

Submission to the Community Affairs Committee, Department of the Senate, Parliament House Canberra ACT

The proposal in the *Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill 2008* to tie social welfare payments to school attendance by Aboriginal children is unreasonable, discriminatory if applied only to Aboriginal students, and bound to fail to achieve its stated objective.

When I chaired the national Schools Council of the Board of Employment, Education and Training I visited remote Indigenous schools where children from desert camps and dreadfully impoverished conditions turned up to school – clean and eager to learn. I also visited schools where attendance was a continuing problem – at least for some of the students.

In talking to the teachers and some of the parents, I came up with plenty of suggested remedies. But I quickly learned that Aboriginal children's chronic absence from school has a myriad of causes – as does that of non-Aboriginal students. Your Committee must already be aware of the complexities surrounding this problem.

It's true that some of the causes stem from dysfunctional family situations. Yet not all of these are within a family's power to correct. Lack of proper living facilities, lack of funds for clothing and school requisites are usually not easily remedied by an act of will exercised by the parents. They have to have the wherewithal. Chronic illness is a major factor: what's the point of sitting in a classroom of your ears are so full of 'gunk' that you can't hear? Children with ear and other health problems often stayed away.

But my study of Aboriginal students in remote schools – admittedly in the early 60s - suggested to me that by far the most serious barriers to school attendance and therefore to learning had to do with the school curriculum and the way schools operated. The principals of some schools had banned the speaking of Indigenous languages – even in the playground. I visited a 'class' of 2 struggling Aboriginal Year 11 students – the rump of a once larger class whose other members had left because it was 'boring'. The students were trying to read a (yes, boring!) textbook on the mid 19th century European Revolutions. Few of the 'white' teachers socialised with the Aboriginal people whose students they were attempting to teach. A 'them' and 'us' climate was the result.

The contrast with schools whose teachers reached out to the families of their Aboriginal students was dramatic. Eager students with parents and elders feeling welcome to visit the school and even participate in its activities; the continuing celebration of Indigenous art and knowledge; inclusive sports programs – and high learning expectations. Nor were all such effective schools 'Indigenous-only' schools or located in remote areas. Derby High School is just one that stands out in my mind as having knowledgeable teachers committed to improving the academic performance of their Aboriginal students – among others.

Indeed, the specialised development of sympathetic teachers and the circulation among schools of information about excellent contemporary educational practice may ultimately make for more dramatic improvements in school attendance than the constraints on family income being contemplated.

Even where parental neglect is identified as the cause of absence from school, the prospect of enforcing changes in parental behaviour is very doubtful. My daughter –

now a teacher in a low-income public secondary school – worked for many years at the Prahran (Victoria) public housing estate in the ‘alternative playground’. They had a ‘walking-school bus’ where cheerful workers helped kids get ready for school – homework, packed lunches, and transport - then looked after them when school finished for the day. In the case of these non-Aboriginal kids and their families, the carrot – thought not *a/ways* effective – generally worked better than the stick.

Why would this not be the case with Aboriginal families? Where violence, alcoholism and drug dependence rendered this approach not feasible, other services had to be invoked. It’s unlikely, in such extreme cases, that withdrawing welfare payments would have a beneficial effect on the parents – but certain that it would have a negative effect on the children.

Please think carefully before agreeing to a course of action that may make the lives of already deprived Aboriginal children even more miserable – an outcome that will almost certainly worsen school attendance, not improve it.

Yours sincerely,

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