



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Reference: Education of boys

THURSDAY, 27 JUNE 2002

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

INTERNET

The Proof and Official Hansard transcripts of Senate committee hearings, some House of Representatives committee hearings and some joint committee hearings are available on the Internet. Some House of Representatives committees and some joint committees make available only Official Hansard transcripts.

The Internet address is: **<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>**

To search the parliamentary database, go to: **<http://search.aph.gov.au>**

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Thursday, 27 June 2002

Members: Mr Bartlett (*Chair*), Mr Cox, Mrs Elson, Ms Gambaro, Mr Johnson, Mrs May, Mr Pearce, Ms Plibersek, Mr Sawford, Mr Sidebottom and

Supplementary Members: Mr Cadman and Mr Wilkie

Members in attendance: Mr Bartlett, Mr Cadman, Mr Cox, Ms Gambaro, Mr Johnson and Ms Plibersek

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.

WITNESSES

COLEBORNE, Mr James Hugh, Executive Director, School Education Division, ACT

Department of Education and Community Services..... 1323

MASON, Mr Jeffrey Bevan, Director, Curriculum and Assessment Branch, School Education

Division, ACT Department of Education and Community Services 1323

Committee met at 8.43 a.m.

COLEBORNE, Mr James Hugh, Executive Director, School Education Division, ACT Department of Education and Community Services

MASON, Mr Jeffrey Bevan, Director, Curriculum and Assessment Branch, School Education Division, ACT Department of Education and Community Services

CHAIR—I declare open this public hearing of the inquiry into the education of boys. Gentlemen, thank you for joining us this morning. I am obliged to remind you that the proceedings here today are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings in the House. The deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence given today be given in public, but if at any stage you wish to give evidence in private please ask to do so and the committee will consider your request. I invite each of you to make some introductory remarks about the issues you think are important to this inquiry before we proceed to questions and discussion.

Mr Coleborne—As an opening statement, I will touch on some of the key issues that we would want to raise with you today. In the ACT there are differences in performance levels between boys and girls, particularly in literacy and numeracy and particularly for Indigenous students. While there are many variable factors, they do not permit clear generalisation as to the causes or the differences, but there are some notable issues there in performance levels between boys and girls. The ACT considers the issues related to many boys' engagement in their learning are complex and that there are no simple solutions to improving their interest and performance in schooling. I would make the point that I believe it has more to do with good quality teaching practice, inclusive practices that recognise the diversity and capabilities of all students and the engagements of students in their learning. We have some evidence about the effectiveness of that in the high school years with some projects that we have been undertaking recently over the past couple of years that have had some success.

We consider that there is a need for a concerted investigation at the national level into strategies that target the improvement in performance of boys in schools. In this context, the ACT has undertaken some research titled 'Improving the education outcomes of boys' by Dr Andrew Martin. The project is currently in its second phase, and we are happy to forward you a copy of the final report when it becomes available later this year. We have an interim report so far on that work. It looks at a number of motivational factors regarding the performance of boys. It also relates it to their achievement levels, using some of our internal data within the system. Some of that work will certainly inform the work that we do.

We have recently released a planning document titled *Within reach of us all*, which covers the government schools plan for the next three years. It is shortly to be followed by another planning document for student support and Indigenous services. We are just at that point where we can point to some of the key directions that the ACT government system will be pursuing over the next three years. A government school education council has recently been formed, which will give policy advice to the government from a range of stakeholders. We would imagine that this area would be of interest to the Government School Education Council with the announcement last Friday of the chair of that, Professor Eddie Braggett, and the work that that council will undertake will be helpful to us.

In addition to the plans I have mentioned, there is a young people's framework for 2001-03 which has recently been launched, which provides an overarching approach to services for young people in the ACT. We believe that that is also informing our work. The ACT is strong in school based management. It has much stronger levels of devolution of responsibility than in other jurisdictions, and that allows us to be fairly responsive to the need to make immediate changes where that has to occur in the ACT. That has been a particular focus of the culture of the ACT school system for some years. In terms of the relative performance of boys and girls, there are some clear gender differences, as I mentioned. Many of those are apparent in students before they begin their primary education. We can say, on average, that boys begin school with better developed skills in maths but poorer in reading and phonics. This disadvantage is certainly greater for Indigenous students. Reading recovery level at year 1 consistently has two-thirds representation of boys, although 90 per cent of the students in the program achieve the average reading level in their class within 20 weeks. Boys predominate in those programs, but we are pleased with the progress they make.

The recent study on the program for international student assessment—PISA—results show the difference between girls' and boys' reading results in the ACT was half that of some of the other states. While there are some differences there, the differences between boys and girls were less pronounced in the ACT than elsewhere. The ACT assessment program carried out in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 confirm female students outperform male counterparts in all literacy strands, the most significant difference being evident in the writing strand, but in numeracy the results are much closer with male students either equalling or outperforming females by a very small margin. We believe that some kind of longitudinal study would be needed in the ACT to compare the same group of students over a period of time to evaluate the change in gender difference as the students progress through school. There is some evidence that some students' performance diminishes, to some extent, in later years in secondary after a very good start in primary. That would be a concern that we have generally to maximise performance and engagement of students in the high school years.

The gender differences in literacy are greater for Indigenous students than they are for all students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The strongest effect is for year 9. This may indicate the relative disadvantage of Indigenous boys and how it increases in the later years of schooling, but there is no clear trend. Some of the variations may be caused by differences in the cohort, the small number of the cohort and the fact that we are not necessarily testing similar students from year to year with the mobility and movement of students, and it is a very small sample.

The ACT has a number of literacy strategies, which I will not go into right now, but which we are happy to expand upon if you wish. In curriculum and subject selection, particularly in the VET area, we note that males are over-represented in courses like motor technology, electrical trades, information technology, and furniture construction and they are under-represented, almost predictably, in hospitality, tourism, retail and business, where part-time and casual work are common. In regard to work force participation we note that, as a group, while boys seem to be sometimes outperformed by girls through the school system, by the time they get to post-compulsory years and moving into employment the opportunities for boys seem to increase. The evidence is that boys do better in the employment area and are more successful, despite some of the earlier signs about their achievement compared to girls in the post-school options area.

I will make a comment about Indigenous students identified in one of the DETYA reports. I think it was the one called *What Works: Explorations in improving outcomes for indigenous students*. It was released in March 2000. It highlights one of the key things that probably applies to all boys. Flexibility, particularly regarding content and teaching methods, the importance of personal relationships, mutual trust, focus on cross-curricula literacy skills, and the relevance of curricula to students' lives, interests, context and culture are factors that make a difference. We would make a strong statement that we believe that the interests of boys are best served by good teaching that is relevant to all students and that engages all students, particularly those in the high school years, when the engagement of students is sometimes an issue.

The Martin research is being done. The terms of reference for this project, which was commenced in 2001, included to research the current practice and issues in the area of the education of boys, to provide an analysis of what is currently happening in the ACT, an analysis of ACT government schools data relative to boys' outcomes and to produce a report on strategies for ongoing improvement of educational outcomes for boys with regard to levels of schooling, retention, and ways to improve their engagement with learning and literacy and numeracy outcomes. We are happy to expand on the early findings of that report and we have some interesting observations to share with you, if you wish, about motivational factors in boys' performance.

In terms of implications for teacher practice, we would say that recent research reinforces the view that, to be effective for all students, teachers must be able to connect with students, to recognise their individual differences, and to foster inclusive learning environments. We have had some particular success with the high school development project. The exhibitions that we have been running with year 9 last year, supported by the National Schools Network, have given boys, in particular, an opportunity to become far more engaged in their learning and to share their learning with round-table panels.

If I can just digress, I was at Canberra High School recently with a panel where we were sharing the learning achievements of year 9 students. The panel was led by a year 8 student. She had all the confidence that you could ever wish for to engage not only the panel but the applicants. On the panel with me was the English teacher. I was there as a visitor. Often we have had business people on these panels as well. Students share their learning, talk about what they have learned and how they have learnt it and what they have gained from it. That whole project in the high school years of the year 9 exhibitions is probably worth some further discussion with you, if you are interested.

There are a number of new budget initiatives in the ACT that we are happy to expand upon that indicate some of the areas where further development will occur over the next three years that we believe relate to boys' education. We do believe, though, that there is a need for much more research and we do not think the solutions are simple. The department has a strategy to improve the performance of boys. Just touching on that, it includes targeted teacher professional development, targeted principals' professional development, student consultation, and working with parents. We can talk about specific examples in schools of where some fine work is being done. I would mention Canberra High School, Lake Ginninderra College, Narrabundah College, and work at Majura Primary School to support under-achieving boys in literacy. Gold Creek, which is a middle school from K to 10, has done some particular work.

There is some work being done in single-sex classes at Belconnen High School, which has been interesting. On top of that we also have system teacher professional development, which covers a range of workshops, expos, presentations and visiting speakers engaging teachers in a range of activities relevant to boys and their learning. I will conclude at that point and say that these are some of the things we would be happy to expand on, if you are interested.

CHAIR—Thank you, James. Jeff, did you want to add to that?

Mr Mason—We prepared a joint submission. There are a couple of points that I would like to make. The purpose of our original submission was to provide you with up-to-date information about what was happening in the ACT. We did not set out to tell you what the solutions were but to inform you. I know in that respect that our submission was somewhat different to a lot of other submissions that you received.

James has covered quite comprehensively the outcomes and data like the PISA report. I want to make the point to you that the performance of students starting school is actually based on an assessment which we do of students at entry. All students who enter kindergarten classes in the ACT are assessed. That assessment shows the things which James talked about—for example, that girls are ahead then in terms of basic reading and phonetic skills and that boys are slightly ahead in the numeracy area. Those differences, which you see reported throughout schooling, are actually present at that early age.

I would like to make another point—and I think it is in our submission—about the results at year 12, which may be different to those of other states. Our results show that girls do better than boys do at the year 12 level. There is a high percentage of girls who achieve year 12 certificates and that, the higher the qualification you look at, the greater the difference is. A larger percentage of girls gain university entrance qualifications than boys do in ACT secondary schools. We have provided the data for the year 2000. The difference in the 2001 data is not quite as great, but there is very little difference—essentially the figures are the same.

Our school system is very much a school based system. We have a high level of school based management; we have school based curriculum development; and we have school boards which are responsible for making policy decisions about how the education program is implemented in the school. For that reason, we have a variety of different school structures and different approaches to the presentation of the curriculum. We have some schools which are organised very traditionally and other schools which are organised on middle school concepts. So the variety which exists within our system is important. It means that we have a relatively small department of education, which sets a policy framework for schools to work in but the schools have the power to implement strategies within the school which meet the particular needs of their community. You will find in James's list that there is a range of different ways that schools perceive the needs of their students and address these issues.

CHAIR—Thank you, Jeff. I have two questions to begin with. You mentioned quite positive results from Reading Recovery—90 per cent of students get back to an average level of reading ability after being on the Reading Recovery program. You indicated the need for longitudinal study to see whether that continues. Do you have any anecdotal evidence of, say, what happens in the first two or three years after students have been on the Reading Recovery program? Does a disparity start to emerge between boys and girls, or do they maintain the class average?

Mr Coleborne—The anecdotal evidence that I am familiar with is that they maintain the benefits provided the teachers continue to work with the students in a less intensive way. The advantage is sustained provided there is some maintenance of the work that has already been done but there is not the intensive approach that was used to boost the performance initially. There needs to be ongoing work with the students to make sure that it is not lost. I have worked in two systems, in the New South Wales system and in the ACT. My general observation would be that that is a powerful way of improving the performance of students, but it should not just be seen as a one-off fix that restores—

CHAIR—When you say ‘ongoing work’, it is nothing particularly directed at those students or at boys. It is just general classroom concentration on literacy.

Mr Coleborne—General classroom concentration on literacy and some further individual work with those students to make sure that the gains are not lost.

CHAIR—Is that Reading Recovery program largely phonetically based?

Mr Coleborne—No, it is a combination of whole language and structural analysis. So it is very heavily based on word attack, of course, and it also uses the best of whole language approaches, using the capacity to predict language, to anticipate what the meaning of the sentence is but to combine it with good structural analysis skills or phonetic capabilities. My understanding of it is that it is a very powerful program but, coming from Marie Clay’s work in New Zealand, it also goes back to what we call structural analysis and the capacity to recognise sounds and to know how to sound out letters and words combined with the best predictive capabilities of the whole language approach.

CHAIR—Is it your view that they combine the best approach?

Mr Coleborne—I think it is very resource intensive. Whilst it produces very good results, a Reading Recovery teacher—which is what I am familiar with; Jeff might have another view—works with up to six children a day and this produces high quality outcomes, but it is also quite resource intensive. On the one hand you have got the notable improvements that are brought about by the use of that intervention; on the other it is a fairly expensive way to improve literacy performance.

Mr COX—How much time per week does one of these children get in Reading Recovery?

Mr Coleborne—My understanding is that they have a daily session with the teacher and it lasts for about 30 minutes.

Mr Mason—That is right, a 30-minute session every day.

Mr Coleborne—Individual, one on one.

Mr COX—What is your average class size in junior primary in the ACT?

Mr Coleborne—We are currently moving to reduce those class sizes. Currently, in kindergarten to year 2, class sizes have been 25 in kindergarten and years 1 and 2 have been 30. We are moving to reduce those to 21 by 2004. So we have got a progressive government initiative to introduce more teachers to kindergarten to year 3, so that the class sizes are reduced to 21.

Mr COX—Do you have a lot of instances where there might be two classes operating in one of those open classrooms together?

Mr Coleborne—Yes. One would see that as a strength, because it gives teachers the opportunity to teach children at their stage of development. Are you asking about the issue of whether you have got one, two or three grades in one room?

Mr COX—I am just talking about numbers. Those split classes, K-1s or whatever, are another issue.

Mr Coleborne—Yes, that is another issue. There are many multi-aged classes. Are you asking whether we have open space type situations where there are numbers of teachers working with—

Mr COX—Yes.

Mr Coleborne—Yes, we do. And we have a variety of classroom structures in a physical sense. Some of our newer classrooms often open on a pod arrangement, where there would be numbers of classrooms that open into a central area—we have those in some parts of Canberra—with numbers of teachers who work together on occasions and individually with their own groups.

Mr COX—With those big class situations—a lot of kids together—do you notice any problems with kids with hearing difficulties having their literacy problems compounded because of more background noise and it being more difficult for them to hear the teacher?

Mr Coleborne—We had a discussion about that very topic in terms of some of our planning for new schools. We worked with some staff as a focus group and brought them in and asked them those very questions about whether students with learning difficulties had any greater problem in learning in open space classrooms where there tends to be sometimes a greater level of noise.

The responses that we got from the focus groups that we used were very balanced. On the one hand, some people were saying that there was an issue and it required particular attention from the teacher to make sure that students who had particular learning needs were in a very focused and targeted part of the classroom and teachers were attentive to that, and there were sensitivities you must observe. There were others who were saying that it was not an issue because of the way the teachers conducted their work. So I thought we had a range of responses to that question. I was interested in it because there sometimes is a higher level of noise in open space areas and the need for greater acoustic control in those classrooms is sometimes worth considering. So it is an interesting issue you are raising.

Mr COX—What sort of acoustic control do you get into?

Mr Coleborne—In the ACT, some newer classrooms that were built on an open plan basis were subsequently modified by installing baffles in some sound absorbent material to address the issue that you have mentioned. But certainly our planners are aware of that. The design for one of the new schools that is being planned, I think in Amaroo, Gungahlin, is subject to consideration of the issues that you are raising.

Mr COX—I think it is an important point.

Ms GAMBARO—I wanted to ask about the separation of high schools and colleges in the ACT, with the years 7 to 10 in the high schools, and then the year 11 and 12 students in the colleges. How long has that policy been operating? Also, I would like to know what impact it has had on resources and on bullying and learning outcomes.

Mr Coleborne—I understand it has operated since the ACT system was established, in around 1973. The college system—we currently have eight colleges working in years 11 and 12—has been in operation for a long time. Basically it is regarded as a very successful way of offering post-compulsory education. We pick up a significant number of enrolments into our college system from the high school years. So we are quite proud of that.

Ms GAMBARO—We have had submissions on bullying and the role of mentoring, older students mentoring younger students. Has bullying decreased since you have removed that older sector of the high school to the colleges? Or have there been no significant changes that you are aware of?

Mr Coleborne—We do not have statistical data on what happened before the split and after. I think before was when the ACT belonged to New South Wales. Subsequently it was taken under the ACT and commenced with the 11 and 12 structure. We are aware of issues of bullying and the deleterious effect bullying can have on students' learning. There is a great deal of professional development done with schools to address those issues. Through the training of principals and teachers, a great deal of work has been done to sensitise people to work with students to bring about a whole school approach to bullying—not only the bullies and those who are bullied but the bystanders. So there is a whole school approach to addressing issues of bullying. But as to the level of bullying without the college years being present in a high school environment, as in other jurisdictions, it is difficult to assess that because we do not have any prior data on it.

I have worked in leadership positions at Melba High School, which was designed as a year 7 to 10 school, at Charnwood High School, which was also a year 7 to 10 school and I was principal of Narrabundah College for 10 years. I believe very strongly in the college system. It provides the right opportunities and the right freedom and preparation for the senior students at the time they need it. It provides greater opportunities for younger students to grow and to take on responsibility and provide leadership.

So a peer support program which was originally designed for year 7 to 12 schools, with year 11 students providing peer support to year 7 students, works in our high schools very well with year 10 students providing the peer support. What it actually provides is opportunities for stu-

dents to grow and mature and take on leadership responsibility. The techniques work, regardless of the age group that you are talking about.

CHAIR—Is there any difference in involvement between boys and girls in those leadership roles, say at the year 10 level?

Mr Mason—Again, we do not have statistics on it, but I do not think so. The peer support programs that I am aware of in our high schools involve mostly year 10 students, because the number of students you have in year 10 is similar to the number you have in year 7. Students want to participate in them, and I think that there is a very balanced involvement of boys and girls but I do not have any statistics to prove that to you.

CHAIR—From experience, though, does it require more encouragement, enticement, pushing, to get the boys involved?

Mr Mason—That is not my experience.

Mr Coleborne—Could I make a general comment about the post-compulsory years, 11 and 12. The greater the responsibility that students undertake for their learning in the ACT in those 11 and 12 years, combined with the curriculum choice that is possible in colleges where there are 600, 700, 800, 1,000 students, provides much greater options for student choice and satisfaction in their learning. The quality of the outcomes and the satisfaction of students with the 11 and 12 years is quite marked.

Ms GAMBARO—Could I just ask one more question. I will finish on this. Is the percentage of male teachers and the gender balance there pretty widespread as between the high schools and the colleges, or do you tend to have a predominance of male teachers in the college sector because it is more appealing? Do you have any statistics on that, and on how you are going with attracting more male members of the community into the teaching profession? Do you have any special programs in the ACT, or is it just based across non-gender type areas?

Mr Coleborne—It is a very difficult issue you are raising, because of equal employment opportunity requirements that we do not discriminate in terms of our employment of people.

Ms GAMBARO—I qualify it with that, but we all have heard submissions about the lack of male teachers and male role models, and all sorts of things, in this inquiry.

Mr Coleborne—I understand what you are saying. Our figures show that, as a whole, 75 per cent of our teaching service is female, compared with 70 per cent for Australia, so we have a slightly higher proportion of female staff employed in our schools—with, obviously, 25 per cent males, compared with 30 per cent nationally. So we have slightly fewer males and more female teachers in our employment and recruitment. I cannot give you any sector figures because I do not have them. I doubt there would be any great difference across—

Ms GAMBARO—Between the two sectors, the high schools and the colleges?

Mr Coleborne—Yes. I have not seen the figures, and I would rather not postulate anything about that. My personal view about that, if I may give it, is that really it has to do with the

quality of the teaching and the engagement of students, and I do not think it is gender specific to the role models that you have. I am quite convinced that boys can be thoroughly engaged in their learning with good teachers from whatever gender the teacher is. It has to do with the way students are involved in their learning and engaged in the work that they do, rather than the specific role models and the gender balance.

Ms GAMBARO—You have pretty much supported what we have heard. We have had a lot of people say that as well. So that is very good.

Mr Coleborne—The alternative is that we simply do not have any better options. The ACT has a very high number of people who apply for every single recruitment vacancy that is here, and we never have any difficulty in general—there are specific subject areas that are harder in secondary, but we have very little difficulty—in recruiting people to come and work in the ACT. Despite that, our gender figures are as I have described.

Ms GAMBARO—Okay. Thank you very much.

CHAIR—Just to expand on that: you said in your submission that it is important that students do have access to male and female teachers, and that action should be taken to increase the percentage of male teachers.

Mr Coleborne—I agree with both those statements, but it is very difficult to actually take the actions when we cannot discriminate affirmatively in any direction.

CHAIR—But you still hold that it would be valuable to have more men in teaching, if it were possible?

Mr Coleborne—If it were possible and we had our preferences, we would like to have perhaps a greater balance. But the teachers are not there in those numbers. Our figures are a little different from the national figures, but they are not that much different. As I say, we have a large number of people who want to come to the ACT, but despite that we have not changed our gender balance.

It is a very complex and difficult issue, but I come back, despite the statements in the submission—which I do not disagree with, of course—to saying that it has to do with how well students are engaged in their learning. If one may make a simplistic observation, there would be some male teachers who do not engage all male students and vice versa. It really has to do with how relevant and appropriate the learning is, and how well students are absorbed in that. The work in the high school years, with the Exhibitions projects which we started with 20 students in year 9—and we are moving towards nearly full cohorts of year 9 students for work that has been done from the Queensland Rich Tasks project and supported by the National Schools Network here in Canberra—is really starting to show results. Students are saying things like, ‘Well, I know I don’t like sheet work,’ ‘I like to actually express what I am feeling and thinking,’ ‘I like to share my views with other students,’ ‘I like to have control of my learning.’ They are comments that we have heard from students that are significantly different from some of the learnings that students have traditionally had. So what we are attempting to do in our high school years is not to bring about structural change but to bring about cultural change in terms

of the way learning proceeds. That is challenging, but we believe we are making progress through the high school activities.

In the high school years, in particular where we have a focus over the next three years with a government initiative of half a million dollars in each year, we are going to set up high school teams to work with schools to bring about improvement and to focus on the middle years, in particular, years 5 to 8, to do some work in VET in years 9 and 10, and to maintain the Exhibitions project that we have started with some success, increasing this interest and engagement in learning. We believe we are making progress in that. Jeff might want to add to that.

Mr Mason—Just so you do not think that all of the examples that Jim is giving you are related to girls: at the round table that I was at, at the Canberra High School, one of the boys that I was involved in assessing made the comment that, from the Exhibitions project that he had been working on, which was a project related to drug education, he had discovered that he was an ‘independent learner’. When I asked him what he would like to take back into his ordinary classes, his response was, ‘I want to have more control over my own learning. I want to be able to find out things for myself. I’ve discovered that I don’t like listening to teachers telling me what the answers are.’

Mr JOHNSON—I was interested in some of the observations made in your submission under ‘Future directions’. In the first one you talk about the cultural background as an influence. I was wondering if you had any thoughts or comments you could make on the influence of cultural background, in terms of the performance of boys—and maybe even the impact upon boys and girls. I am very interested in that.

Mr Coleborne—I am just refreshing my memory on what we said. This is the section in our submission on social and cultural factors?

Mr JOHNSON—Yes. I know that it was under the heading ‘Future directions’, but do you have sufficient data at the moment to give a pointer, at the very least?

Mr Coleborne—We do not have particular data on that issue. I can say that we are engaged in a lot of work recognising the cultural diversity of students in our schools, and the ACT has a very wide mix of students from different cultural backgrounds, including international students, who make a particular contribution to the ACT. I think we have 400 international students here, which is the largest of any jurisdiction on a percentage basis. We are very sensitive to those issues. I am not sure that we have data that we could share with you about the effect of those. Is that what you are saying?

Mr JOHNSON—Yes. From time to time you read comments in the media about students from certain backgrounds doing very well academically—Asian students, in particular, with a cultural factor of the importance of studying and doing well academically. Could you elaborate on that and its impact here on boys?

Mr Coleborne—It is an interesting question you are asking. We have a large number of Asian students in our international section who come from overseas and complete their schooling here. Their results are very impressive, given that many of them start with little English and are taught English through intensive instruction and then often go on to achieve

very high outcomes in a short period. We have observed that from pretty much all of our international students, who make very rapid progress, given the learning conditions that prevail in our schools.

I am not sure that we have any particular data that I could share with you and I certainly would not want to break it up by groups other than to say that the contribution that students make in a diverse sense to the ACT enriches the quality of the school system immeasurably here. It would be seen as a very multicultural, diverse student clientele in many of our colleges and high schools in particular, where international students make a valuable contribution. Jeff might want to make some more comments on that.

Mr Mason—The group of students you are talking about are largely in the later years of our schooling. Our results do not show the same sort of pattern in terms of the literacy and numeracy testing in earlier years as has been reported from other states and territories. The main reason for that, I think, is because of a different definition in terms of what group of students we look at. When we report in terms of benchmarks, we look at students who have English as a second language needs, so they are the targeted group of students who will be getting extra support. So that is a compounding factor in terms of their performance where most states and territories identify students of a non-English speaking background or a language background other than English, so some of those students will be students who have grown up in Australia, but who come from a family background where the parents came from overseas. I believe that, when you look at that group, there is a tendency for that group to perform more strongly. But our total population is too small to partition it in the way that, say, Victoria, New South Wales or Queensland partition their groups.

Mr Coleborne—In terms of Indigenous students, where there are very diverse needs, we are making particular efforts to improve performance there by upgrading the skill levels of the Indigenous staff who work with students, recognising that there is a gap in performance, particularly of Indigenous boys, and the need to recognise their cultural diversity in the school system. A particular focus of our planning for the next three years is on just that, particularly the services planned for Indigenous students. So we are very mindful of the need to improve the performance of Indigenous students and particularly boys in the later years of high school and college years. That is one of the key—

Mr JOHNSON—What would be the numbers of Indigenous students that we are talking about there in your jurisdiction?

Mr Coleborne—I think there are about 700 in the ACT school system as a whole.

Mr Mason—We average about 58 students in a year group.

Mr Coleborne—So in terms of our Indigenous results, when we are testing for the ACT assessment program, we are talking about very small cohorts of students at each year level in the Indigenous group.

Ms PLIBERSEK—You mentioned some research by someone called Martin.

Mr Coleborne—Yes, Andrew Martin.

Ms PLIBERSEK—You were talking about motivational factors. Could you expand a bit on that?

Mr Coleborne—Yes.

Ms PLIBERSEK—I do not really have a clear idea of what these panels and exhibitions are. Could you describe them a bit better for me, please?

Mr Coleborne—I might start with that first. The issues to do with the high schools project involve a concept that came from Queensland called Rich Tasks, which we are not using because it was a copyrighted term. We call it the Exhibitions project. It was based on students engaging in their learning more by working in a community sense and doing a whole lot of research using different kinds of learning. At the end of a set period, when the learning is seen to be ready to share, the students share their learning with a panel called a ‘round table’, which may be a straight table, but the notion is that it is where everybody is equal, and it is not a teacher-student type relationship in the traditional sense. The students share their learning, with the teacher asking questions and engaging the student.

At the end of the learning period, the students indicate what they have learnt, how they have learnt it, what challenges they have overcome and how they felt about their learning. They then get feedback. In the group I was in, they gave warm feedback and cool feedback—warm being positive and cool being things that might have been improved—in a supportive and helpful way. The whole notion of that activity is to allow students to have more responsibility for their learning.

Ms PLIBERSEK—Could you give me an example of the type of projects; you mentioned one that related to drugs?

Mr Coleborne—The one related to drugs used the topic, which paraphrased as something like, ‘Drug free Canberra: is it possible to achieve this?’ The students had done research with community groups. They had conducted surveys, been out and spoken with their peers and others in the community, had visiting speakers, aggregated information, done searches on the Internet, looked up other reference materials, had internalised and thought about the issues and then presented a coherent piece of work to the panel called a ‘round table’.

Ms PLIBERSEK—How large is the group of students that would work together on such a project?

Mr Coleborne—It could be a small group of, say, three to five or six students who work together, or it might be a student, in some cases, working alone, but encouraging the notion of cooperative team work. Essentially, they are gathering information from a wide variety of sources involving the community, going outside the standard classroom environment to gather and to integrate thinking and learning. They then come back and share that and talk about and reflect on the learning that has occurred, how the person felt about the learning, where they thought they succeeded and where they thought they needed to have done things differently.

Ms PLIBERSEK—In that case, do you need to talk to students about theories of teaching to enable them to think about how they learn best? They don't spontaneously say, 'I am an independent learner,' do they?

Mr Coleborne—I think they come to the conclusion that they enjoy their learning much more when they have more control over it, when they are not being provided with didactic approaches or teacher-centred approaches. When the learning is more inclusive, and they have some say in it and control over their learning, there is a marked increase in students' engagement in their work.

Mr Mason—To add to that, part of the program is teaching students to reflect on their own learning. Yes, they do need to be taught skills in how to do that.

Ms PLIBERSEK—Do you find that, at year 9, they have the maturity to do that sort of self-directed work generally?

Mr Coleborne—Yes. It would be possible to extend it much earlier than that. We have focused on year 9 as a critical year that we wanted to make some gains in. There is no question about their maturity levels. I have sat in on various panels last year and this year and heard boys, who were otherwise fairly detached and disengaged from their learning, communicating with a fair degree of enthusiasm and affection for what they had done. They shared their work, their models, their three-dimensional objects that they had made and talked about them with a great deal of enthusiasm, and as if they had discovered things for the first time.

Mr Mason—One of the exciting things about the project is its success in engaging students who were low level students, not particularly motivated about schooling.

Mr Coleborne—We particularly made an effort to insist that, when we began the pilot, schools did not simply target their most motivated students, that they looked at students who were considered to be at risk of non-completion, students who might not have the highest literacy skills, who may be the ones who were causing other difficulties in the classroom. Then they were to report and ask the schools to reflect on their success in engaging those students rather than the ones who would achieve good outcomes in any case. We are happy to share that work with you in a more substantive way if that sort of material is of interest to you.

CHAIR—That would be helpful.

Mr Mason—Last year we asked every high school to have 20 students involved in a project and we trained teachers to work with that group of 20 students. Some schools chose to do more than that in the trial year. This year all we have asked schools to do is to extend the project. We expect that 60 per cent of students will have that experience this year.

Mr Coleborne—The management approach we have taken is to provide a lot of high expectation within the system that schools will be involved and to also give them the professional training and the support to enable them to carry out the work. We are working with the national schools network. A DVD is being produced for distribution which involves interviews with a whole range of teachers, students and others. We have a kit that is ready to support the work at another level.

CHAIR—James, you mentioned targeted teacher professional development. Could you elaborate on how you think that should be organised and what features it should include?

Mr Coleborne—Do you want us to answer about Andrew Martin? I am happy to do that. It is a good opportunity to share this because we are quite committed to it.

Mr Mason—Andrew Martin has done quite a lot of work for us in terms of this project. He has done a comprehensive study of the research literature and provided that for us. But the really new work which is different from what is already there is work which is based on his PhD, which was looking at the motivation of students. He came into our schools and provided a survey for year 7 and year 9 students in some targeted schools. About 1,900 students completed the surveys. He has analysed that in a number of different ways. But the one that we are interested in here is in gender.

His motivation survey has questions which aim to evaluate student motivation in two areas. He has got one category which he refers to as boosters, things which boost motivation. The other category is called guzzlers, things which tend to decrease motivation. The boosters are self-belief, value of schooling, learning focus, planning and monitoring, study management and persistence. The guzzlers are anxiety, low control, failure avoidance and self-sabotage. Self-sabotage sounds very dramatic, but it is really about adopting strategies which avoid the fear of failure. So if a student says, 'I'm not going to try because, if I did, I might find out that I can't do it,' that is a self-sabotage activity.

There are gender differences: girls responded at a higher level on the boosters of learning focus, planning and monitoring, study management and persistence. So effectively, their own assessment of themselves is that they have better strategies and are better able to do those things. In the guzzlers, the girls were higher on anxiety and boys were higher on self-sabotage.

The interesting thing with self-sabotage is that the significant difference was at the year 7 level, not at the year 9 level. In that category, there was no difference between boys and girls at year 9. That might actually contradict some of the evidence that you have been given about the high school years being the years when things go bad for boys. So that has not come out in this study in that way, but it certainly is an issue when boys are in year 7.

Mr COX—Have you used that assessment tool for levels lower than year 7?

Mr Mason—No. It is not a suitable tool to use at lower levels because of the survey nature of it. To do that in the primary school years it would need to be administered face to face and, as you would appreciate, that is very expensive.

CHAIR—Do you have any idea why the results at year 9 would be different from what we would have expected or from what we have had indicated in other states? Could it be because of the separation of your high school system from your college system? Is that perhaps part of it?

Mr Mason—I would like to think that the opportunities for our students to grow and to mature and to deal with problems are greater because of the structure that we have.

Mr Coleborne—The high school years certainly promote greater responsibility by year 10 without the senior students being present. So there is a greater sense of independence in our high school students, I would suggest.

Can I make a comment about academic resilience. Some of Martin's research indicates that academic resilience is developed through promoting the motivation boosters and reducing the guzzlers, the risk factors. I think the implication is that boys do better when they are more academically resilient.

Ms PLIBERSEK—I do not understand what you mean by 'academically resilient'.

Mr Coleborne—It is a concept reflecting students' ability to overcome setback and challenge and effectively deal with the pressure and stress in the everyday school setting, as opposed to well-rounded students, who are not as energised and motivated to achieve but are resilient when the going gets tough, so they hang in there.

Ms PLIBERSEK—How do you measure that?

Mr Coleborne—We are hoping that there will be some further findings from Andrew Martin's research. We do not have the final report yet, but we believe it is going to inform our work. There has been quite a deal of literature about resilience generally and the need, particularly in relation to drug education, for students to have higher levels of resilience. But we do believe it is a factor in students being successful in their learning.

Mr Mason—The second phase of Andrew's work is within two of our high schools. He is interviewing students about their responses and about what these things mean for them, so he is trying to dig deeper into those issues.

Mr Coleborne—I am happy to come back to the targeted teacher issues. One of the key ones is to enhance the motivation of boys through classroom and school approaches that build on the motivation boosters—self-belief, learning focus, planning and monitoring, study management and value of schooling with assistance, which is Martin's work. So, at the end of the day, we would want to pick up on whatever findings come out of his research when the report is ready. Another one is a package of materials we intend to provide, which will include relevant research findings that indicate best approaches to improving the performance of boys. Discussion paper topics include issues such as—and people have to talk about these things—single-sex classes, role models, the value of mentors, the importance of literacy, and the importance of behaviour issues and behaviour management. So we are planning to provide a package of materials there.

We want to do more work on gender relevant programs that provide an opportunity for students to explore the construction of gender. It is important that we have a strong understanding in schools about how gender is constructed and how students perceive that.

I think providing opportunities for boys to succeed and acknowledging individual success with learning are also important. The issue that is very relevant for some boys is that they do not handle success very well. Through our work with teachers, we need to create a climate in schools to make sure that they are comfortable with acknowledging the success of boys. There should be strategies to include student input in planning and consideration of policy and

curriculum issues. This is the greater ownership that we were talking about, with the exhibitions being projected into planning-policy type work. So they are some of the things that we are planning with targeted teacher professional development workshops.

CHAIR—Do you plan that that would be centrally organised through the department, or would there be a degree of autonomy to individual schools?

Mr Coleborne—My understanding is that we are looking at centrally organised, coordinated professional development. Obviously, all schools have a responsibility for professional development of staff—professional learning, as we are currently calling it—but we would want to take some leadership of that as a system and to support schools in pursuing those issues.

CHAIR—How adequately is professional development funded within the ACT department?

Mr Coleborne—I would have difficulty giving you an exact figure, but we believe it is well funded and well supported. The bigger issue for us is not necessarily the funding of it but the fact that, for every element of teaching development, there is a requirement to be able to replace teachers while they are away from their classes. Those issues are important to us as well, that we have an adequate supply of staff who are available for relief, to provide support when professional development occurs. What we are currently doing is looking at the sequencing of our professional development across the year so that it is as well coordinated and sequenced as possible, so we can make sure that learning programs in schools have the best possible continuity while the professional learning is taking place.

CHAIR—It is a big problem in some schools.

Mr Coleborne—It can be an issue if there is not a sufficient supply of teachers to back up the professional learning that other teachers are doing, because, unlike other professions, when a teacher is away from the classroom it is necessary to have backup. That is not necessary in many other professions but it is critical for education. So what we are doing, in terms of delivering professional development in the future, is looking at a fully coordinated model to ensure that it is as well sequenced as possible, to maintain the continuity of learning in classrooms.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, gentlemen. That has been very helpful.

Mr Coleborne—It is our pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity. We appreciate your time.

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

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

Committee adjourned at 9.42 a.m.