

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Finance and Administration Portfolio

Department of Human Services and agencies

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2005-2006, 1 November 2005

**Question: HS44**

**Outcome 1, Output 1.1**

**Topic:** Halls Creek trial of withholding benefits from Indigenous parents who do not send their children to school

**Hansard Page/Written Question on Notice: Written**

**SENATOR EVANS** asked on 1/11/2005:

1. What exactly is occurring with this trial?
2. What exactly is the legal basis for the scheme? On what basis is Centrelink able to withhold payments from parents of children who are not attending school?
3. Has this been done through legislation? What scrutiny was there of the decision to proceed with the scheme?
4. What checks does Centrelink have in place to ensure that the scheme is working appropriately? Or does Centrelink just rely on what the school tells them about the attendance of indigenous children?
5. What sorts of education programs about the scheme have been used? (that is, are parents and children fully informed of their obligations?)
6. Who came up with the idea in the first place? Was it suggested by the local indigenous community?
7. Who actually endorsed the scheme in the first place? What consultation occurred with the indigenous community at Halls Creek and elsewhere? Ask for details of all consultation that occurred.
8. Has the possibility of extending the scheme to other communities been considered? What other communities are being considered? What consultation has occurred in these other communities?
9. Has the possibility of extending the scheme to cover issues other than education outcomes been considered?
10. Is Centrelink considering whether to extend the scheme to cover health/hygiene outcomes? (for example, is Centrelink considering whether to withhold welfare payments from indigenous parents who don't ensure their children are washed? How would such a scheme operate?)

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**Answers:**

1. The trial ceased in October 2005. The Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, the Hon Kevin Andrews MP, issued a media release on 1 December 2005 stating that the trial was to restart from the beginning of the 2006 school year, incorporating learnings from the 2005 trial.
2. The legal basis for the scheme was the Social Security legislation. Centrelink can withhold payments from individuals if they fail to respond to a request to turn up for compulsory interviews regarding their income support with Centrelink.
3. No. The trial was developed on the basis of information from the Western Australian Education Department and consultations with the local Halls Creek community.
4. Yes, Centrelink relied on the school's advice regarding attendance.
5. Centrelink advised parents who participated in the trial of their participation requirements as part of their plan/agreement interview. Parents involved in the trial did so on a voluntary basis.
6. Motivation for the trial came from the Western Australian Education Department, which sought Centrelink's assistance in addressing the high truancy rate at the school.
7. Broad community consultation occurred within the Halls Creek community including parents, the school principal, teachers, police and government agencies.
8. In his media release, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations stated that if there is a case in applying the lessons from the Halls Creek trial he would pursue it. Neither the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations nor Centrelink have had consultations with other communities about extending the trial.
9. The Minister's media release indicates the matters that may be considered after the new trial is evaluated.
10. No.