

Chapter 2

Parental and Community Support and Awareness

Introduction

2.1 The demise of the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program as a result of amendments to the Indigenous Education Assistance Act was the most contentious issue faced by the committee at its meetings with indigenous communities. There are two elements to the dissatisfaction resulting from this decision. The first is that it suggests to indigenous communities that there is a retreat from a Government commitment to self-determination, and has been widely regarded as an indication of lack of trust in the good sense of indigenous representatives. The second element is the more practical consequence of having greatly reduced levels of funding to support educational programs, particularly in student welfare and attendance support and in covering extra-curricular activities.

2.2 The Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program dates back to 1990. The 1990-91 DEET programs book describes ASSPA as being designed to encourage educational opportunities for indigenous students, at the same time as encouraging increased parental and community involvement in education¹. It may be taken to mean that through ASSPA's role in strengthening the connection which parents and extended families have with local schools, and through involving them more in the decisions of the school, that over time students would be more comfortable in a school environment in which their parents and grandparents were familiar faces.

2.3 The number of ASSPA committees increased across the country from around 2000 in 1991 to 3839 in 1999. Over 90 per cent of all indigenous pre-school and school students attended schools which had ASSPA committees. ASSPA funding entitlements ranged from \$110 per student in a primary non-remote school to \$315 per student in a remote secondary school, with funding ranging up to \$100 000 for a particular school. Ten per cent of schools received grants of over \$10 000.²

2.4 ASSPA was conceived within the wider context of policy promoting indigenous self-determination. The demise of ASSPA may be regarded as one manifestation of the Government's impatience in attaining achievements in this direction, and a change in emphasis to what it sees as transparent and accountable ways of delivering programs which it believes will improve numeracy and literacy standards. The committee notes some contradictions in efforts made recently to

1 Commonwealth of Australia, *Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program, Final Report*, 2004, p.11

2 Commonwealth of Australia, *Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) Programme*, 1999, at <http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/indigenous/publications/idea/idea.htm>

balance responsibility with accountability. This is always a problem with indigenous programs. Opposition senators, and many witnesses appearing before the committee, take the view that ASSPA, despite the minor shortcomings evident in some communities, was largely successful in maintaining this balance. Whatever may be the shortcomings of programs in other portfolio areas which have been associated with self-determination, the importance of parental involvement in schools is beyond question. This holds good for any school community anywhere.

2.5 The committee and Minister Nelson appear to agree on this point. In April 2005 the Minister is reported to have stated that public schools with high indigenous enrolments should be run like independent schools for the purposes of ensuring parental control over staffing. Speaking to Aboriginal representatives meeting in Cobar, the Minister is quoted as saying:

You need to have the power to recruit your own principals. I think the future for public education has increasingly got to be about giving parents and the school itself the power to control their own destiny.³

2.6 Opposition senators wonder how it is possible to reconcile the decision to abolish ASSPA with sentiments expressed above by Minister Nelson. The Minister appears to be torn between two conflicting policies: that of supporting local initiative and self-management, which is now conventional wisdom; and imposing a Commonwealth policy, with stringent conditions attached, likely to stifle local initiative and impose a centralised micro-management regime. The committee urges that a broad choice be made in favour of the former, with negotiations to produce a satisfactory compromise on accountability measures.

2.7 In fact, ASSPA funding has been spent on a range of projects, the vast majority of which fit broadly within the objectives of the indigenous education program. Common projects include nutrition programs, swimming classes, excursions (particularly where the school was remote and trips would not otherwise be possible), curriculum support, artist or musician-in-residence programs, and provisions for National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week. The quality of extra-curricular programs makes a crucial difference to the success of the core curriculum.

2.8 The demise of ASSPA has not been adequately explained. At the Melbourne hearing, DEST officials were asked about the evidence upon which the decision to abolish ASSPA was based. The committee heard that the government drew on a number of findings in a 1999 performance review, including criticisms that ASSPA has little influence on decision-making within schools, and being insufficiently concerned about educational outcomes.⁴ However, the committee notes that other parts of the review appeared to reflect very favourably on the usefulness and performance of ASSPA, especially in its role of increasing participation rates. Indeed,

3 Hon Brendan Nelson MP, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 2005, p.2

4 IEDA Review, 1999, p.59

at the time of tabling the committee's interim report of this inquiry in March 2005, the DEST website continued to report on the effectiveness of ASSPA in addressing and improving educational outcomes, according to evaluations made and anecdotal evidence provided. Particular comment is made on the positive effects of cultural activities on learning outcomes, and on improvements to student self-esteem, confidence and pride.⁵

2.9 It should be noted that the effect of the disbanding of ASSPA is likely to be uneven. The committee has found that in Western Australia, public schools will see a large measure of continuity preserved as a result of the Commonwealth's agreement to run the PSPI through established state structures. Regard is being paid to Western Australian legislation which requires Commonwealth money to public schools being paid through the state education department. District Aboriginal Councils will play a key role in advising DEST on funding allocations. Western Australia is committed to school-based budgetary decision-making, and each school has a plan for indigenous education.⁶ Submissions from the governments of Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania do not make it clear how they will deal PSPI. Submissions were not received from either New South Wales or Victoria. The committee has no information on the extent to which these states have developed structures for accommodating Commonwealth initiatives.

The effectiveness of ASSPA

2.10 The committee heard substantial evidence of the successful role played by ASSPA over its years of operation. Successes included increasingly confident participation by parents and extended families in school operations, as well increased attendance and fewer behavioural problems. Parents have become noticeably more confident in their participation in school events and at meetings, as was even evident to the committee. The committee also heard of ASSPA's role in fostering student pride in their school and culture through activities such as NAIDOC week. These improvements to school tone and morale were due to programs which, at the time of the committee's visits to some of these schools, were under threat or had stopped.

Nutrition programs

2.11 The 1999 review of ASSPA found that perceptions of efficiency were influenced by opinion as to whether some expenditure was in the category of 'welfare' rather than 'education'. The committee encountered this argument during its visits, hearing documented evidence of recent decisions by local DEST officers to the effect that provision of breakfasts and nutritious food during the day did not fit expenditure guidelines, resulting in funding applications being rejected. These included a letter from DEST to the Parramatta State School in Cairns declining to accept its concept plan, and clearly stating that:

5 *ibid.*

6 WA Department of Education and Training, *Submission 19*, p.3

Under the program we will not be funding excursions, teacher aides, tutors, the professional development of teachers, TRS, NAIDOC, sports, nutrition programs, resources, artists, workshop presenters, camps and fees.⁷

2.12 The committee notes the assurances it has received from a senior DEST official during the hearings on the additional estimates to the effect that a school nutrition program could be fairly regarded as an attendance initiative, and as such was a major priority for the Government.⁸ It appears that this message has been ineffectively transmitted to DEST's regional decision-makers, at least until recently, when DEST issued modified guidelines. However, schools continue to report discouraging messages from DEST in relation to nutrition and other so-called 'welfare' based programs. At the committee's final hearing, DEST submitted that nutrition programs were able to be supported only where they were shown by schools to be linked to 'core objectives'. This view was reiterated when DEST appeared before the committee on the budget estimates on 2 June 2005.⁹ While DEST's response would have been appreciated, the committee understands that principals and teachers became frustrated with official efforts to have them make submissions on such obvious matters.

2.13 Notwithstanding DEST's inconsistent approach, schools continue to provide the services they know to be important, sometimes relying on teachers to dip into their own pocket for food.¹⁰ At Shepherdson College, the ASSPA committee funded a breakfast and fruit program, as did many other energetic committees across the Northern Territory and the states, with the results as described:

One of the huge benefits is behaviour management. Three years ago we used to have fights and trouble in all the classrooms all of the time. As we got to understand the importance of nutrition and health, we had very few behaviour management problems within the school because, through research and in combination with the health centre, we were able to link those together. If you are going to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, you have to make sure that all the things that go together to make that happen in an Indigenous community are in place, otherwise literacy and numeracy are not going to suddenly improve on their own.

2.14 When asked about the perceived link between a nutritious diet and good behaviour, one principal illustrated his response with an anecdote:

We have three [deputy principals] looking after each block, and when a child comes to them I want them to be able to tell me why that child is

7 Correspondence from DEST Regional Office to Mr Paul O'Reilly, dated 4 March 2005, provided as additional information 7 April 2005

8 Mr Tony Greer, DEST, *Committee Hansard* (Estimates), 16 February 2005, p.118

9 Mr Shane Hoffman, DEST, *Committee Hansard* (Estimates), 2 June 2005, p.56

10 This was reported on a number of occasions. See, for example, Dr Jim Heslop, *Committee Hansard*, 29 March 2005, p.52; Ms Janet Matthews, *Committee Hansard*, 30 March 2005, p.2 and at the Garbutt State School, *Committee Hansard*, 6 April 2005, p.74

misbehaving. In week one of term one of 2005, we had nine students sent to our senior block deputy...nine out of nine of those students by one o'clock in the afternoon had not had breakfast, morning tea or lunch and all reported that their tummies were growling and they were hungry...if you are tired and if you are hungry then you are not going to learn and you are not going to behave yourself. It is just not going to happen. It never has and it never will.¹¹

2.15 Evidence was offered to the committee from almost every school it visited on the link between 'full tummies' and learning responsiveness. But there are other consequences, too. The committee heard that students who have now to buy their lunch are less likely to attend school at all, due to the shame involved in taking a handout.¹²

2.16 To complement nutrition programs such as these, at least two schools visited by the committee operate a system whereby deductions are made by Centrelink from parents' accounts and in return the school provides students with breakfast and lunch, ensuring that at least two meals per day are eaten. In addition to avoiding being shamed, this provides an added incentive for school attendance, as parents insist that their child attend school and eat the food which has been paid for.¹³ A variation on this scheme was the running by the school canteen of an optional account system, allowing block payments and a 'line of credit' arrangement for students. As every school principal will attest, an inability for students to pay cannot exclude a student from benefits available to other students.

2.17 One participant in Cairns suggested that policy makers need to be realistic about ways to achieve learning outcomes:

[A]s teachers and principals in schools we know that if we have a hungry kid they cannot learn and we need to deal with that issue. Everybody wants to fund the big picture thing about improving literacy outcomes. But they do not necessarily want to address all the nitty-gritty issues. If there is one thing I have learned about improving the literacy of Indigenous kids it is that it is a complex issue, and it needs to be addressed in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances.¹⁴

Other activities

2.18 Another ASSPA responsibility that may be forgone under new arrangements, and which also contributed significantly to school attendance, is travel for the

11 Mr David Knox, *Committee Hansard*, 30 March 2005, p.31. See also Mr Faraone, *Committee Hansard*, 1 March 2005, p. 30; La Grange school discussion, *Committee Hansard*, 31 March 2005, p.16

12 Ms Janet Stewart, *Committee Hansard*, 30 March 2005, p.17

13 See, for example, Ms Janet Matthews, *Committee Hansard*, 30 March 2005, p.3; Ms Glenys Pianta and Ms Charmaine Durshell, *Committee Hansard*, 30 March 2005. p.24

14 Mr John Baskerville, *Committee Hansard*, 7 April 2005, p.27

purposes of sport. The sports and music teacher at Milingimbi School told the committee of one problem, possibly insignificant to policy makers, but not so to children in Arnhem Land:

from what I can see this year, the impact of the stalling process has probably already blown our sports program—not just ours but that of the whole Arnhem region; I do not know which other regions. ...To enter students into competitions for the NT school sport program in town—nearly all those events occur next term—the bid for the team to be nominated has to be in very soon. You have to get them in a month before the event. So, by the sound of things, if we are not going to know for weeks whether we are getting any money it sounds like all those programs, at least for this year, anyway, are going to be blown out of the water. So kids in the Arnhem region will not get to play sport or compete in sport in the Territory this year. That is my perception in terms of immediate impact, and, again, things like music excursions and just basic resources for the classroom, as Ingrid was talking about. We are all very much in the dark. We would like some answers.¹⁵

2.19 Since the committee visited Milingimbi in March, the school has learned that it will receive \$40 000 under PSPI, half of what it received under ASSPA in 2004. The sports program still remains under threat.

2.20 Similar concerns about inter-school sport were voiced at Shepherdson College and at the Yarrabah School. In both cases, it was ASSPA funding which kept the inter-school sports program afloat in a region where travel is very expensive. Yet, as the committee was told in several schools, sports participation is a key to literacy and numeracy for a high proportion of boys.

2.21 Teachers and community representatives in Yarrabah spoke of the threat to the work experience program at the school. The program provides access for students to a broad range of industries and types of work experience in Cairns, which lies 76 kilometres away. Hence, a bus service is needed, for which ASSPA funding was essential.¹⁶ This must have been taken up by a local DEST officer present at the committee's hearing. The committee was pleased to hear later that funding had been arranged for the bus through a different program.¹⁷

2.22 The committee points out the connection between maximising participation and learning effectiveness, on the one hand, and nutrition and sports programs on the other. The committee is struck by the fact that neither the Minister nor DEST have made an authoritative statement recognising the link between nutrition and fitness and learning readiness, and putting these concerns to rest. Local DEST officials needed more guidance on this point, as DEST has belatedly admitted. As the Commonwealth

15 Mr John Graham, *Committee Hansard*, 2 March 2005, p.3

16 Yarrabah school discussion, *Committee Hansard*, 7 April 2005, p.3

17 Mr Tony Greer, *Committee Hansard*, 27 April 2005, p.45

chooses to become increasingly more involved in the minutiae of direct school contact, it will find many similar problems awaiting it. They require a much closer acquaintance with school culture than would be currently possessed by many DEST officials.

Criticisms of ASSPA

2.23 An internal review of IEDA, including the ASSPA component, was conducted by the (then) Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in 2000, with a final report published in 2004. The final (2004) report of the review of IEDA is presumably the basis on which the Government made its decision to disband ASSPA and replace it with PSPI. The committee asked about the details of the review of ASSPA at the budget estimates hearings in June 2004. It learned that in reviewing ASSPA functions, DEST selected 400 of the 3800 ASSPA committees at random (albeit a statistically significant sample) and sent them a discussion paper for comment. There were 10 responses.¹⁸ The committee therefore has some doubts about the veracity of the final report.

2.24 Most submissions and witnesses held the view that ASSPA funds were expended on a broad range of programs which were eminently helpful in achieving the objectives of the program. As Principal Jan Matthews told the committee in South Hedland, WA:

I think there are a lot of things we use the funding for that lead to improvement, but it is like going up a mountain – there are a lot of pathways up a mountain...you have got to make people want to learn...you are not necessarily going to make people want to learn by just saying 'What we are looking at is literacy and numeracy'.¹⁹

2.25 The 2000 Review considered that ASSPA had provided an appropriate and effective mechanism for increasing the participation of indigenous parents, but was in favour of changes. Specifically, the reviewers stated:

There is broad consensus that the success of ASSPA within a particular school community is heavily reliant upon the attitudes, skills and motivation of the Indigenous parents, the school principal ... the most successful ASSPA committees are those where there is a genuine partnership between the committee and the school.²⁰

2.26 The review found that:

These programs continue to be appropriate, and they enjoy strong support from the community, because program objectives and outcomes align very closely with Government priorities and initiatives as well as meeting client

18 Mr Shane Hoffman,, *Committee Hansard* (Estimates), 1 June 2004, p.158

19 Ms Jan Matthews, *Committee Hansard*, 30 March 2005, p.12

20 DEST, *A Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) Program*, 2000, p.44

needs at the local level. These programs have been effective in achieving overall program objectives.²¹

2.27 In contrast, the 2004 review finds that:

The involvement of Indigenous parents and communities in education is still an appropriate policy response, but the ASSPA program in itself is no longer an appropriate intervention to achieve this...mainstream education providers and peak parent bodies should be encouraged to step up their activities to encourage and engage Indigenous parents in school education issues in particular.²²

2.28 The committee is puzzled by the stark differences in the findings, over a relatively short four year time span. Apparently, the ASSPA program went from being a successful program to a failed program in a very short time, in spite of the program's successful alignment with government priorities being listed as a key strength in 2000. The committee is unable to identify what changed between 2000 and 2004, or how such changes precipitated a radical shift in the policy of program delivery. DEST officials agree that the negative and positive findings on ASSPA in the final report are 'observations from both sides of the fence', but that the Government drew on the report in support of changes.²³ They are not referred to in the 2004 report, so it must be assumed that this report is a signal for a policy change, rather than a report which gives reasons for a change. The committee has looked in vain for a missing link in the argument.

2.29 The Australian Education Union (NT) considered that problems with ASSPA Committees were more about a lack of structural support from DEST in integrating Committees with mainstream school management structures and in providing support and advice to ASSPA members.²⁴ There may not be any structural support available to the new PSPI creations in the new funding, but it does appear to be the Government's intention to integrate them into mainstream school management.

2.30 The committee noted that even supporters of ASSPA were aware of the uneven performance of the committees. The Director of the Catholic Education Office in the Northern Territory warned of the view of holding an over romantic view of ASSPA, and there was support for this view from other roundtable participants in Darwin. But as the CEO later conceded in its evidence, there was no doubt that ASSPA provided a focus and a locus where indigenous parents have felt comfortable

21 *ibid*, p. 6

22 DEST, *Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program, Final Report*, 2004 p.45. Accessed at http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/publications_resources/profiles/indigenous_education_direct_assistance_report.htm on 23 May 2005, 2.15pm

23 Mr Tony Greer, *Committee Hansard*, 27 April 2005, p.33

24 Australian Education Union Northern Territory, *Submission 9*, p.7

and able to come in and make a contribution to education policy and the way the school is run.²⁵

2.31 Personalities play a part in the stability and success of ASSPA committees, as does community mobility. For instance, the committee visited Koormilda College, one of the largest Protestant boarding schools in the country, and learnt about the problems faced by boarding schools whose ASSPA committees were drawn from many communities, creating complications for school management.

2.32 Varying effectiveness was recognised, particularly between those schools which had a high or almost exclusive indigenous enrolment and those which did not. The principal of the Kurrawang CAPS School in Western Australia told the committee:

The sheer facts that these [Aboriginal Independent Community Schools] are Indigenous and are run by Indigenous boards and that Indigenous parents have a major part in the day to day running of those schools means that ASSPA worked incredibly effectively...ASSPA was probably one of the most effective programs that was running.²⁶...However, if you look at the broad range of schools across Australia, the comment that I have heard is that some were not effectively administered and some schools did not have ASSPA committees, which is possibly the case in suburban areas where the Indigenous population is quite small. ...I cannot understand why something that was not broken needed to be fixed, but perhaps in other spheres and aspects of ASSPA across Australia there were some issues that needed to be dealt with...

2.33 ASSPA committee stalwarts, as might be expected, were eager to describe their role and its importance in the life of the school. The committee noted that many of these people were depressed about the fact that their active involvement in school life was nearing its end, and it noted what a considerable loss to the community and to education programs they would be. The committee was told in Alice Springs that while ASSPA attracted a core of active parents, the PSPI program would not. Indigenous parents would be unwilling to serve on school council sub committees. They would resent being 'mainstreamed'.²⁷

Homework Centres

2.34 Apart from ITAS and the PSPI, the other component of the Whole of Schooling Implementation Strategy (WOSIS) which is relevant to this chapter is the funding of homework centres. According to DEST, funding for centres may be applied for independently or as part of the school's concept plan. In order for the application to be successful, as with other elements of a concept plan, it must be

25 Dr Bill Griffiths, *Committee Hansard*, op.cit., p.40

26 Mr Grant Little, *Committee Hansard*, 29 March 2005, p.52

27 See, for instance, Ms Carmen McLean, *Committee Hansard*, 3 March 2005, p. 19

established that it was developed by the school and indigenous parents and community in partnership. It must also demonstrate clear milestones and performance measures. In common with other WOSIS programs, there is a requirement that an application for funding must show that a homework centre would achieve specific educational objectives. DEST advised that 88 homework centre applications had been approved as at 27 April 2005, and that figure had risen to 100 by 2 June 2005.²⁸

2.35 The committee recalls the enthusiasm with which homework centres were extolled during its 1999-2000 inquiry into indigenous education. It was interesting, therefore to hear the views of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training. There is less enthusiasm there at system level where industrial issues loom as significant.

...homework centres are not a part of the concept planning process in Western Australia for the government school sector. We made a decision, along with the state DEST office, that the homework centre process was one that we were not prepared for our school principals to manage. The information was provided to us in late December that DEST expected the principalship to manage homework centres. We refused to allow that to happen, only because we have not gone through a due and appropriate process with regard to the principalship taking over homework centres. It has EBA ramifications and a whole stack of other ramifications.²⁹

2.36 The committee has not pursued this issue with other state departments.

The importance of continuing indigenous involvement

2.37 The changes to structures and to funding do not give promise of continuing strong involvement of indigenous parents. The Independent Education Union of the Northern Territory (IEUNT) warned that while ASSPA may not have been perfect, its replacement with PSPI has the potential to disenfranchise indigenous parents of students studying in urban and independent schools. The IEU added that:

To argue that after 13 years of operation the ASSPA program produced negligible evidence in improving educational outcomes of [I]ndigenous students is to ignore that those outcomes can only improve if the students attend school on a frequent basis and feel comfortable in the school environment.³⁰

2.38 Most schools with an ASSPA committee reported that, if not completely disbanded, the residual group of active indigenous parents was fewer in number after the changes. As one witness told the committee; parental involvement will dwindle because too many restrictions are put on parent committees. Interest would be lost

28 Mr Tony Greer, *Committee Hansard* (Estimates) 2 June 2005, p.51

29 Mr Bob Somerville, *Committee Hansard*, 29 March 2005, p.21

30 Independent Education Union of the Northern Territory, *Submission 6*, p.10

because of unwarranted concern with the mechanics of accountability, all because of occasional instances of mismanagement.³¹

2.39 For most, however, it is the loss of decision making power that has brought about a reduced interest in ASSPA-type committees by indigenous parents. Typical of sentiments were these observations from a teacher speaking at Kirwan State High School in Townsville:

If we were having some issues with getting parent involvement, we will now have big issues because if there is no ASSPA committee and if those people have no power and do not have some money and resources to work with to make some decisions that really do impact on their kids, they are not coming.³²

2.40 DEST acknowledged that concerns such as these were evident from the committee's transcripts, and conceded that one of the challenges they faced was improved involvement and engagement of parents in the schools.³³ The committee is curious as to why DEST would have expected a different reaction to that reported here. It raises questions as to the policy rationale and the process by which it was arrived at, and the sources of that advice. These are decisions which are reached by governments within a sphere of policy about which there is often public and parliamentary indifference.

Testing the mettle of school principals

2.41 A side effect of the changes has been the need for principals to use school funds for essential services, previously funded under ASSPA. The committee heard of the unease of a number of principals with this course of action, because it risks a breach of financial guidelines on the use of mainstream school funds. In the event that PSPI funding does not arrive, principals would be accountable. As one principal said:

A lot of us have our backsides hanging out bigtime, because we are funding things from our school budgets that we are hoping we will then get the money back for, and we do not know whether that will happen. I cannot, as a human being, justify not doing what I think is right and proper, having consulted with my community, because I am waiting for bureaucracy to catch up.³⁴

2.42 A number of other principals admitted to following the line of 'spend and be damned'. They could not bear to see valuable programs cease simply because of uncertain funding. The principle of La Grange Community School on the north-west coast of Western Australia south of Broome is one such principal, though he put it

31 Ms Sharna Raye, *Committee Hansard*, 1 March 2005, p.13

32 School representative, *Committee Hansard*, 6 April 2005, p.35

33 Mr Tony Greer, *Committee Hansard*, 27 April 2005, p.34

34 Cairns West State School discussion, *Committee Hansard*, 7 April 2005, p.24

more gently when he affirmed that he was taking \$300 a week fruit money out of school funds, while awaiting for an as yet unknown amount of PSPI funding:

We are looking on the positive side. Our attitude is that people want us to do what is right. We are working on the principle that if people can see that we are doing the right thing they will come to the party. We will worry about it if it does not turn out that way. As I said, we work on the principle that people will do that. We work on the principle that if it is really obvious people will support us in that endeavour.³⁵

2.43 The committee is gratified to know that in their role as 'risk managers' school principals are increasingly prepared to put the immediate welfare interests of their students before other considerations. Their role and vocation gives them no option, and governments have no option but to support them.

Conclusions

2.44 From the evidence put before it, the committee concludes that ASSPA was a program which enjoyed considerable success in achieving its stated objectives. The committee heard ample evidence that, by their nature, ASSPA committees promoted indigenous involvement in school activities, and that this had definite benefits for indigenous student education outcomes. The committee acknowledges that the ASSPA program was not perfect, but heard little evidence that it required serious reform. The overwhelming majority of stakeholders who contributed to the inquiry supported the ASSPA program, even if, in some cases, in amended form, and saw its abandonment as a retrograde step.

2.45 The committee's second observation is that while PSPI's designers may have intended concept plans to promote simplicity and community involvement in the types of activities applied for, this has not eventuated. The disbanding of ASSPA committees has in many cases left principals without confident and committed indigenous people from whom to take advice. Principals themselves have in some cases found difficulty in interpreting DEST policy intentions regarding new ground rules. This has been made more difficult because of reports of conflicting advice from DEST, which have filtered down through the principal's 'grapevine'.

2.46 The final, and most telling observation is that the committee is unconvinced that the PSPI program, as it has been 'rolled out' so far, will promote indigenous involvement in schools. Indeed, the early evidence suggested that a sizeable proportion of the former ASSPA committees have completely disbanded and have not been reformed. Only with great difficulty are they likely to be resurrected as PSPI committees. The transferral of funding from an indigenous parent and community-based committee to the school principal has been interpreted as a vote of no confidence by the Government in indigenous people, and this has resulted in a fall-off

35 Mr Geoff Blythe, *Committee Hansard*, 31 March 2005, p.17

in indigenous parental and other community support which the program seeks to attract.

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that the Government ensure that under PSPI there is a genuine engagement with parents and the community to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes for all students.

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that as a matter of preference, PSPI reverts to guaranteed per capita funding, and in the event that this does not occur, that PSPI be applied for twice yearly, with conditions which recognise the circumstances of individual schools and their diverse educational needs.

