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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Reference: Education of boys

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Thursday, 30 November 2000

Members: Dr Nelson (*Chair*), Mr Barresi, Mr Bartlett, Mrs Elson, Mr Emerson, Ms Gambaro, Ms Gillard, Mrs May, Mr Sawford and Mr Wilkie

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mrs Elson, Mrs May, Dr Nelson and Mr Sawford.

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

- the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills in the early and middle years of schooling; and
- the strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.

WITNESS

MOLESWORTH, Mr Rodney, President, Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc.257

Committee met at 9.08 a.m.**MOLESWORTH, Mr Rodney, President, Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc.**

CHAIR—I welcome everyone here this morning and declare open this public hearing in Canberra today for the inquiry into the education of boys. The purpose of this inquiry is to examine the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialisation skills in the early and middle years of schooling. The committee also aims to identify successful educational strategies and ways to promote their wider adoption in schools. Particular concerns which have emerged from the submissions received include—but are not confined to—the gender and state-by-state divergence in early literacy attainment identified by testing against nationally agreed benchmarks; the gender and state-by-state variations in school retention rates, and the tendency for some boys to adopt negative attitudes towards schools and disengage from learning.

Welcome, Mr Molesworth. I remind you that the proceedings here today are proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as the proceedings in House itself—possibly more. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of the parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public but if at any stage there is something that you would like to say in camera please ask and we will give consideration to that.

Mr Molesworth—Thank you. It is my intention not to directly address those things which are comprehensively covered in our submission. As I am not the author of it, I am prepared to say that it is comprehensive and concise and beautifully written. I would like to amplify some areas in relation to that submission, however, and I will proceed to do that.

I think it is worthwhile beginning by noting that the challenge in relation to boys education has risen before all the goals in relation to girls education have been met. There has been a tendency to set boys against girls. This has particularly happened in the media but there have also been some other commentators who ought, in our view, to know better.

ACSSO does not have a boys education strategy; it has a gender equity strategy, and our approach, as always, is that all children have a capacity to learn and it is the duty of systems to ensure that the needs of each are met. Progress with girls education in our view will not cease until all the gender bias is rectified. It is worth while noting that many of the factors in boys' behaviour, which are affecting other boys, are also affecting girls, and that applies to girls who are considered to be highly successful in the educational environment in any case. So the overlap is very considerable. Many of the things which we address will also apply to girls but, of course, many will not.

One of the important differences between making changes in the educational outcome of girls is that the reconstructed femininity of 50 years ago, despite its expression in different ways in different class settings, was fairly consistent. Masculinity, however, is much more linked to dominance and therefore its expression reflects, and is reflected in, social status. This makes the challenge considerably harder because schools have two areas in which they can work. One is to reduce the role of power in the construction of masculinity and the other is to empower those who are disempowered through education and remove the areas of disadvantage and the barriers

which they suffer. This means that in relation to boys the intersection with other measures of disadvantage is central to the discussion. It is always important to the discussion in all areas to ensure that that we do not look at one single issue when it is, in fact, complex. But in relation to masculinities, and in particular in relation to the focus on power and control in the traditional constructions of masculinity, it means that other areas of disadvantage are central to the discussion.

In seeking to understand what schools might do in relation to boys education, we are hampered by lack of research, and it is one of our recommendations—I believe, recommendation 11—that serious attention be given to further research into this area. There is a concern amongst parents that there is confusion, firstly, in relation to whether girls are better than boys—which simply begs the question—and, secondly, there is confusion about what might be the causes of lower educational outcomes for some boys and what might, in fact, be the cause of higher than expected outcomes for other boys in other areas of education.

One of the things I would like to draw the committee's attention to is some research done in another area—crime prevention—which, in our view, is highly relevant to the matter in hand. This research has two direct links with what we are discussing today. In the first place, it is direct evidence about a small group of boys who are underperforming at school and transferring that fact into seriously undesirable behaviour which eventually results in crime and extreme cost to the community. This research also gives rise to the hypothesis that similar matters it has taken into account are also affecting students who have low performance but who do not finally wind up in the juvenile justice system. Our submission makes particular reference to juvenile crime—on page 13—and part of what I say will be in amplification of that section.

I draw the committee's attention to a report of the Standing Committee on Law and Justice of the Legislative Council of the Parliament of New South Wales on *Crime prevention through social support—first report*. I do this because much of the research to which I refer is gathered together in that report and it is a useful reference tool. In relation to gender and crime the committee reports as follows:

Overwhelmingly, crime, and violent crime in particular, is committed by males.

It also states:

The issue of why males commit crimes, and violent ones in particular, at a far greater rate than females is inextricably linked to notions and constructions of masculinity.

It is our view that notions and constructions of masculinity are also extremely relevant to the relationship between boys and school and other social institutions. In fact, the alienation of boys from school is a prototype for their alienation from other institutions of our society and subsequent involvement in crime. On the relevance of schooling, the report says:

The background of most offenders reveals a common picture of school failings, trancies, suspensions, expulsion and leaving at an early age. Evidence shows that difficulties within the school system, particularly learning difficulties, can contribute to later offending behaviour.

Professor Tony Vinson told of a worker in the health field who claimed to be able to point to the future clients of Long Bay. She said:

They are a constant source of irritation to the other students and the teachers and they are beginning to engage now in delinquent acts which will surely grow into major offences.

In his testimony Professor Ross Homel also stressed the need for early intervention when a child begins to display acting-up behaviour at school and even preschool.

One of the research areas that I think is particularly relevant to the education of boys is the work that has been done on the effect of social and economic stress within the family on the alienation of children from institutions, school and society as a whole. Work done by Weatherburn and Lind from the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research is backed up by field research by the New South Wales Council of Social Service, who say:

(Weatherburn and Lind's) work raises the hypothesis that social and economic stress exerts an indirect effect on juvenile participation in crime by disrupting the parenting process.

It seems to us that there are a couple of things which flow from this research. In the first place, this research identifies a small group of young men, overwhelmingly, who are—through the causes of economic and social stress within their family—disrupting the parenting process within that family, placing themselves at extremely high risk of being involved in antisocial behaviours, becoming alienated from school and the aims of schooling, and eventually either being expelled or leaving school early and engaging in behaviours which are extremely disruptive to the society generally and which—it is relevant to note—are extremely costly to the society generally.

Some of the work which has been done in order to seek further information about what might be done about this has some very strong links to early intervention, particularly in relation to the very small target group. It would be our submission that research relating directly to education and lower than expected student outcomes would parallel in many ways the research which has been done in relation to the severely at-risk group and in relation to crime.

I refer the committee to the Elmira study, where visits were arranged to the homes of families of seriously at-risk groups, in which the results were extraordinarily positive. The research has followed the progress and development of the children over the last 15 years. In comparison to families who were randomly assigned to receive other services, early results of women who were nurse home visited showed that they experienced greater informal and formal social support, smoked fewer cigarettes, had better diets and had better health generally. There was a reduction in abused and neglected children, which was identified by Weatherburn and Lind as an extremely important factor in the failure of children to become connected with the aims of schooling and with the society generally. There were other positive effects in relation to further children, and the area of the intergenerational effect of poverty and alienation is further noted. The Elmira study has a cost per child of \$6,000.

The Perry Preschool program has a cost per child of \$12,000. In this, there was a preschool as well as the home visits, and that accounts for the greater expense. A major outcome of the Perry Preschool program was that the preschool participation increased the percentage of young people who were literate, employed and enrolled in post-secondary education at 19 years of age. It can reduce the proportion who have left school and who have been arrested or are on welfare.

A cost-benefit analysis of both of these programs was carried out by the RAND organisation, which is a private research organisation that conducts cost-benefit analyses for government and private clients. They concluded that, in relation to higher risk families—and that is an important point to note—the Perry Preschool program generated, from all government sources but no private sources, savings in government expenditure of \$25,000 as against the \$12,000 in costs, and the Elmira program generated \$24,000 in savings as against a \$6,000 cost for each participating child. The standing committee goes on to report:

The benefits of these programs to government can be far reaching. For instance:

- the potential savings the government (and thus the taxpayers) realises when families participating in early interventions require lower public expenditure;
- participating children may spend less time in special-education programs;
- parents and children ... may spend less time receiving welfare benefits;
- parents and children may spend less time under the jurisdiction of criminal and juvenile justice systems; and
- parents and children (when they become adults) may earn more income and therefore pay more taxes.

It is important to note that none of these savings from early intervention include the savings to persons other than government. So, particularly the costs of crime—victims of crime, increased insurance premiums and security provisions taking place in homes and businesses—are not included in this study. It is therefore the view of ACSSO that early intervention, particularly in the at-risk group, is already shown to be a worth while investment by government, and we support such an idea.

Secondly, we support the idea that there should be further study to try and replicate the research that Weatherburn and Lind have done showing that disruption of the parenting process through social and economic stress causes children to arrive at school not prepared for school and already alienated from the kind of structure that school has.

One of the significant pieces of information which the RAND organisation prepared was on the rate at which children's brains mature graphed against the expenditure of public money on those children. Ninety per cent of the brain's maturing occurs in the first four years, when public expenditure is at its lowest. Public expenditure reaches its highest level well after children's brains have matured. This seems to indicate that governments are expending money on the symptoms rather than on the causes, so it is particularly important that funds be diverted from other areas of government responsibility into early intervention, into schools and into some of the recommendations which are carried forward in our submission.

One aspect of funding which is extremely important and which has not been brought to account in any of the studies I have referred to this morning is the intergenerational effect of low school outcomes, poverty and involvement in crime. It is possible for the effects of a damaged childhood to be replicated in as short a time as a 15-year cycle. Intervention which is paid for now may not reveal results in the next few years but, more importantly, if it can stop the replication of those same circumstances in a new family over and over again, we are talking about an extraordinarily valuable investment of public money.

It is traditional for organisations such as ours to arrive at these committees and ask for increased expenditure. This is sometimes seen as ritual behaviour and not properly researched. I would like to refute that argument, particularly in relation to the evidence which I have given this morning. It is very clear to us that governments are accountable for the money that they

spend. It is our view that governments and the parliament are also accountable for failing to make investments. It is our view that investment in education always pays for itself many times over. It is particularly true that investment in areas where children are falling between the cracks of provision and will go on to be extraordinarily expensive and dangerous to our society are areas that governments ought to be investing in. We are suggesting that this would be very worth while.

I will briefly recap. We believe that the education of boys should proceed very much parallel to the education of girls. While there will certainly be some significant difference, gender equity is the final aim. We believe that there should be recognition of the central role played by power in masculinity—which it always has played—and we seek the Commonwealth’s assistance for schools to reduce the role of power in masculinity—constructing masculinity so that satisfactions come through more worthwhile and available means. Also, we seek the Commonwealth’s assistance to engage children who are disengaged, or potentially disengaged, from the schooling process, and to help them recognise that their future depends, in our current society, upon education. We are asking specifically for serious targeting of the smaller at-risk groups with early intervention and we are asking for early intervention generally. We are asking for support for a cross-sectoral approach targeting areas of disadvantage and the intersection of disadvantage and masculinity.

Other areas, which are important and which are covered in more detail in the report, include the effect of competitive schooling on children who arrive at school with structural disadvantages. When masculinity is constructed on the basis of winning—and some children recognise very early in their schooling that in this setting they cannot win—this is an almost guaranteed pathway to seeking other expressions of dominance with disastrous results. The question of failure within the construct of masculinity is enormously important and the way in which schools have a tendency to separate successes and failures has disastrous effects in the construct of masculinity as it currently exists. We seek very flexible responses to that question in schooling, and we are seeking support, including financial support, in training teachers and providing resources to meet that challenge.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Molesworth. That is extremely comprehensive. All of us here would agree with you about the importance and the emphasis on early childhood development and, in particular, the early part of a child’s life, both educational and family. One of the problems for us, of course, is that it is always difficult to explain to people that there is nothing available to treat the problem because we are spending it on stopping others from getting it. That is the dilemma governments have.

Firstly, to cut to a few things directly because we do not have a lot of time, there seems to be divided opinion. Some people have said, ‘Look, the problem that boys are having, or children are having generally, relates to their socioeconomic background.’ For example, you might be in one of the low income suburbs in Rod’s electorate and you are going to have a poorer educational outcome by virtue of your circumstances compared to, say, one of my constituents. Others have said, ‘Look, your low income status might determine where you start in life, but if you actually have good teaching supported by resources then in fact you can do well.’ What is the position of your association in relation to that? What I am basically saying is that some people seem to take a defeatist attitude to kids from low income backgrounds, whereas others seem to have a more optimistic approach.

Mr Molesworth—The view of the organisation is that disadvantage needs to be overcome, and that disadvantage will need to be overcome by the application of resources. Certainly, there is a great deal of difference between the educational outcomes of people who apparently have the same level of socioeconomic status. Some of these are extreme. In looking at, for example, distribution of money to disadvantaged schools, one of the things that we always look into is whether or not we have what we call in New South Wales the Nimbin factor, where people who have a great deal of cultural capital have made a decision to earn low incomes. There are other groups of migrants, for example, that are doubly disadvantaged. Some groups of migrants are, in fact, people who have a great deal of cultural capital and have low socioeconomic status because they have not been able to bring wealth into Australia that they generated in their previous country.

The answer is that we have to meet the needs of every child. The most important needs to meet, as I said earlier, are those who are in at-risk groups, those groups where the economic and social stress has so disrupted the social and possibly physical development of children that they arrive at school seriously disadvantaged as far as taking up the advantages of school are concerned. There is no doubt that children who arrive in that state have a very small chance of achieving an educational outcome which will enable them to be employed and happy members of our society. So in the first place, that group, in our view, needs to be targeted and there is no reasonable doubt about that necessity.

There are groups that have a high level of disadvantage which goes across not merely socioeconomic status but also the availability of a history of education, a family situation which supports education, and a series of motivations within the family to succeed at school, and there are, on the other hand, things which work against working in and succeeding in school. It is difficult in the first instance to identify simply by looking at socioeconomic status to which group a person belongs. The only institution which has an opportunity to do that is a school at the school level. But the problem with schools at the moment, particularly schools in disadvantaged areas, is that there simply are not the resources available to meet that need even where it is identified. We would certainly support methods of individual assessment of students to try to find exactly what the cause of the low educational outcome or the lower than expected educational outcome might be. But the problem at the moment is that there are simply no resources, or insufficient resources, to meet the need which schools can, in fact, identify, even with the tools that they have at the moment.

CHAIR—The second thing I will ask you before I hand over to my colleagues is that you recommended in your submission increased emphasis on the professional development of teachers, and I think any responsible examination of this area suggests that that is something that is likely to emerge from this inquiry. Is your association concerned about the quality of teaching—in this case we are referring to the government sector? What would you recommend, apart from professional development, for improving the quality of teaching? When we talk about the quality of teaching, we are talking about the sorts of requirements for people who enter the teaching profession, the undergraduate and postgraduate training of teachers and then, of course, the professional, and perhaps even the personal, development of teachers through what is obviously a very difficult career. Does the association have a view on that?

Mr Molesworth—Yes, we do have a view on that. We believe that there is, generally speaking, low morale amongst teachers across Australia, and that was brought out in the report

from this parliament which addresses the status of teachers. It is our view that there is long overdue a reassessment of the worth of teachers in our society. There is a need for governments and systems to promote the value that teachers already express and to meet the looming teacher shortage, which exists in many states already, through a recruitment campaign ensuring that new entrants into the profession recognise the value of the work they will do. There is a need, also, to address the very simple economic fact that young people are not choosing teaching as a profession because of what are considered to be, by existing teachers, poor working conditions and lack of support from their systems. That is the first point.

The second point is that it is certainly necessary that teachers who have university degrees, and who are therefore very often selected from a higher social stratum than the children they will teach, should not enter the profession if they are not able and willing to relate in a very positive way to all the children they teach. There have been changes in the methods of access to various university courses, particularly medical courses, which seek to identify those applicants who have talent and commitment for the actual job which they will do rather than simply the academic ability to do so. It is a very worthwhile idea to pursue that some kind of assessment of the suitability of a person for the teaching profession should be included in the application for teaching degrees.

As far as the existing profession is concerned, generally speaking surveys show that parents in government schools are satisfied to very satisfied with the teaching their children receive. This is borne out by anecdotal evidence as volunteers, such as myself and many others, travel around schools and talk to parents about their concerns about schools. Concerns of parents about schools almost always concentrate on resources, both physical and human, and the very great difficulty that teachers and administrators have in meeting the needs of students in those schools with the level of resourcing that exists.

We believe that one of the greatest things that governments and systems can do to improve the role, morale and commitment of teachers is to improve their working conditions by ensuring that there are adequate staff and resources to deal with, for example, boys who are acting out and to deal with the whole subject of boys' education rather than having to deal with that in a highly stressed context in which the needs of anything up to 30 students must be met.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Molesworth. It probably seems like an odd thing for a politician to say to you, but could you try to keep your answers reasonably succinct just so that we can have the opportunity to get your views on a whole range of things.

Mr BARTLETT—You make the assertion that the policy of promoting access to higher education through full fee paying places as an alternative to subsidised places is likely to discriminate against boys. I would just like to make the point, firstly, that it is not the current policy to do that as an alternative to, but rather as an addition to, subsidised places. But putting that aside for the moment, how do you reach that conclusion? How is that likely to discriminate against boys?

Mr Molesworth—From what part of the—

CHAIR—Page 10. Basically, in the submission you were concerned about the fee paying places that are available once the publicly funded ones in tertiary institutions are filled and that

that would discriminate against boys basically because, I think, girls are doing perhaps better at the year 12 level and they would be taking up those places and boys would not.

Mr Molesworth—Essentially, that is the justification of it. If we are receiving any access to tertiary education which is dependent on school success—which they all are—that is going to discriminate against those who are achieving lower than expected outcomes because they will receive lower than expected access to tertiary education. That is obviously exacerbated in relation to the full fee paying places simply because the universities are placing a cut-off point to which those places are not available. It is anticipated that there is a general higher availability of those places to girls because of their higher than expected outcomes relative to boys.

Mr BARTLETT—Can I just make the point that the full fee paying places are not an alternative to but are in addition to. But putting that aside, if the problem is that girls are achieving better at tertiary entrance level, at TES level, surely then we need to be tackling the cause of that and asking why they are achieving better at TES level rather than making assertions about what is likely to be happening at university.

Mr Molesworth—That certainly is the thrust of the whole report. I understand that that sentence at the end of that paragraph is the only reference to full fee paying places.

Mr BARRESI—It is still a wild assertion.

CHAIR—We are also mindful of the fact that, whilst it is the association's submission, you were not the author.

Mr Molesworth—No.

Mr BARTLETT—How then would you recommend that we tackle the growing divergence of the TES results at the upper secondary level?

Mr Molesworth—The first submission is that it starts much earlier and it depends on the individual on how much earlier it must start. In relation to secondary schooling, the initiatives around middle schooling are extremely important. We recognise that we lose a very large proportion of boys, particularly around year 8, to expulsion, to early leaving or to simple disengagement from school. The change in teaching practices around the middle years—first of all, to ease the transition between primary and secondary school, and particularly to deal with the question of the intersection of adolescence and schooling—would be an area where we would certainly ask for changes in practice, supported by the Commonwealth, and also changes in resourcing to meet that. By the time we get to the upper secondary level, the most important target group are either disengaged or are no longer at school. The level of divergence between girls and boys in the upper secondary level can largely be traced back to things which have happened before.

CHAIR—This is an important point. Your submission argues that boys have not gone backwards at all, it is just that girls have improved—boys have basically just kept on doing what they have been doing and have been doing reasonably well. I was going to point out to you that the Australian Centre for Educational Research in looking at longitudinal studies—our deputy chair, in particular, likes these sorts of studies—found that, in 1975, 30 per cent of 14-

year-old boys, for example, failed in basic literacy, whereas 20 years later the failure rate for boys in the same benchmarking was 35 per cent. That was another theme in your submission which I found difficult to accept. Whilst everybody is obviously entitled to have different views about things, it just seems that there is quite a bit of evidence that boys are falling behind. In fact, in this sense, I do agree with you that it is not so much boys versus girls, it is more boys versus boys and how they progress themselves in that earlier period.

Mr Molesworth—We are aware of great variation in research evidence in the actual performance of boys. There is alternative evidence that shows that generally speaking the literacy of boys has increased. It is very difficult to discern from one study to the other which is more to be relied upon. It certainly is true from the practice in schools that the major failure of boys is in coming to terms with a changed society. It is in that area that very real support needs to be given. In days gone by, boys who simply did not achieve high levels of literacy had a place to go where they felt valued—they were doing work where they were part of society and so forth. It seems that girls—

CHAIR—Just interrupting you, Rodney, do you consider the technical schools of the past as one of those places where boys who may not necessarily have had academic skills could go?

Mr Molesworth—The technical schools may have been relevant in those days when they were preparing students for jobs which existed. At the moment it is very clearly our view, and it is expressed in the submission, that what is required for boys to actually move into the society which currently exists is much higher levels of literacy, confidence, capacity to learn and so forth which is served by a general education, which may be accessed through vocational courses. Streaming boys off into vocational courses is actually just as much a dead end as streaming them out of school altogether.

Ms GILLARD—In the evidence we took in Melbourne there were two contentions about why boys results might be getting lower than girls results. One contention was that there had been a swing in the curriculum to higher levels of literacy—that our whole curriculum, even in the maths, science area, is now more influenced by higher levels of literacy than it used to be and that girls succeed better in relation to that curriculum than boys do. A second contention was that assessment methods have tended to move from straight examinations to a mix of continuous assessment and examinations, and that has also advantaged girls in that they are better at the continuous assessment processes than the examination processes. I would be interested in your comments in relation to those two contentions that came out of Melbourne evidence.

Mr Molesworth—It is certainly true that practices in schools and the curriculum have changed. We support those changes though, because they reflect changes in the society and changes in the necessary outcomes of schooling if students, boys and girls, are going to be successful. What seems to have happened, though, is that girls have been quicker to understand what is required, and perhaps there have been other factors working there that makes it easier for them to come to terms with those changes. The boys who are performing badly are boys who do not have experience in those areas, either in their families or in their past, or even in their childhoods. The important thrust of our submission is not to say that the curriculum should change to make it irrelevant to the current society, but that efforts should be made to make it

easier for boys to access the curriculum that currently exists, and the practices that are currently there for assessment and everything else.

Mrs ELSON—I was interested in your comment about the lack of resources for disadvantaged schools. I wondered if you have seen, within the public school system, a lack of experience by some teachers not to be able to deliver those programs. I am talking with the experience of having a couple of teachers in the family, and a couple of schools in my area that have experienced this problem. One particular school has \$120,000 worth of resources for disadvantaged students within the school. The teachers have had it sitting there for 11 months and have not delivered it because of the lack of training. They said that when they did their training, they were not trained—you have got to be partly a psychologist, or something, to use these programs. I wondered, is there any extended training for teachers who are sent to disadvantaged schools?

CHAIR—And further to that, if there is a pot of money at a state level—whatever the arguments about the size of that pot—for government schools, are you suggesting that more of that money should go into the disadvantaged areas and less perhaps into the higher income areas—for instance, the sort of electorate that I represent?

Mr Molesworth—I will try to answer all of those and be extremely brief at the same time. Firstly, there is virtually no scope educationally, and no scope at all electorally, for reducing the amount of money which goes to any government school in any area. The result of that would be to exacerbate the obvious resource differences between government and non-government schools and cause the parents to shift their children away. There is a definite need for more resources into disadvantaged areas and they need to be specifically targeted towards areas of most need. In answer to the question here, I have the advantage of sitting on the state committee in New South Wales that deals with the Disadvantaged Schools Program, as it is still known in New South Wales. The question of unspent funds has been discussed. I am able to inform you that about 400 schools are in receipt of money under that program and a number less than five that have unspent funds of any significant amount. The committee has recommended that those moneys be returned if they are not spent.

CHAIR—How much money is involved there, Mr Molesworth?

Mr Molesworth—The total amount of money?

CHAIR—Yes, roughly.

Mr Molesworth—I am sorry; I cannot remember. I think it is about \$500,000.

CHAIR—Right—so less than a million.

Mr Molesworth—Less than a million certainly. Generally speaking—for example, in New South Wales where I have experience—the programs for accountability for expenditure of those funds are extremely effective. They are both local and state based and they involve training opportunities for teachers. However, I would certainly say that there is room for further training of teachers in schools serving disadvantaged communities. The first aspect is the one I mentioned before about ensuring that cultural appropriateness to the communities that the

schools serve is not always provided by pre-entry training. Secondly, we have to ensure that more resources be available for in-service training of teachers who are dealing particularly with serious levels of disadvantage and also groups of students that have special needs.

Mr SAWFORD—This committee is only in the early stages of its inquiry but we have already received evidence from the Commonwealth department that in the view of the two larger states, New South Wales and Victoria, if you compare achievement levels of boys and girls now with those of 20 years ago you will find differences of up to 20 percentage points. If you look prior to 1980 you will see there is considerable evidence that shows the difference in achievement between boys and girls was less than one percentage point over a whole range of areas. Today it can range up to 20 per cent. Something has happened in the last 20 years that has had an impact on boys' achievements. I get the impression from this submission that there is a bit of denial about that fact.

I want to raise three issues. You say that more research on the learning needs of boys is required. I would have thought that there was plenty out there. I am a teacher. I remember the first lesson a very wise principal gave me. He said, 'Rod, anyone can teach kids who want to learn. The real test of a teacher is the kids who don't want to learn.' In terms of boys and girls I can structure a curriculum and a test to favour boys or girls. When I favour girls I structure it so that synthesis rather than analysis is the main aim. I structure it so that intuition, which girls are much better at, is put in instead of insight. I structure it so that description skills are there rather than problem solving skills. I structure it so that verbal skills are there rather visual spatial skills. Anyone can do this. It is not very clever to be able to do that. But the fact is that boys and girls need all of those skills. That is the first thing; there is plenty of research about the learning needs of boys.

You say under 'Suspension and expulsion'—this is where I get into the denial part:

Boys form the majority of those suspended or expelled from school with boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds and Indigenous boys most likely to be excluded.

Why is that so? Is this because teachers cannot cope? Is this because the current curriculum structure cannot cope? Is the gender of teachers in our teaching force a problem? You also say under 'Gender and socio-economic disadvantage':

It is also clear that the intersection of gender with culturally constructed attitudes towards masculinity and learning can produce groups of boys who are less interested in and receptive to schooling.

Yes, you could say that, but you do not have any evidence for that. Or you could say that schooling, as it is currently structured, is not agreeable to the way in which boys learn. Would you like to make some comments on those three issues: that is, the way boys and girls learn; why are we suspending so many of our lower socioeconomic and indigenous children from school; and why is it that boys are showing disinterest in the current organisation of schooling?

Mr Molesworth—In the first place, the submission does not go into what reasons there might be for differing learning styles in boys and girls. It does not buy into the biological versus cultural argument about why boys are as they are. I think that is a very wise move simply because we do not have the evidence to be able to distinguish between those two things, and it is a very heated debate generally.

Mr SAWFORD—I don't want to interrupt, but I dispute that; but you go ahead.

Mr Molesworth—It is probably fairly clear from your earlier remarks that you do dispute that. Nonetheless it is the view of the submission and the view of our organisation that it is a requirement of schools that they meet the needs of all students, whatever they are. However, there is a countervailing requirement of schools, and that is that they be relevant to the society as it currently is. It is our view that the biggest problem is not the learning styles of boys, but their preparation for school and the way in which their family lives and the social lives in the communities in which they have grown up are simply unrelated to the things that they will need if they are going to be successful at school and in society thereafter.

It is not the fault of schools that curriculum is relevant to the current society. It is not the fault of schools that the economy has changed and that opportunities for young people are extremely different from what they were 20 years ago. It is not surprising that many boys find, quite early in school, that they are not having anything which can be even vaguely described as success and they become disengaged from the process. I think a lot of the things which you are referring to about the way in which boys think are, in fact, being produced by a feeling of disengagement by boys, one, because they are subjected to failure in a system which they do not particularly well understand; and, two, because there is no belief—and this is particularly true of indigenous students—that an education will actually provide them with something which they can use in later life. It is the view of the submission and of our organisation that the efforts of government and systems should be directed towards changing the attitudes and life chances of students before they enter school and while they are at school.

Turning to suspensions, it is the view of our organisation that the rates of suspensions and expulsions are exactly paralleled by the involvement of students in school, which is directly paralleled by their chances of achieving success at school. It is therefore extraordinarily important, if we are going to keep kids at school, that we make school relevant to them, but not relevant to them at the expense of making their schooling irrelevant to their later life. It is therefore necessary to apply resources in order to overcome the disadvantage that students bring to school, having come from families that do not, as part of their family culture or part of their community culture, value education and see the link between education and a bright future.

CHAIR—It comes back to perhaps the first thing that I asked you. In fact, I asked a witness this in Melbourne last week. If we had teachers who were enthusiastic, well trained, committed and confident in what they are doing, would we even be having this inquiry? I think few people would argue that we should not put more resources into schools, but you could have all the best computers and the most wonderful buildings and all the rest of it, but if the teachers are disillusioned, burnt-out, undertrained and with limited professional development, then nothing is going to change. That is certainly the view put to the inquiry by some people who seemed well informed.

Mr Molesworth—Okay. The thing is that many teachers are disillusioned and burnt-out, and the response is not retraining. We are talking about boys not having opportunities for success at school; the problem is that many teachers do not have that opportunity either. They are placed in situations where they are expected to achieve miracles with very little. They are expected to work with large and extremely diverse class sizes and they are expected to work under conditions where there is inadequate provision for students with behaviour difficulties. They are

expected to work in a class where there are disruptive students and there is no support to ensure that that disruption is dealt with by someone other than the classroom teacher in the classroom setting. These are the reasons which teachers bring forward for their disillusionment. Unfortunately for governments, that relates directly to resources. The support that teachers are unable to get in order to carry out their duties, is the main reason that teachers give for their being tired, burnt-out and disillusioned with their job.

Ms GAMBARO—I would like to talk to you about early intervention. You were speaking about before the student goes to school. I met recently with a group of principals. One principal put forward an idea that boys perhaps should attend school one year later than girls, because of maturity levels and their just not being able to keep up with the maturity level of girls. I would like you to comment on that. Another thing that he highlighted to me was the lack of reading, particularly when they are in those early preschool ages. Somehow, depending on the family and socioeconomic background, it is not macho for a father to read to a young boy and, consequently, some of the literacy problems of later years are related to the fact that children are not read to at a very early age—predominantly one, two or three years of age. I wonder if you can comment on that as well in the context of this inquiry.

Mr Molesworth—The question of early maturity, particularly early maturity in the area of literacy in girls, is highly relevant to this inquiry. Certainly for boys who are otherwise disadvantaged, it means that virtually from their starting school they are behind a very large group of people. With the intersection with other areas of disadvantage, a group of boys will find itself behind nearly all girls and behind most of the boys as well, and so their experience of success in the early years of schooling is simply denied them. The only way to deal with that is to ensure that some opportunities of success are provided. One opportunity would be to start the boys a year later—whether or not that would be something that parents would support I am not in a position to say, but I am sure that it would be difficult for many parents to actually do that. And we would also have the negative effect of boys arriving at a great level of physical maturity at school without the time to adjust.

The area of constructive masculinity in parents is extremely important and it is one of the areas which directly relates to how boys will do at school. It relates to behaviour as well as to learning. It is very difficult to address because it is something that occurs within the family and is part of the culture of families and communities from which children come. Any efforts by governments and schools to change that attitude, to have parents recognise the importance of schooling, literacy and life-long learning to the success of their children will have a positive effect. Anything that governments and systems can do in that area will be a positive benefit.

The things that can directly be done are really limited to the provision of extra preschool places or some of the kinds of targeted interventions that I have referred to as suggested by the research in relation to crime prevention. We would seriously support early intervention along the lines of the Perry Preschool Program in relation to that very small, very disadvantaged and very average group. As far as other children are concerned, we do support the idea of further provision of preschool places, particularly to attempt to bridge that literacy gap that many children bring to school.

Mr EMERSON—On that point, we had some evidence in Melbourne that preschool was not the solution, but I tend to agree with you. I am heartened by the emphasis of your organisation

on early intervention, picking up at-risk kids, not simply because I represent an electorate where there is 25 per cent unemployment in some suburbs, but because I think equality of opportunity in education is just fundamental to a civil society. Do you have a lot of evidence of the success of early intervention programs? You have mentioned the Perry Preschool Program. That is one of the few genuine longitudinal studies, but a lot of the studies that have been done are not longitudinal or have not yet gone over a sufficient period to be able to draw very firm conclusions. I think it would help this committee if you could identify any further research to bolster the case for those early intervention programs. One example is the Head Start Program in the US. You are probably aware of the various permutations of that.

Mr Molesworth—Yes, we are advantaged by the war on poverty in the United States in the 1960s putting in place some programs which have continued and have been continuously evaluated. Such a situation does not exist in Australia and we are thus left with a limited amount of evidence. However, in part 2 of the report of the Standing Committee on Law and Justice that I referred to earlier, there is a study of a New South Wales early childhood intervention program. Pages 91 to 127 give a very reasonable overview of a number of early intervention programs and their attempts to claim success. Unfortunately, none of those has been in place for anything like the length of time of the US studies and so the capacity to claim success is lower, but that is a good overview of some programs in New South Wales.

CHAIR—Also, the pathways to prevention work that has been done by the current and previous governments identifies the very things you are talking about. Whether it is drug use, recidivism, problems of self harm in one form or another or poor educational outcomes—I think the Jesuits worked this out a while ago—it actually goes back to those first four, five or six years of life.

Mrs MAY—Mr Molesworth, I was interested in your previous comment when you were talking about teachers. You were talking about them being tired and burnt-out, and being asked to perform miracles with a lack of resources. I wonder whether you would like to comment on their career path and salary packaging, and how we attract more teachers to the teaching profession as a profession, and keep them there and keep them interested. How would you see our doing that?

CHAIR—Also, you referred to changes in medical courses where you are looking for people who have more than just 99.9 TER; we are looking for other attributes. At the moment, the ACT and New South Wales governments—there seems to be bipartisanship in this area—have tried to pension off teachers over the age of 45 when, intuitively—men sometimes are intuitive as well—you would say well, maybe they are the sort of people we actually need to be getting into teaching. So, as well as the specific question Margaret asks, I ask: are we doing the wrong thing in trying to get rid of the sorts of teachers we actually need; and should we be developing programs to help people who do have life experience, as much as anything, to get into the teaching profession?

Mr Molesworth—To answer both of those questions, it is necessary to start by saying that the most important thing that teachers and parents report is that the constant attacks by the media and some governments on teachers is one of the most important factors in low teacher morale. In fact, the Queensland Minister for Education, about one year ago, addressed the ACSSO annual conference and he said that his first task as minister was to end attacks on

teachers. That was so roundly applauded it had more support around the table than any other statement that he managed to make that day. This is not something which this committee can necessarily address—it happens in governments and in media over which the Commonwealth has no control—but it is certainly a very important factor which ought to be borne in mind. If a profession is constantly blamed for everything that is wrong in society, where teachers go to dinner parties and claim to be axe murderers because they get a better reception than by admitting that they are teachers, we have a real problem.

CHAIR—How do you think we feel?

Mr Molesworth—Some things are deserved more than others.

CHAIR—That's a good one.

Mr Molesworth—So there is that point. The point about recruitment of teachers is important. I think that what systems and governments can do is, when they are recruiting—if we look at the advertisements for the defence forces we are showing a very positive image of what life in the defence forces might be like. Where are the similar advertisements in relation to teachers, and where is the backup of that to actually show that when teachers do take up the profession they are going to have a satisfying life where they are going to take children that are in need of education and, at the end of the year, they can say, 'I have been instrumental in achieving the progress that this child shows.' There is a whole raft of support which can be put in place, and can be put in place very inexpensively, by governments to ensure that teachers feel that they are valued at least by their employer and by the governments of the states and territories in which they operate.

The other area, however, is extremely resource intensive. That is, as I have referred to before, the fact that many teachers are not in a position where they can say at the end of the day, or at the end of the year, or at the end of five years, or at the end of their career that they have actually achieved very much. That is because they are being asked to do too much in a situation where kids are bringing to their classrooms problems and disadvantages and learning acquired elsewhere which is extremely difficult to undo and which is not the same for the whole class. So they cannot put in place one strategy in order to help one child because that may be completely contrary to what is necessary for another child.

This means the application of further resources. That is very expensive but it is certainly something which we advocate on the basis that it will pay dividends and it will be worthwhile. In relation to some of the evidence on crime prevention—which does not take into account the total cost to government and certainly does not take into account the total cost for the society—we are inclined to say that if you think education is expensive you should try ignorance, and we have plenty of evidence to suggest just how expensive ignorance is.

Mr SAWFORD—I think you have raised a very important point in the way in which public education has not effectively changed for 100 years, and that is the concept of one teacher, 30 kids, 12 months swap. Where in actual fact if you look at the very best schools, both in public and private throughout this nation, you will find specialisation in the primary school where the expressive arts are taken out of the hands of a classroom teacher. That is, there will be a sports specialist, an art craft specialist and a music specialist in that school and you will find team

teaching among the teachers in the sense of specialisation in the language arts, including a foreign language and in the maths and sciences areas. The very best schools in this country are organised in that way, but that is not how most schools are organised. If you are in a school with an enrolment of under 300 you physically cannot do that with the staff that you have got—you just cannot do it.

I agree with you. I think teachers are, in fact, expected to do too much. I talk to teachers a lot too. They say that pressure comes from within the department rather than from outside. I accept your proposition that they are under too much pressure and they are expected to do too much.

In all my time in teaching I have never seen one teacher who can cater for the primary school curriculum as it is stated today. It is an impossible ask. No-one can do it. We spoke to some kids last week who told us that they came from a school and they never did sport. If we had asked them a few more questions I will bet they did not do a few other things too. I am not blaming the teacher in that school. I think the demands on teachers are so diverse and complex these days—much more than they were 20 years ago—and they are not meeting them and I do not think they can ever meet them because the way schools are structured is wrong.

Mrs MAY—I do not think teachers are ready to take that on particularly teachers who have been in the system a long time.

Mr Molesworth—And I never addressed your question about the older and younger teachers. Basically, the view is that there should be a mix of older and younger teachers. Older teachers bring a wealth of experience. There is a whole course at Sydney University, for example, which is designed to bring people who have other experience into the teaching profession or back into the teaching profession so that that wealth of experience can be made available. It is, however, necessary for teachers who perhaps went into teaching for the wrong reasons many years ago, or perhaps have simply burnt out, to be able to get out. In other words, we need a mix of new teachers and highly experienced teachers and we need a mix of young teachers and older teachers.

As far as the question of specialisation is concerned, I would not like to put down a hard and fast rule to replace another hard and fast rule. There is not the lack of willingness to provide different kinds of provision and to use the best of each teacher's speciality, and so forth; there is simply a lack of resources to enable that to happen effectively. Schools that receive money under the disadvantaged program often have intensive periods for a couple of hours each day when they bring in all sorts of people and they break into smaller groups and attempt to meet specific needs in those smaller groups. That can be done for a short time but essentially those people have other duties and they have to go.

I am sorry to keep talking about money, but the very best schools probably have a student-staff ratio of about 8:1. This is what Denmark has and this is what elite, non-government schools in Australia have. The New South Wales education department have an average of 16.25:1. There simply is not the capacity in an ordinary school setting—particularly, as you say, in a school of about 300, which is a very common size of primary school—to do too much moving around of staff without disadvantaging somebody. I absolutely support what you say in theory but, in practice, it requires some extra resources, as is shown by those schools that might have one or two extra staff members because of the level of disadvantage they have.

Mr BARRESI—I have a question about your organisation, Mr Molesworth. Who does the organisation represent—parents, teachers?

Mr Molesworth—It is the peak body that brings together all the parent organisations in each state. Those organisations voluntarily affiliate with ACSSO. In fact, all the parent organisations—that is, P and C type organisations, autonomous parent organisations and school council organisations—that exist at the state level affiliate with ACSSO.

Mr BARRESI—Right across Australia or just New South Wales?

Mr Molesworth—Right across Australia.

Mr BARRESI—What input did they have in preparing the submission? I would like your answer to refer to the conference you have just had in Darwin. Was there any discussion on the education of boys inquiry there?

Mr Molesworth—There was a period set aside in the annual conference to discuss the education of boys. Most of what I have said which is not amplified on in the written report came out of that discussion. It was an opportunity for us to meet and to share, amongst the organisations, comment on this report—which, of course, was available to the annual conference—and also to bring up some extra points to be presented to this committee.

I was elected to this position at that annual conference, and this paper was prepared before I was elected to that position, so I am not exactly sure of the procedures which took place. Generally speaking, I can answer that each organisation supplies a representative, who has the title of vice-president. They seek comment from within the organisations they represent and bring those to executive meetings before the report is finalised.

Mr BARRESI—I was actually interested in the grassroots level—whether parents who have kids at preschool or primary school have made comments about such things as learning methodologies and the age at which kids should be going to school. You have answered; I will not labour that. You make a point about the biology of boys and girls. In your submission you say:

Much has been written about the behavioural differences between boys and girls, with a great deal of discussion about what is biologically determined, and what are socially constructed gender differences. While this debate is fascinating, it has to be said that it is of little relevance to the tasks of schools.

However, when we look at issues such as the development of boys and girls at that early age, particularly in regard to literacy and behavioural problems, it is important to our inquiry. I will give you a good example. Last week we went to a boys school in Melbourne which recognised that the learning techniques of boys and girls differ. They have a girls school and they have a boys school—parallel education. They understand the different behavioural nature of boys. They set aside time for the boys to have what are called ‘energy sessions’. They may have just gone through a very intensive literacy session and, knowing what that might do to their level of concentration and possible stress levels, the school then gives them time out to be able to release the required level of energy in a very safe way. That is a classic example of a group of teachers employing very specific learning techniques which identify the difference between

boys and girls. It is therefore relevant to this inquiry that there is a biological difference, and perhaps that should be part of the mainstream approach taken by teachers to teaching.

Mr Molesworth—What the wording of the submission intends is that, if a teacher discovers that boys are requiring, say, an energy release session, or if a teacher thinks girls, or a mixed group of boys and girls, are requiring that, it would certainly be our view that that is a practical decision which is made at a classroom level, or perhaps at a whole school level, as a response to a specific need. What the submission is saying is that it is not particularly relevant whether that comes from the socioeconomic background of those students, their ethnic background, the community from which they come or their biology. What matters is that this is a need that needs to be met within that group of people.

It could be found that, in fact, there was a gender difference there and that, if you had boys and girls in the same class, you might find that you were taking the boys out for the energy session but the girls thought that was silly. On the other hand, it could be that another response might be there, and that is that perhaps the girls thinking it is silly is as ineffective educationally as failing to notice that the boys do need it. And there would be responses in different circumstances and those would be decided at a school level.

The purpose of the submission is to ask the committee to consider what our organisation believes to be the major efforts which government could take, which parliament could take, towards addressing overall the question of boys education in the context in which it currently exists.

Mr BARRESI—Yes, but in doing that, you still have made certain comments which have been put in there at various places, such as the question that Mr Bartlett asked and this one, which give the indication that this is a firm belief of your organisation. I hear, though, that your central proposal relates to resourcing—I understand that—but there are still a number of other comments that have been made throughout there which tend to colour the submission. That was a comment, not a question, Mr Molesworth.

CHAIR—It is almost 10.30 and we need to finish. I realise it is a voluntary thing that you are doing and whether we agree, disagree or whatever, we all recognise the effort you have put in to represent the views of parents. Thank you for coming today and taking time away from your work. I have said that in my own electorate, if we had 100 per cent parent involvement in schools, we would not have half the problems we have got for a start. In some of my school P&Cs there is less than 10 per cent parent participation, which is an indictment on our society. Thank you for what you have done and for the submission. If there is anything else you have got to add or send please feel free to do it.

Mr Molesworth—I thank the committee for the opportunity to address it and I wish you well in your deliberations.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Sawford**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the proof transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 10.28 a.m.