergarten to year 10 for a child with a mild to moderate intellectual disability. We also enrol children with other disabilities, such as physical and emotional or behavioural, as we are able—that is, as we can resource them. We currently have at least 41 such disabled students in the school, but there are resource implications in taking on such students.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you finding in private schooling that there is a proportion of parents who come to you and say, 'My child is in a public school, but I feel that because of their disability it is not working out for them and, therefore, I want them to come to your private school.' Is there a significant cohort of parents who are doing that?

Mr Nash—Yes, there are parents who come to us. They do not actually come saying it is not working out so much; they come more on the basis of the particular ethos of the school, which is something they accept as a family and they want their child in that type of environment. They come often realising that perhaps the level of support their child will receive in an independent school will not be the same as they would receive in a government school. They come for reasons beyond just necessarily the child's physical needs being met. There are obviously emotional needs, spiritual needs and so on, which they believe the independent school can provide for them.

Mr O'Doherty—A school has written to me in recent days to raise a case such as that, and I will refer briefly to their email. They said that they have had to turn away an autistic child from their school because of a lack of funding—a five-year-old who had a 0.9 aide at a local preprimary school. The mother was unhappy with bullying that had occurred in that environment and was seeking a private school environment for both of her children—the five-year-old and a nine-year-old. They enrolled the child and could not get the funding that was required to support the child, who had a high level of disability and had only been out of nappies for two weeks and was still drinking from the bottle, in fact. The mother went from private school to private school and could not find a school that could provide the level of support, so they have gone back into the government setting and she is very concerned about what may happen there. That is just one case. Another school that wrote recently sought to enrol the sibling of a currently enrolled student. The sibling had Down syndrome. The child arrived at the school, funding could not be found to provide adequate support, and reluctantly they have had to take that child and the sibling out of the school because they wanted both of their children to go to the same school.

Senator TIERNEY—Mr Nash, you say that it works out at about one child with a disability per class, so obviously what is done can be focused on the particular disability that the child has. Can you draw us a picture of what sort of additional support a child with a disability would receive in a mainstream class in your school?

Mr Nash—The classroom teachers are helped through professional development to try to meet the needs of that child, whatever they might be, in the class. The child will be withdrawn from some classes for focused support, depending on what their particular needs are, and we have a support unit in the school that does that. A teacher's aide may be provided in a classroom for that child, particularly in practical subjects. Modifications are made to classroom resources, to handouts and to exam papers by the special program support unit in the school. It depends a

little bit on the disability and whether we are talking about an intellectual disability or a physical disability. We have both types of children in this school.

Mr Crimmins—If we were to lift the level of fees in our schools to accommodate more students with disabilities, we would then be discriminating against those parents that we want to be open to who can only afford a low-fee Christian school. We do not want our schools to become elitist in any sense of the word—or selective for that matter, either.

Senator TIERNEY—Are you perhaps seeing a universal service obligation there, in terms of carrying a bit of the load across the total parent population to support such students that come to your school?

Mr Crimmins—We certainly do, and we think that that universal service obligation is met by the general recurrent grants arrangements whereby one of our schools may receive, from a combination of both Commonwealth and state support, 70 or 75 per cent of the AGSRC. They then have, for able-bodied students, a gap of 25 per cent to meet from parent fees. We think they should do that whether the student is able bodied or disabled. However, the additional funding that is needed for the student with a disability should not be on the basis of the school that the parent chooses to send the child to.

Senator TIERNEY—You do not see any role for fees paying any part of that funding at all?

Mr O'Doherty—In practical terms, they do. I think you will find that, even with the full level of funding that might be provided equitably across sectors, there would still be additional funding required to support the needs of that student. I am sure the committee has heard submissions from others in the government sector attesting to the fact that the additional funding is not enough in any case.

Senator TIERNEY—Of course, there will be students who attend your school who will have learning disabilities which the parents may not be aware of or may not even notify you of. In such a situation, there would be students whose disability would be obvious but in others it would be less obvious. I assume that your teachers are trained in the state system. We have heard about the inadequacy of that system during this inquiry. In the independent system, what sort of inservice training is provided in relation to the identification of children who might have learning or other disabilities? Also, what teaching pedagogy do you provide in your inservice that is different from mainstream pedagogy? How do you handle that on the basis of in-servicing?

Mr Nash—During the enrolment process of a student we seek to identify whether the child will have any special needs above and beyond the norm. We generally can identify that, although, as you say, sometimes they do come in and you only discover the disability later on. I can only speak about my own school. We have an extensive program of teacher professional development of 12 days a year without students present, as well as sending staff to other outside agencies for support. Each year, we target some of that towards assisting teachers to deal well with students who have disabilities of varying kinds in their classes. Any new teacher to the school will have as part of their induction program a session with the director of special programs who will talk to them about the types of needs that they will come across, what they will need to do to cope with those and the sort of support the school can provide. If required, we

would also send staff whom we identify as perhaps having a child in their class with a special need who they may be having difficulty dealing with to an outside provider for some specialist professional development.

Senator TIERNEY—Can you give some examples of what sort of outside provider you would use?

Mr Nash—In the main, we would use the Association of Independent Schools. They have a strong professional development program for teachers in independent schools, including helping people deal with students with disabilities. We would also invite outside agencies—that is, people who specialise in working with students with disabilities—to come into the school and work with the staff as well.

CHAIR—Mr O'Doherty, how many students do you think the schools that you represent would have been forced to turn away over the last five years?

Mr O'Doherty—It would be impossible to hazard a guess and probably dangerous to do so. Every school has stories of students whose needs they would like to meet but cannot. The parents have to make the decision. The schools would always, as a matter of course, advise the parents of the level of support that can be provided, and many of them enter into arrangements on that basis. Occasionally, after a period of time, the student's needs become such that the support that can be provided is not enough and they need to seek placements elsewhere.

CHAIR—Mr Crimmins, do you have any idea of how many students would have been turned away in the last few years?

Mr Crimmins—As many as we have enrolled would be my guess.

CHAIR—How many have you enrolled?

Mr Crimmins—Twelve hundred.

CHAIR—So you think 1,200 over the last five years?

Mr Crimmins—Yes, 1,212.

CHAIR—So in excess of 1,200 students would have been turned away.

Mr Crimmins—Good examples of those are in the papers that we tabled.

CHAIR—Yes, I saw that. How many exemptions from the discrimination act have you had?

Mr Crimmins—We have not sought exemptions, and the reason we have not sought exemptions is that seeking an exemption immediately puts you into an exclusive category whereby you are, in effect, given the right to refuse admission. We would prefer our schools to be operating on the basis that Phillip has described where parents are apprised of what resources the school can provide so they can make a full choice.

CHAIR—Would you say that by turning students away you are in breach of the law?

Mr O'Doherty—Certainly not. In my time as a member of parliament I dealt with, as I am sure you have, students who are turned away from government schools. The so-called turning away is a process by which schools often engage in discussion with parents about how their child's needs can best be met. I would not think that the so-called turning away was any greater in our sector than in any other. Quite the contrary: I think we have demonstrated that our schools try their utmost to provide additional resources to keep students at the school.

CHAIR—I am sure that is right. How many separate legal proceedings have been taken against Christian schools in the last five years for failure to enrol?

Mr O'Doherty—I am not aware of how many. In my file for this meeting there is one school that has informed me that within recent years they had an antidiscrimination case when they had to close a special unit because the resources were not there. The end result of that was that they were given an exemption because of undue hardship.

CHAIR—There is plenty of provision in the act. I am just saying that you have not applied it too often. We have had evidence from independent school parents that there have been numerous cases of court action being taken by parents against schools for failure to enrol students. In terms of the proportions of disabled students enrolled in independent schools—which is not just you but rather a broad category—the Australian Parents Council tells us that government schools enrol twice the number Catholic schools do and almost three times the number independent schools do. Is that not prima facie evidence of discrimination?

Mr O'Doherty—The discrimination is that those students who seek to choose an independent school setting are not able to do so with the same freedom as other students. A child with a disability is discriminated against by not having the same choice as non-disabled students. That is because of the inequities in the funding. It is a structural issue, if you like, rather than a philosophical issue.

CHAIR—What about those legal cases that the parents referred to? How many were found against the school?

Mr O'Doherty—I am not aware of that figure.

CHAIR—Would you take that on notice? It would help us to see whether or not there is any pattern. I was a schoolteacher so I know that there are ways that teachers use to move people on—not that I have ever done it myself because I worked in a technical school in Victoria where, in fact, it really was take all comers. I understood that students arrived in front of me that others had sent on. There are ways and means, you would agree, of moving people on that you do not want to deal with. I am wondering how many cases you might have had that the court said you should not have moved on.

Mr O'Doherty—I am personally not aware of any but we can take it on notice.

CHAIR—That would be helpful. The other thing you mention is the support provided by systems. Our primary concern is of course the Commonwealth, and Mr O'Doherty as a former

shadow minister for education would know the facts in this matter. Can you tell me the amount of money the Commonwealth pays per disabled student in the government sector?

Mr Crimmins—It varies, and I need to get an accurate figure. They supply the 1,212 students so I can easily ask them how much money was attached to that.

CHAIR—Per student, because there is a number of means, but the Commonwealth provides money, as you would be aware, through the indexation arrangements, AGSRC. It also provides money through various equity programs, strategic assistance programs. There is a range of measures. Also, dependent upon how cute the Commonwealth officers are getting, they will say they provide money through untied grants. I could quite happily quote figures that say that the Commonwealth is providing funding to the state systems of about 46 per cent of total operating costs at the moment but, in terms of the tied grants, the figure is about 12 per cent. We can identify that quite explicitly. Can you confirm for me that the non-government school system receives $561 per child but for the government school it is only $110?

Mr Crimmins—Yes.

CHAIR—You can confirm that?

Mr Crimmins—Yes.

CHAIR—And for the secondary system it is $561 for the non-government school and $110 for the government school.

Mr Crimmins—Yes. That is according to the legislation.

CHAIR—That is what the State Grants Act actually says. It is quite precise about this. Is there not discrimination by the Commonwealth against government schools?

Mr Crimmins—I am not in a position to comment on discrimination against government schools. What I do suspect, however, is that there is a range of funds that flow from the Commonwealth to students with disabilities in government schools via departments other than education.

CHAIR—The submission you put to us suggested to me that the discrimination was against the private school system, whereas the act implies to me that the discrimination is in fact the other way.

Mr O'Doherty—Our submission is based on the funding that is available from all sources, Commonwealth and state, in terms of the additional support provided for a student with disabilities comparing the levels of support within the two sectors. Those are the figures on which our submission rests.

CHAIR—If you look at capital moneys, is there not a similar pattern?

Mr Crimmins—Very similar. What we are saying is that in providing additional funds for students with disabilities the role is shared between the Commonwealth and the states. Whether or not that is an appropriate balance of arrangements is probably a matter for people like you to decide.

CHAIR—I am sure it is.

Mr Crimmins—The net result for our schools is that, where students with disabilities in a government school might attract an extra $15,000 to $20,000, in our schools they are lucky to attract an extra $3,000 from government sources.

CHAIR—But on these figures the act would imply quite clearly that the disadvantage is for the government school student, not the non-government school student.

Mr Crimmins—I understand what you are saying.

CHAIR—Can you tell me about the broadbanding of equity programs? I have been talking to you now for some years about this. When it was first introduced I raised some concerns. I think you may well have supported broadbanding when it came in. How do you feel about it now? Are you actually able to identify where the money goes?

Mr Crimmins—Broadbanding has its up sides. It provides the individual organisation, be it the AIS or the Catholic Education Commission or government education authority, with a range of choices inside a broad band. However, it might mean, for example, in the current broadbanding area that you are referring to, that the bulk of the money could wind up in literacy and numeracy areas and very little of it might find its way into the support of students with disabilities, and that is a major concern.

CHAIR—There is a great deal of agreement between us today, Mr Crimmins, and it is very good to see. I trust it will continue. It does seem to me, though, that that is part of the problem. The strategic assistance program is able to be spent any way people want it to be spent, so it is a bit rich to then come back and say, ‘Hang on a minute, there is not enough money for this’, when the money is there but people like yourselves have made choices about where money is spent. Do you think that is a fair comment to make?

Mr O’Doherty—The Australian Associations of Christian Schools is not a system of schools. Our schools are independent.

CHAIR—The same problem applies, though, doesn’t it? Priorities are made by principals, or whoever the allocating officer is.

Mr Crimmins—It is the AIS in each state and territory in our case.

CHAIR—Do you think that the question should be put to them, assuming the policy settings as they are are set? I disagree with them, and I have made that perfectly clear to you as well. Given that the Commonwealth allocates a fair slab of money, isn’t it also appropriate to say to the school systems, ‘How are you spending that money?’

Mr O'Doherty—I think it is always good to have accountability for funding to make sure that it is reaching the people for whom it is designed. Certainly we support the idea of accountability in funding. That seems to be slightly different from the question that we are investigating today, which relates specifically to the provision of additional funding for students with disabilities.

CHAIR—The terms of reference actually talk about the adequacy of funding. Lots of people come before a Senate committee like this and rattle a tin and demand more, and I understand that. I have been known to make claims like that on occasion. Equally I think we are entitled to say to people, 'How are you spending the money you are getting now?'

Mr O'Doherty—I am happy to fully account, and we do.

CHAIR—I am sure you do. I am just making the point to you, though, that one of the products of the change in policy to broadband Commonwealth money is that governments are able to escape their obligations because they can simply say, 'Well, look, it is up to you. You make the choices. It is not our job anymore.' Would you agree with that?

Mr Crimmins—It certainly allows authorities that are one arm removed from the government to make choices that in some instances we would prefer were tagged rather than chosen. For example, in this case, if all the money currently in the program that has been broadbanded were allocated to students with disabilities in non-government schools it would be swallowed up without so much as a blink.

CHAIR—That is right. But equally, though, if some money was allocated we could actually say, 'Hang on a minute. What value are we getting for those dollars?' At the moment, everyone says to me, 'Hang on. It is a pea and thimble trick. I never actually know where the money has gone.' I think this subcommittee probably spends more time trying to investigate that problem than most would.

Mr O'Doherty—It is interesting because it raises what we have identified as a real issue around the country, which is that the criteria used to assess people's eligibility for the additional funding that is made available through the AISs in each state vary from state to state. A child who receives $700 in one state might move interstate and receive $300 because the criteria are different from state to state. That is something that we would like to see systematised.

CHAIR—Mr O'Doherty, here is a difficult question for you: do you think the Commonwealth has met its obligations to fund students with disabilities?

Mr O'Doherty—I said earlier in our submission that we would agree with those who put the notion to you that we need to have additional funding provided for students with disabilities across the board from all state governments and the Commonwealth government.

CHAIR—I asked you specifically about the Commonwealth. Given that the overwhelming bulk of the money that you receive to run your schools comes from the Commonwealth—in excess of $18 billion is spent by the Commonwealth on the non-government sector—I ask you specifically: do you think the Commonwealth has fulfilled its obligations in regard to the funding of students with disabilities?

Mr O'Doherty—We would like to see an improvement in the funding for students with disabilities. We would also like to see improvements to the arrangements whereby at the moment students with disabilities do not have the same choice as non-disabled students. We would ask the Commonwealth government and the state governments to provide those improvements.

Senator ALLISON—I wish to pursue the funding question. Looking at the case study of Emma, $3,000 is provided—presumably this is for 2002, but correct me if I am wrong—which is targeted funding for students with disability through AISV. Can you inform the subcommittee about how the figure of $3,000 was arrived at and whether that is the maximum level of funding provided? I presume that money comes from the Victorian state government. Do state governments differ with regard to this targeted funding? Maybe it is possible for you to provide us with the categorisation that determines whether it is $300, $600 or however many hundred dollars.

Mr Crimmins—That $3,000 would be a combination, as you suggest, Senator, of state and Commonwealth money.

Senator ALLISON—Through which fund?

Mr Crimmins—Through AISV. AISV would administer the funds on behalf of the independent sector in Victoria. However, the bulk of the money would be Commonwealth money.

Senator ALLISON—Which program does that come through?

Mr Crimmins—It comes through the Commonwealth Additional Support for Students with Disabilities program and whatever the program is called in each state and territory. To answer the second part of your question—does it differ—it differs enormously around the country.

Senator ALLISON—So that funding is provided by the Commonwealth on a per capita basis and then the AIS—

Mr Crimmins—No, the extra money is not provided on a per capita basis. The only extra money that is provided on a per capita basis is the $561 that the chair referred to. The top-up money is provided on a case-by-case basis depending on the level of disability, the judgment of the AISV with regard to that level of disability and the pool of funds that are available to be spread across the sector.

Senator ALLISON—What is the total amount which comes to AIS nationwide from the Commonwealth?

Mr Crimmins—I have not got that figure but I can get it for you.

Senator ALLISON—Is all of it expended by the various AISs around Australia?

Mr O'Doherty—It is administered through the AISs. I think you will find the figures you are looking for in the submission from the NCISA.

Senator ALLISON—I do not think so. Maybe that is right.

Mr Crimmins—That money you mention is pooled money that Senator Carr referred to before in a broadband. It is mixed up with literacy and numeracy money, and it is the separation that I think Senator Carr was referring to when he was talking about the accountability.

Senator ALLISON—I am asking the same question, essentially.

Mr O'Doherty—The way it works, though, is such that in some cases students with various kinds of intellectual disability and so on are receiving $700 or $300. One school that wrote to me this week said, 'We spent all of that just on textbooks and it didn't cover any of the needs of supporting the child in the class.' In the case of another student that needs assistance with toileting the money was able to provide someone to toilet the student at lunchtime and recess four days a week but the principal toilets them on the fifth day.

Senator ALLISON—That $3,000 would be at the upper level, assuming this student is at a fairly high level of support needs. That would be the upper limit.

Mr O'Doherty—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—As I understood, Mr Crimmins, your remarks about putting aside one place per class for mildly or moderately intellectually disabled students and one place for a student with a behaviour problem—is that what you said? I am sorry, Mr Nash?

Mr Nash—That is a policy of our particular school.

Senator ALLISON—Where then would a student such as Emma fit into your school?

Mr Nash—With a physical disability? She has cerebral palsy.

Senator ALLISON—Yes, a fairly significant one.

Mr Nash—In addition to intellectually disabled students for whom we reserve a place in each class, we take other physically disabled students on an ability to support them basis. We have a number of wheelchair children, deaf and blind children, and cerebral palsy children.

Senator ALLISON—You do not set a quota?

Mr Nash—No, we do not. We try to assess it on the basis of the particular needs of the student and whether we feel we can provide adequate support for them.

Senator ALLISON—The system that we currently have, if I may draw this from what has been said, where the AIS distributes the funds and they are not actually targeted to individuals

at the Commonwealth level encourages you to take students with a lower level of disability than a higher level of disability. Is that a fair analysis?

Mr Nash—Yes.

Senator ALLISON—We heard earlier today of the importance in New South Wales of a counsellor in a school, and there are counsellors made available on a part-time basis in all government schools in this state. What do Christian schools do with regard to counsellors, who in the state system—well or otherwise as the case may be—are available to detect learning disabilities, autism, and a whole range of ways in which students may fail to learn? Do you have counsellors, what is their role and how are they funded?

Mr O'Doherty—I think it is fair to say that most Christian schools would have a person on the staff who was the counsellor or pastoral care person.

Senator ALLISON—I should add that this person is fairly highly qualified in the state system and is often a psychologist or a teacher with some years of postgraduate training in the subject.

Mr O'Doherty—A number of our larger schools have psychologists in that role. Most cannot afford to have a psychologist in that role but would either access resources in another Christian school or in another independent school or seek private assessment. The answer is that it depends on the circumstance of the school.

Mr Crimmins—One of our schools in Canberra recently perceived, due to the discernment of the teacher, that there was probably a problem of autism associated with one of their students. They then asked that the parents have the student assessed. The parent was told that the cost was over $600. The parent could not afford the assessment. They perceived that the child was on the lower end of autism. However, the assessment was free of charge in New South Wales if they came into this jurisdiction, but it would require two days and therefore their accommodation in New South Wales for that period of time would be over $600 as well. Eventually they took the test in New South Wales and got the child appropriately categorised in terms of the particular learning difficulty et cetera. They are the problems that our schools have. If you do not have trained staff, you then have to ask the parents to take them to a properly qualified practitioner who can assess the particular learning disability or difficulty and then have the appropriate educational arrangements made for that child. We have no system whereby we can ensure that our rural, regional or smaller schools can have those resources.

Senator ALLISON—And this leads you to your recommendation that these testing facilities should be available through Medicare or bulkbilling?

Mr Crimmins—That is right.

Senator ALLISON—Which suggests a medical approach to the problem, and a problem with regard to psychologists who, as I understand it, are not currently covered by either of those.

Mr O'Doherty—To amplify the submission at this point: I think best practice would lead us to believe that the way to handle this is screening for various types of impairments and disabilities from birth, not just for hearing and sight. We should increase the screening that is available. If Australia were able to move to a system where more children had preschool experience then the trained educators in their preschool setting would also be able to be on the lookout. In other words, we would support an early intervention approach.

Senator ALLISON—You will get no argument from me on that, Mr O'Doherty.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming today; it was very helpful.

[3.12 p.m.]

ALEGOUNARIAS, Mr Tom, Director, External Relations Policy, New South Wales Department of Education and Training

McKIE, Mr David, Manager, Student Counselling and Welfare, New South Wales Department of Education and Training

SMYTH KING, Mr Brian Uther, Director, Disability Programs, New South Wales Department of Education and Training

CHAIR—I welcome the representatives of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. The subcommittee has before it submission No. 231. Are there any changes you wish to make to that submission?

Mr Smyth King—No.

CHAIR—The subcommittee prefers all evidence to be given in public, although the subcommittee would also consider any request for all or part of your evidence to be considered 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.

Mr Smyth King—Thank you for this opportunity. I will start by saying that I noted the comments in the morning press and media about our submission. I would like to say that it was merely intended as a background paper. We are a very large and complex education system. We are the largest in Australia and one of the largest in the world. We do not believe that a submission—in terms of a written document forwarded to you—could do justice to such an important issue. Rather, the opportunity to come and talk to you about the issues and about the types of services we provide here in New South Wales would seem to be a more appropriate way to go.

In New South Wales we do care about students, particularly those with disabilities. The size and the scope of the services we provide reflect that. We have a very wide range of provisions, we have an extensive level of funding, we believe that the quality of our provision is second to none and we are very proud of the staff that work in our schools, particularly those in special education.

Here in New South Wales we provide a full range of educational settings for students with disabilities. This range includes special schools, special classes in regular schools and supported enrolment in regular classes. These are complemented by a further range of services, including itinerant support teacher services that work across all of those settings as well as a wide range of services for students with learning difficulties.

In 2002-03, the Department of Education and Training will spend over $515 million on services to students with disabilities. I might add that this is an increase of $37.4 million on last year’s budget. I would like to note at this stage that of the $515 million New South Wales will

expend on special education in this coming financial year, a mere $19.5 million has been provided by the Commonwealth—the rest comes out of the state budget. We believe the New South Wales Department of Education and Training has indeed been very responsive to the needs of students with disabilities and has expanded services and provisions for students with these needs significantly in recent years. Over the last five years, the Department of Education and Training has established additional special schools, special classes in regular schools, itinerant services and support for students in regular classes. I can go into those details a little more, if you require me to.

The quality of our staff is also to be commended. Since 1995, all preservice teacher training programs in New South Wales must provide a mandatory component of special education within the training program. The department endorses the mandatory components when universities amend them. So we actually have a contribution to make in terms of what they teach and how they teach it. Any graduate from any of our universities who does not have a mandatory component in special education is not employable by the Department of Education and Training. In addition to that, each year the New South Wales Department of Education and Training provides what we call postgraduate cadetships in special education for teachers working in or wanting to work in special education. Since 1999, 351 teachers have been trained through this program. It is an expensive way, but it is a very valuable one. In addition to that, our teachers are constantly involved in ongoing training and development in their local schools, in their districts or on a systemic basis. One area in particular that I will mention here is the state literacy and numeracy plan. Over $400 million has been contributed to that, and most of that goes into either face-to-face training and development of teachers or the production of materials for them to use in classrooms.

In addition to this, we realise that there are many other people who work with and support students with disabilities in our school systems, and perhaps one of the most important positions in that area is that of teacher's aide (special), who work alongside teachers, assisting them with students with disabilities. Since 2000, we have introduced through TAFE New South Wales a certificate III course in training which is delivered both in TAFE institutes and through our district office structure. To date, 624 teacher's aide (special) have commenced or undertaken training through this program. I propose for the rest of our presentation that we take the questions and respond to the issues that you might raise.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. You would have noted Senator Tierney's remarks this morning and I understand that he has distributed a press release, so I have no doubt that he will have some questions for you. Senator Tierney, we have agreed to finish at four, so you are well in advance of everyone. I propose, therefore, that we all have 15 minutes each. Do you agree with that?

Senator TIERNEY—We will see how the questions go.

CHAIR—As I say, we are finishing at four, so 15 minutes apiece—

Senator TIERNEY—I might have some questions that go beyond that.

CHAIR—You put some on notice, then.

Senator TIERNEY—We will see.

CHAIR—I just indicate to you, Senator Tierney, that we have been down this path before. Mr Smyth King, could you refresh my memory on this: how much is the New South Wales government spending on disabilities?

Mr Smyth King—In this coming financial year, it will be in excess of $515 million.

CHAIR—How much is the Commonwealth contributing towards that amount?

Mr Smyth King—$19 million.

CHAIR—In your estimation, does the Commonwealth provide the same level of support to government and non-government schools in regard to students with disabilities?

Mr Smyth King—No, it does not.

CHAIR—In what way?

Mr Smyth King—Non-government school students receive $561 and government school students receive $110.

CHAIR—Is that a provision of the State Grants Act?

Mr Smyth King—Yes.

CHAIR—So that is a legislative requirement.

Mr Alegounarias—Yes.

CHAIR—We have had representations from some non-government schools that they are discriminated against. Is it your view that they are discriminated against in terms of Commonwealth funding?

Mr Alegounarias—No, we would not agree with that. Clearly, the Commonwealth's approach to funding both students with disabilities and students generally is uneven in that fewer funds are provided to government school students than to non-government students on the basis of this federal government's unilaterally declared position that it has a higher level of responsibility for non-government students than it does for government school students.

CHAIR—Does the government school system enrol all comers?

Mr Smyth King—Yes.

CHAIR—Is it required to by legislative framework?

Mr Smyth King—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that same provision applicable to the non-government school system?

Mr Smyth King—My understanding is that it is not. Non-government school systems can decline enrolments of students on the basis of whatever reasons they believe.

Mr Alegounarias—Non-government schools are exempt in this area from the anti-discrimination act. The result of that is that around four per cent nationally of students with disabilities are in government schools and around 1½ per cent are in independent schools and about 2½ per cent, very broadly, are in Catholic systemic schools. So the larger burden with regard to disability is in government schools.

CHAIR—You say that they are exempt. Is it not the case that they have to apply for an exemption?

Mr Alegounarias—I think it is possible under the act. I am not an expert. I could not provide you with how many under the act.

CHAIR—I will ask you about the general situation. Is it the case that the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992 has had implications for the funding arrangements for the states?

Mr Smyth King—I cannot answer that directly. I am not aware of it. I will take it on notice.

CHAIR—Have you noticed an increase in demand from parents for disability services in schools?

Mr Alegounarias—There are a number of dimensions to that. Broadly speaking, the demands of the Disability Discrimination Act and the federal legislation have resourcing demands for the states, and there is not, from the states' perspective, a commensurate response from the Commonwealth to help resource the implications of that act in New South Wales schools or schools in other states and territories.

Mr Smyth King—Since that act was passed, the number of students that we are now supporting is greater than it has ever been before.

CHAIR—I am interested in this. If you say that you are spending $515 million per year—that is, this year—and the Commonwealth has provided only $19.5 million of that money, is there a reasonable case to be put that in fact the states are being asked to take on more without the Commonwealth resources to back them up?

Mr Smyth King—Yes.

CHAIR—Is that the proposition you are putting to us?

Mr Alegounarias—Absolutely.

CHAIR—In your view, has the Commonwealth's contribution towards the funding of disabled students been adequate and has the Commonwealth met its responsibilities in this regard, given that we are working under a Commonwealth act?

Mr Alegounarias—There has been no increase in funding per student, above cost indexation, that I am aware of for students with disabilities for the past seven or eight years at least. All increases in funding have been cost indexation, and that indexation of the Commonwealth has been driven by increases in expenditure by states and territories. The Commonwealth has simply kept pace with that. Therefore we would argue that, as this is an issue that the Commonwealth has accepted at least a level of responsibility for by providing a level of funding, what the national agenda has lacked has been the Commonwealth's support keeping pace with the increased demands being placed on schools, both government and non-government, with regard to disability.

CHAIR—If we look at the indexation arrangements that have applied, are you able to tell me in percentage terms what the Commonwealth increase has been for the non-government sector?

Mr Alegounarias—Increase as part of the indexation? As I said, there has been no increase above indexation.

CHAIR—If we were to take indexation, enrolment increases and real increases: if we look at the amount of money the Commonwealth is spending on non-government schools in New South Wales, how much has it increased?

Mr Alegounarias—Over what period?

CHAIR—Let us take the last budget—the 2002-03 budget. I will put it to you another way: can you confirm that the figure is 9.3 per cent?

Mr Alegounarias—For non-government schools the increase from the Commonwealth was 9.3 per cent, yes.

CHAIR—And what was the equivalent increase for government schools?

Mr Alegounarias—Around six per cent.

CHAIR—So in fact are we seeing a growing gap in the funding from the Commonwealth for the two sectors?

Mr Alegounarias—The only substantive change to funding policies for government and non-government schools at a national level for the past seven or eight years has been a commitment of increased funding in real terms to non-government schools from the Commonwealth, in terms of quantum funding. So the gap between what the Commonwealth provides to government schools and what it provides to non-government schools has grown in favour of non-government schools.

CHAIR—So on top of the state grants provision that says for disabled students the Commonwealth government provides $110 for each student in a government school and $561 for a student in a private school, you have got this broader gap that is emerging in terms of recurrent funding and capital funding as well?

Mr Alegounarias—Yes. In that regard I think it is important to note that the vast majority of funding for students is actually in that general recurrent amount; it is not in that specific amount provided by—

CHAIR—Yes, I appreciate that.

Mr Alegounarias—By way of amplifying your point: that is exactly right; there is a growth in the gap between what is provided to government schools and what is provided to non-government schools by the Commonwealth in that element, which is the most substantial, which is the general recurrent cost of schooling for students.

CHAIR—Senator Tierney, I note that I have had 12 minutes, but I will give you 15.

Senator TIERNEY—We will note that you have run out of steam after 12 minutes. Let us start with your submission. It is a 3½ page submission. Can you explain why it is so brief and bereft of detail.

Mr Smyth King—Senator Tierney, I did explain at the outset.

CHAIR—If you were here you would have heard it.

Senator TIERNEY—We are all entitled to breaks, Senator.

CHAIR—You have had one for 4½ hours.

Mr Smyth King—Unfortunately, you were not present, but I will reiterate the comments I made earlier.

Senator TIERNEY—Your verbal comments must have been as brief as your written submission.

Mr Smyth King—No, they were not.

CHAIR—They went for 17 minutes.

Mr Smyth King—The department is a very—

Senator TIERNEY—On a point of order, Chair: I thought we had an afternoon tea break at three o'clock?

CHAIR—The problem is, mate, that you have not been here all day. You would not know—

Senator TIERNEY—I realise that but, according to the program, we had an afternoon tea break at three o'clock. I was working off the program that says 3.15. So I apologise for missing what you said at the start, but I was of the understanding you were starting at 3.15 after an afternoon tea break. Anyway, please continue.

Mr Smyth King—The submission that we put forward was done so on the basis that the New South Wales Department of Education and Training is a very large organisation. It is the largest public education provider in Australia and one of the largest in the world. We believe that a submission to try to detail the full extent of the provision and the service that we provide to people and students with disabilities within our sector could not be done justice in a written form. Rather, what we have done is to provide you with an outline of the issues that we believe are very relevant and current ones facing education sectors in the provision of disability services and we saw this opportunity today as one to provide you with the detail. I have been through that detail, preliminarily, this afternoon in terms of the size, the budget, the scope and the type of provision.

Senator TIERNEY—As you presented it orally this afternoon I am intrigued why you could not have presented it in a written form.

Mr Smyth King—I have just explained to you that we believe that the issues that that paper contains are the ones that are the crux of this matter, and the detail that we have provided this afternoon adds—

Senator TIERNEY—You really think that 3½ pages actually provides sufficient detail of even what the issues are—that it covers all the issues related to disabilities education?

Mr Smyth King—I am more than happy to talk through the issues with you this afternoon.

Senator TIERNEY—I am just intrigued, when you have had notice since the end of last year that this inquiry was coming up, that you can provide only 3½ pages. Surely someone in your department could have whipped that up in about an hour. You had to be prompted by the secretariat to actually provide the information. It arrived the afternoon before this hearing started—

Mr Smyth King—I am more than happy to answer any of the questions you wish to ask this afternoon.

Senator TIERNEY—I am just intrigued as to why you are actually treating this committee and its proceedings with such contempt by putting in such a scatty submission that gives us no detail and providing it so late?

Mr Smyth King—I do not believe that we have dealt with this matter in any way with contempt and, as I said, I am more than happy to take the questions that you wish us to respond to today. If you require further information and we cannot provide it today then we are more than happy to forward that to you at a later date.

Senator TIERNEY—When did you start working on this submission—how far back?

Mr Smyth King—In March, May—March.

Senator TIERNEY—In March and May. June, July; you have had 2½ months to come up with 3½ pages. When I saw the thinness of it I thought it must be pure gold because it was obviously summarising the key points, but what I found was 3½ pages of waffle which gave me absolutely no detail. If I knew nothing about your programs, at the end of reading your 3½ pages I would still know nothing about your programs.

Mr Smyth King—Do you have any questions today? I might be able to give you more detail.

Senator TIERNEY—I certainly do, but the secretariat of this committee contacted you and contacted all departments of education across Australia in relation to the supply of certain information. Every state provided that information to the secretariat except New South Wales. Can you explain why you are the only state that did not answer that request?

Mr Smyth King—I cannot speak for any other state in Australia. I work for the New South Wales department—

Senator TIERNEY—I am asking why when you were given the questions—

Mr Smyth King—I have explained to you that we have provided that paper to you and are now ready to answer any of the questions that you wish to ask.

Senator TIERNEY—This paper does not cover what the secretariat asked you for last year. Every other state has provided the detailed information that was asked except New South Wales.

Mr Smyth King—I do not recall on the papers that I received it said what type and length of submission would be required. It outlined the terms of reference, it outlined the process that was going to be undertaken and it sought from people responses or submissions.

Senator TIERNEY—We will start with some of the issues relating to the education of people with disabilities by focusing on the mainstreaming policy which has been in place now for 15 years or something like that. Has there been any evaluation done by the department of the success, or otherwise, of mainstreaming students with disabilities in New South Wales?

Mr Smyth King—When you talk about the success of an evaluation, we conducted the McCrae report in the late 1990s which highlighted the need for additional supports or funding to support students with disabilities as they enrolled in regular classes. Since that time we have very significantly increased the funding available. In this current year, more than $49 million will be made available to students in regular settings who have disabilities, and that is additional support on top of what standard support they may well receive by being in a regular school.

Senator TIERNEY—How many recommendations were there in the McCrae report?

Mr Smyth King—There were a number of recommendations but I cannot tell you how many off the top of my head today.

Senator TIERNEY—How many did you implement?

Mr Smyth King—The main thrust of the report was to respond to the funding needs and the support needs of students within regular educational settings. One of those recommendations was that funding be allocated to students based on need. We very strongly embrace that and we have moved down that track with what we now call the Funding Support Program that has been in place since 1998. I can tell you that over 18,000 students this year, or just over 52 per cent of all students in New South Wales with disabilities, are supported through that program.

Senator TIERNEY—Many of the submissions are advocating the implementation of these recommendations because according to the other submissions that is not occurring. Could you comment on the accuracy or otherwise of what other submissions have said on that matter?

Mr Smyth King—The department believes that it has met very well the recommendations for additional support to students with disabilities. There is no categorical approach other than the assessment of students to determine those who maybe eligible to receive the additional funding and beyond that it is a needs based assessment. On that basis we believe that we are providing an outstanding level of support compared to other parts of Australia, other parts of the world and other systems.

Senator TIERNEY—That is interesting because we asked some witnesses this morning: is there any state or territory in Australia which is a shining light in this area of disabilities education? And they could not point to any, including your state. I want to return also to this question of mainstreaming and the way in which it is working out in the classroom. The whole basis of mainstreaming is that a child with a disability is educated in the normal mainstream classroom with support. Could you comment, seeing as it has been in place for about 15 years, on how that level of support is working. And have you assessed whether students who do have disabilities are being provided with adequate support in the classroom?

Mr Smyth King—Yes, it is a fact that we have 18,000 students now on the program and schools embrace the process that is in place for assessing student need. Parents do, by and large, embrace it as well as being a very worthwhile system. I know there are other states in Australia that are very interested in the way in which New South Wales identifies the needs of students and allocates resources to them It may well not have been the one that you spoke to—the state—but there are—

Senator TIERNEY—No, this was a national association commenting right across Australia.

Mr Smyth King—There are other public providers in other states who are very interested in the way in which we do it. We evaluate the process every year, we look at where there are issues that have been raised through the funding processes and we address those with our representative groups. That may well be with teachers, parent groups or principals groups.

Senator TIERNEY—I may be at a bit of a disadvantage here because all I can do is take what you say on face value because I have absolutely no evidence before me one way or the other. I have no figures, no statistics and no evaluations. Do you have any hard evidence on this, rather than just saying it all happens and it is all working well?

Mr Smyth King—What sort of hard evidence would you like?

Senator TIERNEY—Have you done any evaluation of it? Have you surveyed parents of children with disabilities, for example, on their satisfaction with the support for their children? Have you surveyed staff in schools, asking if they feel they are getting sufficient support if they have a child with a disability in the classroom? Is that sort of work being done; do you keep figures on that sort of thing?

Mr Smyth King—We have a very extensive appeals process that both schools and parents can access over the level of funding. Last year we had some 14,000 students on the program. It has increased to about 18,000 this year. I would like to report that there were no more than about 400 appeals during the period. That would be a very strong endorsement of the fact that the vast majority of students who are being supported on that program do believe that what they are getting is appropriate and sufficient.

Senator TIERNEY—It is only when we come down to actual case studies that we can assess whether that measures up to reality. I will just give you one case. Two days ago a parent came in to see me. Their child is in a school in Newcastle, has mild autism and extreme allergic reaction to chemicals to the point that she will stop breathing; for example, she will have a reaction if she walks into a classroom that has just been painted or if they have just laid carpet at the school. They seem to keep painting the school in little bits and tend to keep replacing carpet, so she has had great difficulty. It has also been difficult for the school, and I understand why it would be difficult, but I suppose what floored me was that she was told initially that there was no place for her in a state high school. Can you explain why any departmental official would say such a thing?

Mr Smyth King—I am not responsible for the vast majority of people that we employ but, if you give me the details, I am more than happy to look that up.

Senator TIERNEY—I am very happy to do that.

Mr Smyth King—I am more than happy to follow that up for you.

Senator TIERNEY—I would be very happy if you could follow it up. So whoever said that was acting against departmental policy?

Mr Smyth King—I do not know who said it.

Senator TIERNEY—No, but in principle, if someone says, ‘I have a child with a disability,’ and is then told—the child is now in year 5—that, when she gets to high school, ‘There is no school around here,’ that would be against departmental policy?

Mr Smyth King—You would appreciate that it is very difficult to comment on a particular case, particularly when you do not have the details. I do not know the full circumstances of it. You have told me part of the story; there is obviously another side of the story that is important as well.

Senator TIERNEY—I would be interested to know what the other side of the story is.

CHAIR—Does the New South Wales government have a policy of admitting anyone that comes into a school?

Mr Smyth King—Yes.

Senator TIERNEY—That is what I thought the policy was. That is why I am asking if whoever did say that was acting in accordance with or against departmental policy. I assume from what you say that it is against departmental policy.

Mr Alegounarias—If that is what was said, that would be correct.

Senator TIERNEY—I will give you the details of that, because I really would like that followed up.

Mr McKie—We would need to know if they were actually within the zone for that school.

Mr Smyth King—Those are the details that I need to know. It is very hard to comment on something without the details.

CHAIR—No, that is fine. I understand.

Senator TIERNEY—The interesting thing about it is that that parent managed to get the department to reverse the position. What I suppose is sad about that is that that was a very articulate parent; I wonder what would happen in other circumstances: sometimes people do not have the ability or skills or are a bit intimidated by dealing with officials.

Mr Alegounarias—I do not think we would accept that a case can be made that there is any sort of pattern of exclusion of students with disabilities in the government school system of New South Wales. In fact, the provision of educational services for disabled students relies on the existence of the universal provision of public education to all students. Individual exceptions aside, we would say that one of the proud dimensions of the government school system is that it in fact is open to all.

Senator TIERNEY—Turning to the identification of children who have a difficulty, could you describe briefly how, if a child is in a state high school and does have a disability—some are obvious, of course, and some are not—that is identified?

Mr McKie—We have a process within schools: the teacher in the classroom with the students is the one who has the most contact and who is certainly looking at their educational progress. Beyond that, though, a team of support is available. So the process involves a teacher bringing to the attention of the school—

Senator TIERNEY—Could I just stop you at that point, because I want to ask you some questions about that. How does the teacher identify that disabilities exist? What sort of diagnostic training do teachers get preservice or inservice to do that?

Mr McKie—There are a couple of issues. I will answer one of them, and I will put it back to Brian to answer another. In the first instance, teachers are working on their stage programs—they are aware of their stage programs and their stage outcomes, and they are gauging that—but at the same time they have also had awareness programs in the needs of students with disabilities.

Senator TIERNEY—Where do they get those?

Mr Smyth King—I outlined that at the beginning. Since 1995, there has been a requirement of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training that all preservice teachers do a special education component in that training program; it is mandatory.

Senator TIERNEY—Since what year?

Mr Smyth King—1995.

Senator TIERNEY—We have an ageing teaching population—teachers are now getting into their late 40s—and a huge number of teachers started before 1995, so how do those teachers receive that information?

Mr Smyth King—There are two other ways. One is through the curriculum frameworks that David has alluded to and the training that goes into implementing those, and the staged outcomes that align with those frameworks. Teachers would identify students who were not making those levels and would seek further supported assistance around those individual students. Alternatively, we have a cadetship program. I outlined that that is a training program for teachers who are interested in this area or who work in this area but who may not have formal qualifications.

Senator TIERNEY—What percentage of teachers, pre 1995, undertake such programs inservice?

Mr Smyth King—I am one of them. In my early teaching career—

Senator TIERNEY—I would hope so. You are the head of the division. I am talking about your classroom teacher. What percentage of classroom teachers would have undertaken such programs?

Mr Smyth King—All teachers would be engaged in their training and professional development programs within their schools.

Senator TIERNEY—Sure, but what percentage of teachers have done work relating to diagnostic methods and learning strategies related to disability education in your school system?

Mr Smyth King—All teachers will have been involved in that sort of training.

Senator TIERNEY—Every one of them? They have all done it inservice?

Mr Smyth King—Yes, all of them, through their school based training—

Senator TIERNEY—You can state categorically that every teacher in New South Wales has done that?

Mr Smyth King—We have provided every teacher in New South Wales with an opportunity to do that.

Senator TIERNEY—Yes, but what percentage have actually done a course and how long are those courses?

Mr Smyth King—I am not sure I get the point of the question that you are asking.

Senator TIERNEY—The point of the question is that the evidence we have received is that this is all very hit and miss and it depends upon whether the school makes that a priority whether it happens. The evidence that we have received is that there are vast numbers of teachers out there who have received no training. I am just wondering why you are telling us the opposite.

Mr Smyth King—No training in what?

Senator TIERNEY—No training in terms of skills relating to diagnostic work with children with disabilities and also pedagogy for teaching such children.

Mr Smyth King—Last year I distributed to every New South Wales primary teacher a strategies handbook—

Senator TIERNEY—Terrific; they got a handbook!

Mr Smyth King—on literacy and numeracy identification.

Senator TIERNEY—What percentage read the handbook amongst all the other stuff the department sends?

Mr Smyth King—It was a very well received document—a very, very well received document.

Senator TIERNEY—I am sure it was very well designed. I am just trying to figure out the effect of that through into the classroom practice and how you evaluate that. You are pulling our leg a bit here, surely? Could you tell us exactly what is happening, not what you think should be happening? Who is getting the training, and what percentage of teachers are getting the training? How many days are they spending on this sort of thing, and is that, in your view, adequate?

Mr Smyth King—What you are suggesting is that a pull-out program that provides a teacher with one day's training or 12 days training, or whatever it might be, then changes the way they approach their profession.

Senator TIERNEY—It would be useful to have some training in it, wouldn't it?

Mr Smyth King—They do, but it is an integrated training program that fits into the curriculum structure of New South Wales schools and the requirements of the Board of Studies.

Senator TIERNEY—But more than half the teachers would miss this, wouldn't they—being honest about it.

Mr Smyth King—You are making up the statistics. I do not know. You seem better informed than I am.

Senator TIERNEY—You tell me what the correct statistics are, because we have received evidence from other groups who are concerned about this matter and they are indicating that what you are saying is not correct; that this is not comprehensive at all. You are trying to make out that it is. I am trying to get from you what you are basing that on.

Mr Smyth King—From the position that I operate in in this organisation—

Senator TIERNEY—I am talking about hard facts. What statistics are you basing it on?

Mr Smyth King—The facts that relate to the training and development of individual teachers are facts that I do not have at my disposal here today to talk to you about.

CHAIR—Could you take it on notice?

Senator TIERNEY—Yes, take it on notice. But I just make the comment, Mr Smyth King, that you are doing the whole system a disservice by doing this. One of the recommendations that might come out of this committee is that there is not enough money spent on inservice in this area. We might actually recommend that the Commonwealth come in and spend more money on it if the state government is not prepared to do it, but by making out that there is no problem you obviously will not get such a recommendation.

Mr Smyth King—No, I have not made out that there is no problem; I just said that I cannot give you the details.

CHAIR—Mr Smyth King, perhaps I can help you here.

Mr Smyth King—Thank you, Senator Carr.

CHAIR—If you could provide us with information on what the current inservice requirements are for the New South Wales teaching service and what availability there is for inservice for teachers. Then you may want, as a subset of that, the specific special education and/or learning disabilities inservice requirements. I understand that all teachers have access to three days a year at the moment. Could you confirm that figure? Is it about three days a year?

Mr Smyth King—Yes, they do.

Senator TIERNEY—On anything at all? Sorry, I mean on serious matters of curriculum. Three days—

CHAIR—It is always serious.

Senator TIERNEY—I am sure it is. Three days is the requirement. Who determines what the course is going to be on?

Mr Smyth King—The system.

Senator TIERNEY—The system determines that. It is not done at the school level or at district level?

Mr Smyth King—It is a mix.

Senator TIERNEY—If I assume you bring in a new curriculum, for example, the state might require an inservice on that. Where does disabilities education end up in that mix in your average school? What we found when we had an inquiry into gifted education is that it got a pretty low priority—it rarely happened. We are just trying to figure out whether it works better in the teaching of children with disabilities.

Mr Smyth King—It will be included and it will be specific.

Mr Alegounarias—It is not the only training and development available to teachers—those days are set aside without students. The New South Wales approach with regard to the professional development of teachers is that, while inservice, it is part and parcel of their everyday work. There are specific designated people and committees in schools who organise around ensuring that the school as a whole—in everyday practice, as distinct from that one day a term—develop their professional knowledge with regard to the needs of their students.

Senator TIERNEY—Moving on to another point: what is the relationship between the level of disability and the funding that a school receives? I assume that in some areas there might be higher levels of disability than in others. Is it just pro rata across the system or does it cluster depending upon levels of disability in a school, and how do you determine that?

Mr McKie—Beyond the teacher, there is a learning support team. Where a student is seen as having additional needs, one of the support teachers in the school may be brought in, and the school counsellor would be involved in each of those groups. Where a student is seen as being eligible to access the program, there is criteria—as you alluded to at the start—in the department to do that. That criteria is published, and people have access to that criteria. When a student meets that criteria, the learning support team uses a profiling document. It is an actual document that goes through the various areas of that student's functioning, and in it there are descriptions of how a student may be functioning to reach a certain level. It is more than just a tick box type system; it is one that has a lot of considered effect. The more people in the team who consider it, the better; the department always promotes that because it gives the widest view of the student. We would want the parents of the student involved in that process as well. That document then becomes a profile for that individual student. That request, based on that individual profile, goes forward from the school to the district office at that point. So that individual profile is not an amalgam for that school.

Senator TIERNEY—In submissions and in verbal evidence that we have received, there has been a lot of criticism of what happens at the transition stages in terms of information about children who have a disability who are moving from preschool into primary or from primary into high school or from high school into the university system. We heard from the University of Western Sydney that they have 800 students with disabilities. No records ever came with these students. Is that something the department has looked at in terms of keeping that flow of information going so that teachers at the next level are better informed on the nature of the disabilities?

Mr McKie—We send guidelines out to schools which sets out for principals the requirements under the Privacy Act in terms of passing information on. Where a parent or where a student over the age of 18 requests that information, they have advice on how to deal with such requests.

Senator TIERNEY—The University of Western Sydney have got DLOs that assist these students. If a DLO wanted information on a student from a high school, are you saying that their request would be blocked by the Privacy Act; that they could not request it and that it would have to come through the student?

Mr McKie—I would say that students would have to give approval for any request for that information, and that information would most likely be provided to the student for them to take wherever they required.

Senator TIERNEY—That was not the situation before last December, was it?

Mr McKie—I believe that it was the situation that consent was required for taking information outside of the department—

Senator TIERNEY—From one school system to another?

Mr McKie—Yes. It is in the Privacy Act.

Senator ALLISON—Has an evaluation been made of the preservice unit in special education? It has been referred to, I think on one occasion by one of our submitters, as being somewhat of a mickey mouse subject. Firstly, have you had a chance to evaluate its effectiveness once your teachers are in the field; and, secondly, have you considered requiring placements in schools that specialise in special education for undergraduate students?

Mr Smyth King—The answer to the first part of your question is no, we have not done a formal evaluation of the teachers themselves who have received that training, but we regularly review and endorse the mandatory components that universities plan to deliver. If there is a change to those courses, as I outlined at the beginning, the university will seek our endorsement for that. The answer to the second part of your question is that it is also at the discretion of the universities as to where they place students. We are very happy and willing to encourage undergraduate teachers to take placements in special education settings, or settings where there are students with disabilities to, obviously, gain a first-hand understanding of their needs.

Senator ALLISON—So you are satisfied that those courses are comprehensive in terms of the diversity of disabilities that teachers have to deal with? I am referring to autism, MS and learning disabilities right through to children with profound physical disabilities. How effective do you think they are in terms of that comprehensiveness?

Mr Smyth King—The effectiveness of them will be relevant to the particular institution that is delivering them. That is the first thing.

Senator ALLISON—How is it relevant to the institution? Isn't it relevant to the students?

Mr Smyth King—The students will go through the program. It depends on how the university actually delivers it as to whether or not those students themselves go away with a much more detailed understanding of how they—

Senator ALLISON—But you negotiate with the university and you have an agreement.

Mr Smyth King—We do not dictate to the university how they will teach that particular unit; that may well be done in a variety of ways by universities themselves. The second thing is that the universities liaise with us regularly about special education and the needs of students with disabilities. But I have to say it is like any preservice training program, whether it is nursing, teaching or anything else: you provide the scope of the particular field that the person is going into. With the particular details of those areas, like special education, for instance teaching a child with autism, a person's knowledge of that is probably going to be further developed when they become a classroom teacher or work in a schoolroom setting.

Senator ALLISON—If they are lucky. Presumably you had a hand in requiring that this be a one semester unit and so there will be some understanding that that is 36 hours; and you review what the university does on a regular basis, which is good to hear. It might be useful for us to have whatever the university sends to you by way of, 'This is what we're now doing.'

Mr Smyth King—Sure.

Senator ALLISON—We were a bit disturbed this morning to hear that community health centres in New South Wales now rarely see students at 'starting school' age for assessment. Can you explain the history of those centres? I think this was specifically in Western Sydney, but perhaps it is common around the state. Can you explain the changes and why they have been brought about?

Mr Smyth King—In New South Wales the government has just introduced universal screening of newborn babies for hearing. But for other areas screening is done on a needs basis by health areas. I suppose the issue I would make about universal screening is that, whilst it will pick up the kids who need the service, it will also screen a whole lot of kids that do not need a particular service at all. So you have to ask whether resources are going to be most effectively utilised in that way. Where young children are in preschool settings or go through medical facilities, we believe that students with those needs in their early years of life are picked up through that process. That would be the position that the health department takes.

Senator ALLISON—So you think the previous arrangement assessed children that did not require it and that those who will require it will come up through some other identification process? You might want to have a look at the evidence on that issue in the *Hansard* and perhaps tell us if you agree.

You say in your submission that there is ‘value in developing common definitions for disability and approaches to the measurement of a cost of meeting the needs of students’. If I can take that first point first, would you favour a national definition of disability to include some of those areas which, while I will not say they are contentious, certainly are excluded currently, like learning disability, dyslexia and some definitions of autism. There are a range of disabilities which impact significantly on learning but are, nonetheless, not—in the Commonwealth definitions—regarded as being disabilities and therefore receive funding. Does the New South Wales state government favour a process or definition which embraces more levels of disability?

Mr Smyth King—We would respond to that by saying that the eight disability criteria that we now have net what would be considered to be the full range of disability except for those that have learning difficulties. We would say that the system we have in place, which is a program that we put more than $85 million into every year, is a non-categorical approach that benefits the vast majority of students who have learning difficulties. It does not exclude them because they do not have a label.

Senator ALLISON—Yes, but that was not my question. My question is not about learning difficulties; it is about learning disabilities. If you look to the UK and to some parts of the US, ‘learning disability’ has been defined as a disability for the purposes of education. In fact, if you look at the Disability Discrimination Act, it also tells you that it is a disability.

Mr Smyth King—At this point in time, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training in the school sector does not distinguish between learning difficulties and learning disabilities. We would contend that the students that have dyslexia and the sorts of things that you are talking about are well and truly supported through the Learning Difficulties Program.

Senator ALLISON—Despite the fact that 80 per cent of our prison population have a learning disability and that learning disability is very heavily represented in those areas of social disadvantage? You do not see that learning disabilities now should perhaps be reconsidered with regard to extra effort and funding?

Mr Smyth King—Again, I ask you the question: where do you draw the line in the sand; which students do you exclude?

Senator ALLISON—I am not sure that that is an answer.

Mr Smyth King—But that becomes the issue: which students would you then exclude? Because that is, in fact, what you would do.

Senator ALLISON—I think we are talking about which students you include rather than exclude. You have already determined that the ‘line in the sand’, if you like, does exclude students with learning disability.

Mr Smyth King—No, it does not.

Senator ALLISON—What I am suggesting to you is that we redraw the line and perhaps include that lot.

Mr Alegounarias—We would endorse work at a national level to consider that issue.

Senator ALLISON—Thank you. Excellent.

CHAIR—On that point, the MCEETYA task force has been in operation for some years now and it is designed specifically to look at the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act. Where is the report?

Mr Alegounarias—A key impediment with regard to that has been that, at the last MCEETYA, ministers asked that task force to develop a regulatory impact statement that listed the costs and benefits—as a regulatory impact statement would—with regard to applying standards to the act. The costings with regard to implementing the act have not been done, and there is no inclination by the Commonwealth to support any resource requirements that might arise from a recommendation of the working group. So, firstly, we do not have an understanding of the cost implications and, secondly, when and if we get advice as to what the cost implications are, the Commonwealth has explicitly neglected to commit itself to helping support those costs.

CHAIR—So you are not asking for the Commonwealth to fund all of those increased costs, just some of them?

Mr Alegounarias—Let me be clear: we are asking for a discussion in the first instance of: 'Let's calculate what those costs might be. Then let's discuss, in a cooperative national framework, how those costs might be met.' That is within the context that both the Commonwealth and the state share responsibility for those costs.

CHAIR—There was a draft report distributed around the middle of October 2000, if my recollection is correct. It is a long time between drinks on this issue.

Mr Alegounarias—The last ministerial council asked that a regulatory impact statement be developed. The core aspect of a regulatory impact statement is a calculation of the resource impacts. That has not been done. Until there is a calculation of the resource impacts, we cannot have a discussion about how we will support that act—the Commonwealth and the states.

Senator ALLISON—Has the costing been done for the July meeting or do we have to wait for another three months?

Mr Alegounarias—That is a little bit out of my jurisdiction. If there is work in that regard it will be resolved at the MCEETYA meeting in July.

Senator ALLISON—This is July. Who is actually preparing the costing?

Mr Alegounarias—It is a national working group chaired by the Commonwealth that has responsibility for preparing those costs.

CHAIR—So you have not received a draft paper from the Commonwealth yet? By this time you normally would?

Mr Alegounarias—All papers prepared for MCEETYA have no status until they go to MCEETYA.

CHAIR—Yes, I appreciate that. But normally in all these ministerial councils, draft papers are distributed well in advance of the meeting so that you can argue the toss about the fine print. Have you received one yet, for a meeting that is due this month?

Mr Alegounarias—There have been a number of papers exchanged and drafts worked on by various parties including New South Wales, on the premise that New South Wales meets and will continue to meet its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act. We have not seen anything that we see as being anywhere near complete or reliable with regard to costings.

Senator ALLISON—This morning the Autism Association of New South Wales appeared before the committee and gave very compelling evidence of the number of students who are affected by a range of autism problems as being between 5,000 and 15,000 in this state alone. We were somewhat amazed to find that this association provides both special schools and special classes within regular government schools, but that the parents of those children are charged fees of, I think, $1,800 per year. Given the recent knowledge about autism and its spread, would you not consider that service being fully funded by government, given that autism schools are presumably not schools of choice per se in the normal independent school system, but are developed with the expertise, specialisation and work with transition into mostly government schools, we understand. Why is that not publicly funded?

Mr Smyth King—We do publicly fund that. We provide special classes for students with autism and we provide itinerant teacher services for students with autism. Students with autism who are enrolled in regular classes are supported through our funding support program. In those cases where parents wish their child to attend a satellite class or an autism school, they choose to do so. We have established for that reason a very close working relationship with the Autism Association, to facilitate the choice of those parents who wish to avail themselves of the expertise and benefits of the Autism Association but move their children into a regular school setting. That is where many of them choose to go to satellite classes rather than alternative provision.

Senator TIERNEY—Supplementary to that: in the case I gave you earlier of the child who had mild autism I assume there is some cut-off point, because evidently that was not an option.

Mr Smyth King—Once again, I would need the details.

Senator TIERNEY—You would need the details, but I assume that at a certain level you would assess that the child had the alternative of whether to go to a special school or not.

Mr Smyth King—No, it does not work that way.

Senator TIERNEY—Doesn't it?

Mr Smyth King—No.

Senator TIERNEY—So why would those parents be told that was not an option?

Mr Smyth King—Once again, I am not sure of the details.

Senator TIERNEY—But if your child had been diagnosed even with mild autism—it was an official diagnosis, professionally done—that should be an option. Is that what you are saying—that it is a possible option?

Mr Smyth King—It could be that when they did the profile—you are describing the first part, but there is a second part when they look at the actual need or the educational impact of the autism—the decision came in at that level, not at the level of: 'You can't be considered for support.' That is what it sounds like; I can only respond to that.

Senator TIERNEY—We will give you the details later.

Senator ALLISON—I would like to pursue that point again. What choice do you understand parents to be making? One choice involves a fee of $1,800 a year; what is the other choice?

Mr Smyth King—Enrol in a government school and seek support through a special class.

Senator ALLISON—But some of these students are already in government schools and they have the autism—

Mr Smyth King—But they may well be in a special class or a special school; or they may well be supported through the funding support program.

Senator ALLISON—But some of these students are in government schools; they are just in a satellite unit of a government school—a classroom within a government school.

Mr Smyth King—In those particular cases, parents have made the choice to put their children into a facility operated by the Autism Association. It is as simple as that. It is like sending your child to a non-government school—they have made that choice.

Senator ALLISON—Extraordinary. There are a number of questions we would like to put to you in terms of detail and figures and the like. Chair, I hope that we can pass that list over.

Senator TIERNEY—I have indicated a number of questions on notice as well.

CHAIR—You are prepared to take some questions on notice?

Mr Smyth King—Yes.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for attending. That concludes the proceedings for today.

Subcommittee adjourned at 4.17 p.m.