



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

**Reference: Petitions presented before 26 September 2008**

WEDNESDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2008

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

[10.33 am]

**AYRES, Dr Russell, Branch Manager, Early Childhood Education Reform Branch, Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**CLEARY, Ms Kim, Section Manager, Early Childhood Education Universal Access Section, Early Childhood Education Reform Branch, Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**CROSS, Ms Rebecca, Group Manager, Schools - Lifting Educational Outcomes Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**GOLIGHTLY, Ms Malisa, Deputy Secretary, Employment, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**KIMBER, Mr Murray, Branch Manager, Child Care Policy and Payments Branch, Early Childhood Education and Child Care, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**MILLIKEN, Ms Marsha, Group Manager, Income Support and Stakeholder Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**MITCHELL, Ms Debbie, Branch Manager, Assurance and Student Payments Branch, Income Support and Stakeholder Group, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**ROLLINGS, Ms Deb, Branch Manager, Schools Policy Grants and Reporting, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**WELSH, Ms Silvana, Acting Director, Student Payments, Review and Reporting, Assurance and Student Payments Branch, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to speak under oath you should understand that this meeting is a formal proceeding of the parliament. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as contempt of the parliament. I think we have a wonderful line-up from the department today. I will ask some questions before I hand it over to my colleagues.

I want to ask a question on a petition that was received from residents of Victoria requesting action on funding for students with a disability. In the minister's response she stated:

Consultation with key stakeholders is an important part of the process and is currently underway.

Can you give us an update on the consultation with the key stakeholders?

**Ms Cross**—The point the minister was referring to was consultation to improve data collection and transparency of information. A broad process is underway as part of the COAG negotiations around the new national education agreement. Within that context, the department is looking to get a better national definition of students with a disability so that if we have a consistent definition we are better able to identify where those students are and properly resource and support them. It is happening within the context of the COAG negotiations and there are a range of groups looking at data including through the Ministerial Council of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

**CHAIR**—I will go to another petition, regarding the approval of the doctor of physiotherapy course at Bond University. I would like to go to the minister's response to that of 3 September. I will just quote a little bit from what the minister has stated:

From 1 January 2008, Youth Allowance and Austudy assistance was extended to students undertaking Masters by coursework study, where the course is required for entry to a profession ...

She went on to state in the last paragraph:

The extension of student income support to professionally oriented coursework Masters programs does not extend to coursework Doctorates.

The question I would like to ask is: if Bond University renamed the course a masters from a doctorate, would students be eligible for the assistance?

**Ms Golightly**—That could be a contributing factor—yes. There is a particular process that the universities need to follow to get on the approved list, and basically they need to apply for consideration of their course to be on the determination under the legislation. When we have a look at that course we have a look at various things including whether it is a masters or a doctorate or some other thing and make a recommendation to the minister. If it is not a doctorate then it would probably help not to call it one. But there are a few other things that the guidelines look at as well. There is also the separate Australian qualifications framework, which looks at what can be used as a guide to decide whether something is a masters or a doctorate. At the moment from what we can see the university is claiming it is a doctorate, but the first step really is for the university to apply for it to be considered and then we can take all those sorts of things into account.

**CHAIR**—That is a good answer really for the principal petitioner—the people that actually signed that petition. I think their next avenue would be to talk to the university.

**Ms Golightly**—Yes, I think that would be a very good course of action.

**CHAIR**—That is good. I will just ask one more question on another petition before I hand over to my other colleagues. It was a petition on Commonwealth funding for public schools. The response from the minister on 20 August stated:

The Government will implement its election commitment to continue the existing funding arrangements for all schools for the next funding period (2009-2012) to provide funding certainty to schools. These arrangements will be reviewed with an open and transparent process anticipated to conclude in 2011.

Can you give the principal petitioner and people who signed that petition and the committee an update on the arrangements being reviewed?

**Ms Rollings**—The reference there is to the socioeconomic status funding arrangements for non-government schools. The government is committed to reviewing those arrangements. It will be a pretty broad-ranging review around the whole gamut of funding for schools. During the course of that review, there will obviously be widespread consultation and probably public forums so that people can express a view around the funding arrangements.

**CHAIR**—When you talk about widespread consultations what sorts of groups are you looking at?

**Ms Rollings**—We have not got terms of reference for the review but I would expect there would be opportunities for people to provide submissions to the committee or the reference group or steering committee whichever helped to set the review up.

**Ms Cross**—We would normally engage with all of the key stakeholders—principals organisations, teachers organisations, non-government authorities and parents organisations—as part of the review of that nature.

**CHAIR**—And when do you think you will get the terms of reference for this review?

**Ms Rollings**—I would expect we would start work on that next year in time to get some advice to government about what the nature of the review would look like.

**CHAIR**—Are you looking at early next year or—

**Ms Rollings**—I would not really like to commit at this point given whatever the priorities of the work plan are, but we will start—

**CHAIR**—But you are looking at virtually doing that in, say, 2009?

**Ms Rollings**—Yes.

**Ms GEORGE**—Is the report that was prepared by the department under the former government—which examined the SES model and drew attention to some of the inequities and the anomalies in it—a public document?

**Ms Rollings**—No, it is not. It was prepared on the basis of it going to cabinet at the time and that is how it is being treated. However, I do know that the *Sydney Morning Herald* leaked an earlier version of it. So it was up on the *Sydney Morning Herald* website for everyone to see but it was not a final version.

**Mr ADAMS**—And it is not a public document?

**Ms Rollings**—No.

**Mr CHESTER**—One of the points you raised was in regard to the petition about children with disabilities—I think you made a comment about properly resourcing and supporting them. Is there any national consistency at the moment on the type of support we offer the families and the children with disabilities? Is there any state doing better than others? You mentioned COAG and that type of thing. I am just wondering where we are at the moment. I know it is a huge issue in a lot of our regional areas about actually accessing the services that are available and whether skilled staff are available to help these children achieve their best possible outcomes.

**Ms Cross**—Certainly from the Australian government's point of view our funding is consistent. If it is provided through the normal recurrent funding arrangements we have a consistent amount per student for government schools and also for non-government schools depending on the socioeconomic status of the school, which is the funding arrangement Ms Rollings was referring to. In terms of supplementary assistance, again that is per capita based and it is exactly the same amount for each student depending on which sector of schooling they are enrolled in. From our point of view, if you are in a government school you would get the same funding rate across Australia. If you are in a non-government school, the general recurrent funding depends on the need of the school but the additional support for students with a disability again is consistent.

**Mr CHESTER**—And just on that extra point, is there any state in Australia doing it better than others that we can learn from—other programs that are state based that you have seen or am I pushing my luck a bit there?

**Ms Cross**—Again, the issue is that we do not have a consistent definition of what a student with a disability is. Until we get that consistent definition you cannot actually make comparisons between states so the first piece of work that we are embarking on is to try and get an agreed definition nationally on students with a disability. At the moment each state has quite different definitions so it is quite hard to compare what they are offering.

**Mr CHESTER**—The petition referred to portability and I think that we also refer to portability when they are transferring between states. Do these children make the transition between states well? What is your experience there?

**Ms Cross**—Because the definitions vary within states of what a student with a disability is, for some children they could be eligible for additional support in one state and if they moved interstate under that state's definition they might not be. In terms of the Commonwealth's funding we look at the definition that the state is applying and provide the funding on that basis.

**Mr CHESTER**—Just taking up that point, if a child has a certain level of funding in Victoria but there is a different definition in Western Australia, would their federal funding be affected as well?

**Ms Cross**—I will just get the basis on which we apply the funding because we are stuck by the use of the state definitions.

**Mr ADAMS**—Do you have the state definitions written down somewhere?

**Ms Cross**—I do not have them, but they would be available because the states use them in applying their policies.

**Mr ADAMS**—That would be very good, thank you.

**Mr CHESTER**—That's fine—I can refer to those if I can see them later on.

**Mr ADAMS**—How does the department go about getting who responds to the petition—do you have a structure so it goes to a relevant area?

**Ms Golightly**—Yes, the department is organised under the broad areas of outcomes that we deliver for the government: education, higher education, employment and workplace relations. We then have a structure underneath that as to which area would be best placed to respond to the particular petition.

**Mr ADAMS**—I want to come back to the disability area. The major issue is that there is no consistent definition of disabilities. I think my colleague mentioned that one state might have a different definition from another. Their funding would depend on that and, therefore, the child moving from one state to another has a difficulty in doing that. If the child goes to a private school, and if that school is seen to be at a certain level, there would be less funding, or no funding. It is a pretty complex process.

**Ms Cross**—Yes, it is a very complex process.

**Mr ADAMS**—Do you have any figures on how many students there are in the state and private systems in Australia? Do we have those sorts of statistics?

**Ms Cross**—Yes, we have statistics on the students that we provide the supplementary funding to and that is based on them requiring and being provided with additional support. In 2007 there were around 120,000 within the government school sector and in the non-government sector there were around 30,000.

**CHAIR**—We have got a petition that was lodged by the member for Page, Ms Saffin, on 17 September regarding preschools. We have not really had a response from the minister at this stage so once we have that ministerial response I know the department will come back to us over the next 12 months or the next couple of years. Once we get that response that is when I think I will ask questions on that particular petition.

**Ms GEORGE**—In terms of the new provisions for the childcare tax rebate, does the out-of-pocket expense for a preschool participant qualify for the rebate or not?

**Mr Kimber**—The increase from 30 to 50 per cent for childcare tax rebate which came into force on 1 July 2008 will be administered in the same way. The costs for preschools do not attract the childcare tax rebate.

**Ms GEORGE**—Currently?

**Mr Kimber**—Yes, currently.

**CHAIR**—As there are no more questions, we thank you very much for coming before the committee today.

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