

## Preface

This report reflects the views expressed by indigenous parents, educators and those in the broader indigenous community about recent changes to funding arrangements which threaten to undermine their full involvement in the education of their children. It is also the outcome of the concern expressed by professional educators about changes which may arrest progress in achieving improvements to literacy and numeracy among indigenous students.

Specifically, this report is critical of the rationale and administration of the distribution of indigenous education funding. The report focuses on what has made the program more difficult to administer, especially in the timeframe which the Government considered adequate for implementation. The new funding arrangements made heavy demands on the patience and energy of funding recipients. They not only reduced the amount of funding they could expect to receive, but caused a reduction of the critical involvement of indigenous parents in the running of schools.

The committee has found that preparation for managing the process of change was manifestly inadequate. The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) should have been aware from experience, from a knowledge of the needs and culture of indigenous people, and through its extensive regional and local network, of the requirement to prepare well for policy changes. The Government should have anticipated that direct dealing by DEST with school principals and school communities on sensitive funding issues had the potential to raise apprehension in schools.

The committee has no insight into advice which the Minister may or may not have been given by DEST in regard to the practicalities of hasty implementation. There is, however, unequivocal evidence that DEST did not anticipate the problems that would be created by new processes. Nor did it prepare its own regional and local staff adequately with the requisite policy knowledge, or the skills required to deal effectively and sympathetically with school principals and school community leaders. Evidence presented by DEST in the concluding public hearing suggests that implementation of the new funding policy was notable for its attitude of 'learning as we go'. Advice to schools was inconsistent, not only across the country, but within states and districts; paper trails were hard to follow; and there were anomalous gaps in policy and administration which were hard to explain to people running schools. This was a case of planning on the run.

Senior DEST officials told the committee that its inquiry had helped the department to identify matters which it should attend to. Although it is the role of Senate committees to exercise the scrutiny that has marked this inquiry, this committee finds no particular satisfaction in identifying avoidable problems that have arisen on such a large scale. No one elected to Parliament could help but be depressed to find that confidence in the processes of government among school communities has been seriously damaged by this process. Such concern is above party considerations. The task of picking up the

pieces falls, unfortunately, not only on the Minister and his department but upon those who have suffered the frustration of dealing with a demanding but ill-prepared public service.

The committee thanks the many communities and individuals who assisted, and in many cases, inspired this inquiry. It thanks officials in the education departments of Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory for assisting with professional advice and facilitation of access to schools and other arrangements. It also thanks Catholic Education Office personnel for providing similar advice and services in those states and regions the committee visited. The committee was also ably assisted by DEST officers, notably the state managers in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, and it is grateful for their advice.

Perhaps most importantly, the committee thanks the many school principals and teachers who welcomed the committee to their schools, and who, with community leaders, gave generous hospitality. At the public meetings it arranged the committee gained many insights into administrative problems associated with policy change. The credibility of such evidence was all the more obvious coming from workers at the chalkface. The anger and frustration of these people in having to deal with the procedures and requirements of Commonwealth officialdom, made a strong impression on the committee.

The committee's recommendations are directed toward a review of procedures and policy outcomes. DEST is on notice of continued scrutiny of its performance in improving its relations with schools and of ensuring that its procedures are not at odds with professional educational practices. These are not appropriate in circumstances where it does not employ the personnel it wishes to administer, and where funding is relatively insignificant.

The committee commends this report to the Senate.

Senator Trish Crossin  
Chair