

# **Inquiry into Indigenous education funding**

## **Interim Report**

1.1 The purpose of this interim report is to alert the Senate to early evidence the committee has received of serious impediments and delays faced by schools in accessing urgently needed funding authorised by legislation in mid-December 2004. This report follows the committee's hearings and meetings in the Northern Territory, and precedes visits to Western Australia and Queensland. While the terms of reference invite consideration of the policy underlying the new funding arrangements, this interim report focuses specifically on the deficiencies in the administration of the new tutorial assistance arrangements, other intervention measures, and the replacement of Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committees with the proposed Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI). The committee's findings on the lack of community knowledge and understanding of these changes make up the greater part of this interim report.

1.2 A more detailed consideration of policy will be the subject of the main report. It will suffice to state here that the failure to administer new programs effectively from the beginning has led to a perception among many school communities of a diminished Commonwealth commitment to closing the gap in educational achievement experienced by indigenous students on the one hand, and the majority of students on the other. While the committee accepts that this is not the Government's policy, it points out that schools and school systems will be severely disadvantaged by the lack of continuity in tutorial programs. Indigenous communities are being alienated by the abolition of the successful ASSPA program which has created a culture of commitment and participation of parents and grandparents in the life of local schools. Rather than building on success, the new programs for targeted assistance sweep away proven institutions and build new structures on what can now be described as the quicksand of community discontent. There appears to have been a serious breakdown in trust. There has been no clear explanation as to why the government has dismantled ASSPA, and no indication of whether the Government has considered the difficulty of subsuming ASSPA's role within the new Parent School Partnership Initiative.

1.3 Alerted by this state of affairs, the Senate referred to the committee on 6 December 2004, an inquiry into the implications for schools of amendments to the *Indigenous Education Assistance Act 2000*. This legislation, the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2004, was passed by the Senate the day after this referral and assented to on 14 December 2004. Referral to the committee was the only option available given the need to ensure the appropriation of funds for 2005. The bill had first seen the light of day on 17 November 2004, and provides for continuing funding over four years. It is argued in this report that indigenous

education funding has been dogged by an insistence by the Minister on the speedy implementation of ill-conceived bureaucratic processes which alienate local communities and those who teach in schools. Haste has bordered on recklessness. Consultation processes with affected interested groups has been truncated to the point of worthlessness. Of equal concern has been that discussions with state and other systemic agencies have been badly timed, and have complicated normal arrangements for the commencement of the 2005 school year.

1.4 Communications with schools is almost impossible through December and January. It has not helped that the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) is also in the throes of grappling with its implementation of the new programs. This has left a great many schools uninformed on ill-defined matters such as 'concept plans' and other hoops through which schools must jump in order to qualify for Commonwealth funding. Amidst the anger and frustration expressed to the committee, there was a recognition of the extreme difficulty faced by DEST officers 'on the ground', and an appreciation of their efforts in dealing with confusing red tape. From the committee's experience of listening to principals, teachers and administrators in both government and non-government schools in the Northern Territory, it comes to the only conclusion possible: that whether the Government's indigenous education policy is flawed or not, its hasty implementation will postpone the arrival of outcomes that may have been hoped for.

### **What the amendments to the Act provide**

1.5 The Government has maintained that the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2004 continues current arrangements under the Act, and that these are consistent with the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy. Programs which are substantially continued include funding under the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) and the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program (IEDA). The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS), about which there was so much criticism in the Northern Territory, will continue, though as a greatly reduced benefit for fewer students. In addition, the bill provided funding for two new programs: the Indigenous Youth Leadership Program and the Indigenous Youth Mobility Program.

1.6 It is particularly noteworthy that a reading of the legislation provides no indication of the extent to which changes will affect schools and students. The bill consists largely of one schedule listing the appropriations, specifying accountability processes and other terms and conditions for agreements to be made between 'providers' (DEST 'newspeak' for schools) and the Commonwealth, including the performance reporting and evaluation. There is no specific reference to the programs mentioned in para.1. The amended Act, being a states grants instrument, gives no clues as to the substantial changes to implementation detail. Nor is there any such indication in Minister Nelson's second reading speech in introducing the bill. The Minister speaks of 'improved program management', 'better targeted assistance, and

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'ongoing initiatives': all blandly descriptive of a continuing program subject to normal incremental change.<sup>1</sup>

1.7 It is necessary to turn to the *Indigenous Education Programmes Provider Guidelines 2005-2008* to find the devil in the detail. The Guidelines were issued on Christmas Eve 2004. So fundamental are the Guidelines to the program, and so detailed and prescriptive are they, that the committee raises the issue of whether the Guidelines are legislative in character. The committee's concerns about the discretionary powers of local and regional DEST officers in relation to funding applications will be expressed in more detail in its main report, as will consideration of the Guidelines. The problems they present for schools is the basis of what follows in this report.

### **The end of ASSPA**

1.8 The Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program dates back to 1990. It was introduced for the purpose of improving educational achievement and increasing school participation for indigenous students. This was to be done in association with strengthening the connection which parents and grandparents have with local schools, and to involve them more in the decisions of the school. It was hoped that over time students would be more comfortable in a school environment in which their parents and grandparents were familiar faces.

1.9 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 particular schools. Ten per cent of schools received grants of over \$10 000.<sup>2</sup>

1.10 As this report is written and ASSPA has ceased to exist, the DEST website continues to report on its effectiveness in addressing and improving educational outcomes, according to evaluations made and anecdotal evidence provided. An evaluation conducted in 1999 comments on the positive effects of cultural activities on learning outcomes, and on improvements to student self-esteem, confidence and pride.<sup>3</sup>

1.11 As for efficiency, the 1999 review 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 visit, hearing anecdotal evidence of very recent decisions by local DEST officers to the

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1 Hon Brendon Nelson MP, House of Representatives *Hansard*, 17 November 2004, pp.8-9

2 DEST, Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) Programme, at <http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/indigenous/publications/idea/idea.htm>, Chap 3.

3 *ibid.*

effect that provision of breakfasts and nutritious food did not fit expenditure guidelines, resulting in funding applications being rejected. This may be the result of muffled policy signals from Canberra. The committee notes the assurances it has received from a senior DEST official during the recent hearings on the additional estimates to the effect that a school nutrition program could be fairly regarded as an attendance initiative, and as such a major priority for the Government.<sup>4</sup>

1.12 This is just as well. At Shepherdson College, the ASSPA 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.<sup>5</sup>

1.13 Other evidence, too voluminous to cite here, was offered to the committee on the link between 'full tummies' and learning responsiveness. Another ASSPA responsibility that has fallen into limbo, and which also contributed significantly to school attendance is travel for the purposes of sport. The sports and music teacher at Milingimbi School told the committee of one problem, insignificant to officials in Canberra, but highly significant and dismaying 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

5 Mr Peter Moore, *Committee Hansard*, Elcho Island, 2 March 2005, p.20

6 Mr John Graham, *Committee Hansard*, Milingimbi, *op.cit.*, p.3

1.14 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 was a key to improved rates of school attendance and higher literacy and numeracy achievements for a high proportion of boys.

1.15 The demise of ASSPA has not been explained. It appears not to result from any comprehensive performance review, as the results of the 1999 review appeared to reflect very favourably on the usefulness and performance of ASSPA, especially in its role of increasing participation rates. Many schools with a predominantly indigenous enrolment have attendance rates near equal to those with low indigenous enrolments. The exceptions are those schools in very remote areas where high levels of family and community mobility are more pronounced. The most likely explanation, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, is that ASSPA is no longer compatible with the Government's determination to place as much expenditure as possible under the microscope of DEST control and audit. There appears to be an overreaction to past criticism that DEST tolerated practices inconsistent with proper accountability. As one witness told the committee, parental involvement will dwindle because too many restrictions are put on parent committees.

'There is too much accountability stuff because someone stuffed up in Queensland. That is why you have lost interest over the years'.<sup>7</sup>

1.16 The committee noted that supporters of ASSPA were aware of the uneven performance of the committees. The Director of the Catholic Education Office 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. Personalities play a part in the stability and success of ASSPA committees, as does community mobility. The committee visited Koomilda 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. But, as one witness pointed out, despite some unevenness in performance, there was no doubt that ASSPA provided a focus and a locus where indigenous parents have felt comfortable and able to come in and make a contribution to education policy on the way the school is run.<sup>8</sup> The committee points out that because the committees made decisions about expenditure priorities, they were engaging and empowering bodies for participating parents.

1.17 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 for many of these people, active involvement in school life was nearing its end, a considerable loss to the community and to education programs. 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'.

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7 Ms Sharna Raye, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin Roundtable, 1 March 2005, p.13

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

## **Grappling with concept plans**

1.18 For the first time, most or all schools in receipt of Commonwealth funding have to deal directly with DEST in respect to PSPI funding and some ITAS funding, rather than have their state or territory department or system as the intermediary body. Schools are now in the front line of direct interaction with the Commonwealth. This is a significant development, and explains why 'concept plans' have provoked a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty among principals and school communities generally. Funding of some indigenous education programs requires that the school and its community develop what DEST guidelines call a 'concept plan'. This is the case with funding for homework centres and proposals under the Parent School Partnership Initiative. A 'concept plan', as the Guidelines state, is essentially an expression of intent, providing an opportunity for a school to outline its ideas on the purpose and functioning of a project, together with a brief description of the initiative and the results which are expected to be achieved.

1.19 The committee heard much critical comment on the new application processes. One school principal with a remarkable record as a dynamic and inspiring administrator and finance 'juggler' put the view that DEST appears to be unaware of the impracticability of its submission and administrative requirements. 'Concept plans', he believed, were beyond the capacity of communities to come to grips with, and accountability requirements are now 'extreme and counter productive'. Things cannot be done in indigenous communities overnight, particularly when many parents are on homelands some distance away. Time for discussion is needed. Mr Moore's comments encapsulate the views expressed by nearly all teachers who spoke to the committee:

The whole process that is in place at the moment is what we call a white process. In the past...they would sit and discuss as a group and then put in a submission, which was quite a simple submission to write up. Now, with the concept plans followed by applications, it is an extremely complicated process for people for whom English is a foreign language to have to fill in. I do not think people have taken that into account when they have designed all these forms and procedures. They have forgotten that for most of the Indigenous people—particularly in the Northern Territory—English is a foreign language. Therefore, there needs to be a lot more streamlining of the whole application process and concept plan.

Why are we doing a concept plan that gets approved by committee when you then have to go to an application that you may not get approved? Then there is all this evaluation and things you need to do afterwards with regard to it all. If you have three or four concept plans running you are going to spend all your time administering the concept plans rather than getting on and trying to improve the literacy, numeracy and activities within the communities. It has probably gone too far overboard trying to be accountable and part of the process needs to be putting a balance into place. What we are doing at the moment is disempowering Indigenous people in

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the process because of the high level required with regard to all the form filling, concept plans and those sorts of processes.<sup>9</sup>

1.20 DEST officials assess the concept plan against a set of criteria, and if a school passes this test it is encouraged to fully develop and submit an application for funding. The Guidelines then set out the list of mandatory legal and financial requirements.<sup>10</sup> Even the most energetic and innovative schools have trouble with concept plans. For instance, Shepherdson College put in a plan to link its eight homelands schools by computer. The plan was rejected because, according to the principal, DEST did not consider it important. If ASSPA funds had been available in 2005, the principal said he would have made it important. Another of Shepherdson's concept plans for a homework centre was rejected because it placed an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, which DEST advised was a state or territory responsibility.<sup>11</sup> Other schools reported receiving quite different advice.

1.21 Shepherdson College on Elcho Island is a relatively large and well-equipped school. It is a notably well run school with widely experienced and well-qualified teaching staff, enjoying a very close association with the community. It is highly likely to be in a far more advantageous position than many other schools to adjust to changes being implemented, yet it is experiencing difficulties. The committee notes the comments of its principal and considers them in relation to schools much less fortunate in their size, resources, location and community associations.

### **Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS)**

1.22 ITAS is a literacy and numeracy tuition program, supplementing normal teaching resources and aimed at improving these skills at key points in the first seven years of schooling. Tutors assist classroom teachers by giving individual help around or outside the classroom. For this reason, ITAS tutors are said to run 'in-class' assistance, as distinct from year 10-12 program tutors and those tutors who operate in homework centres after classes have finished. ITAS may be approved for indigenous students who have not met the year 3, 5 and 7 literacy or numeracy benchmark tests or students who are at risk of failing to reach these curriculum achievement levels for their age. The Government's new funding arrangements are to provide students in remote and very remote locations with higher levels of funding than they previously received.

1.23 The committee heard much evidence of the importance of this program, at least in regard to the way it was conducted to the end of 2004. The Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training (NTDEET) advised that in 2004 around 3,800 students in NT government schools were being supported through tuition at a cost of about \$5 million. It is expected that fewer students will be looked

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9 Mr Peter Moore, *Committee Hansard*, Elcho Island, 2 March 2005, p.15

10 DEST IEP Provider Guidelines 2005-2008, p.68

11 Mr Peter Moore, *op.cit.*, pp.19-20

after when the new program comes into operation, because a high proportion of students have reached the benchmark or standard required. An estimated 1666 students will attract funding of around \$3.7 million. It may appear that fewer students will be eligible to receive a higher level of funding.<sup>12</sup> This is doubtful, however, as ITAS (as distinct from the old ATAS) does not include an administrative cost component, which must be borne by NTDEET. It is estimated that there will be a 25 per cent reduction in the tutor hours available for each student: a significant reduction in light of the value of the program in bridging the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous achievement rates.<sup>13</sup>

1.24 ITAS arrangements have been the cause of most frustration and anger in the community and among school authorities. The delay in its operation this year has cost eight weeks of lost time by the date this report is tabled. Coming immediately after the December-January break, the loss of learning continuity is serious.

1.25 There were many comments made to the committee relating to the tutorial crisis: students suffering in limbo awaiting tutors, and the likelihood that with such additional pressure placed on teachers many would suffer 'burnout'; and, the discontinuity in employment of tutors likely to result in a desperate shortage of tutors when the program resumed. The current crisis indicated that the Commonwealth Government was oblivious to the importance which schools placed in maintaining a continuing relationship with tutors and the value of having people committed to an association with a particular school. The principal of Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, an independent indigenous school, told the committee that tutors were being dispersed and would be unlikely to return to the schools they were associated with.

1.26 An illustration of the change that has occurred since last year was given by the principal of Shepherdson College, when up to 10 tutors operated, commencing in the second week of school. So far this year there are none, and the school is only now being supplied with information by NTDEET with regard to funding for years 4, 6 and 8 students who failed the Multilevel Assessment Program (MAP) test in 2004. He raised one funding complication that DEST may not have factored into its management plans:

If you stop and think that we are in an Indigenous community, you will realise that most Indigenous communities have somewhere between 150 and 250 per cent turnover. What happens is that the money is allocated to a particular student. The student may have sat the MAP test here but currently be over at Milingimbi receiving education. By the time the funding is released to Milingimbi, that student may then be over at Ramingining or back here at Elcho Island, and we have to then start trying to track that student to pass that money on. It is going to be an administrative nightmare trying to keep track of where the students actually are within the system.

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12 Ms Christine Fitzgerald, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, p 2.

13 NTDEET, *Submission 8*, p.3

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We also have the problem that at this stage it is only available for years 4, 6 and 8. As a school council, when we were talking about it, we could not understand why we are putting money into kids who have failed. Wouldn't it be better to be putting in the money beforehand, into the years 1, 2 and 3, to make sure that they don't fail; making sure that that is for critical areas of education? In that way, money would be going in there to make sure that we were getting the year 3s and then it would be put into the year 4s so that they could pass the year 5s with the MAP testing.

1.27 The committee heard a great deal of evidence of the Government's funding of ITAS as being contrary to educational principles. As the co-ordinator of indigenous education in the Catholic Education Office confirmed to the committee, educational funding which is geared to failure offers a perverse incentive, and is pedagogically unsound, but ITAS is funding formula only, not an educational program.<sup>14</sup> The committee assumes this to mean that education must be tailored to fit a funding philosophy, rather than the other way around.

### **Timing and transition**

1.28 The committee received much evidence of the unfortunate timing of the implementation of changes to funding arrangements, and reference has been made to this. Advice from NTDEET is that the first-draft guidelines were shown to state and territory officials in late July 2004.<sup>15</sup> Comments were made to DEST by late August. It is claimed that the calling of the election put DEST into 'caretaker mode', so that no further consultation was possible.

1.29 It may be argued that the Commonwealth, and to a lesser extent, NTDEET, have some share of the blame in the delayed implementation of the new funding programs. The committee cannot see why administrative work on an announced policy could not have been continued through the caretaker period. The committee regards the claim of enforced idleness during the election period as ingenuous. There can be no objection to continued government operations in the national interest during election periods. Only belatedly (the first meeting occurring in January) has NTDEET agreed, in view of the urgency of the situation, to provide bridging finance for ITAS, pending the signing of an agreement with the Commonwealth which will start the funds flowing. The committee notes the initiative taken by the Catholic Education Office in the Northern Territory to continue funding ITAS programs and National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) programs,<sup>16</sup> and the claim by its director that he had no choice but to maintain these programs from anticipated funding. A government school reported doing the same. It is not often that the committee observes risk management in such circumstances.

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14 Ms Frances Murray, *Committee Hansard*, p.38

15 Ms Christine Fitzgerald, NTDEET, *Committee Hansard*, Darwin, 1 March 2005, p. 8

16 *Committee Hansard*, *op.cit*, p. 32

The committee is critical of the Government's haste in implementing the changes it has undertaken. Perverse as it may seem, it is also critical of the lack of haste in providing funds in the absence of orderly transitional arrangements. Nearly eight weeks into the school year there are no funds following the cessation of previous programs.

1.30 The committee considers that in this policy instance, the requirement of good government would be for a smooth transition. This helps people affected to become reconciled to change, in cases where the change has been contentious. It gives people reassurance of fair treatment in the longer term, and builds public confidence in government programs and their outcomes. It is difficult to escape the conclusion in this instance that the Government has taken exceptional liberties in imposing change in a way which was bound to alienate people affected by it. This is a failure of administration, but behind that is a failure of political imagination.

1.31 The committee also believes that there was a conscious effort made to maintain a pretence that the changes were of the nature of routine updating and 'fine-tuning' of programs. Indigenous education is not a matter of much concern to those who are not indigenous, or who live far from substantial indigenous populations. It was relatively easy for the Government to present a bland face in the introduction of this legislation, and hide the detail in guidelines with limited circulation. It was necessary for the committee to visit schools and to talk to principals, teachers and system administrators to understand the effect of administrative failure on the school communities and assess the likely consequences for education programs.

## **Conclusion**

1.32 What the committee saw and heard in the Northern Territory warrants an immediate report to the Senate for the purposes of confronting the Government with evidence of its mismanagement. Agreements and the subsequent flow of funds should have been ready for the beginning of the school year. Given the late passage of the bill, it would have been preferable for the Government to acknowledge the value of a transitional year to allow less stressful consultation and a more effective familiarisation process to be undertaken. Local DEST officials could have been far more effectively engaged through this process than through the crisis management which has characterised their work in the first three months of 2005.

1.33 The committee hopes that something may be salvaged from this wreckage, although it fears that faith in Commonwealth processes may have been damaged over the long term. Much will depend on the attitudes and discretion of local DEST officials, and the extent to which senior DEST officials (and indeed the Minister) support these efforts. It may be questioned whether many of these officers are as well-equipped as they should be in putting themselves in the shoes of educators when exercising their financial discretions. It is something relatively new in educational administration that non-educators have the role of deciding matters which were formerly in the hands of experienced professionals and who made funding decisions on the basis of educational considerations.

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1.34 The micro-management tendencies of DEST (which extend far beyond indigenous programs) run up against the reality that DEST does not, and cannot, run schools, or place itself in the shoes of parents, teachers, principals or even state education officials. Even the language and terminology used by DEST to describe its programs is an indication of its anomalous role. Its long finger reaches down to the classroom desk, yet it remains safely at arms length from the realities of school life.

1.35 In the committee's view, DEST is beginning to move beyond the extent of its competence in dealing directly with systemic schools, the consequence being that principals and teachers across the country are being distracted from their work, and that state administrators are unnecessarily preoccupied by the need to meet Commonwealth requirements to an extent which is out of proportion to the funds they actually receive. It appears that some funding practices, particularly the new ITAS funding rules, are contrary to sound educational practice, and indicate a disdain for such practice. The committee considers that DEST is now too close to school operations, where its failure to understand schools and the human activities and conditions relating to teaching are likely to cause damage rather than improvement to the 'outcomes' they wish to achieve.

1.36 The committee has no firm recommendation at this point in its inquiry, but calls on the Minister to look to 2005 as a transitional year in which to implement the Guidelines which DEST has written. It should continue, through this year, to distribute funds as appropriated in the amending legislation, but through previous arrangements. The committee has no comment to make in this report on the adequacy of funding. It does urge the Minister to intensify consultation with school communities and undertake more guidance of principals, teachers and other parties likely to be involved in funding applications. Finally, the Minister and his department should consider how advancement can be achieved through empowerment of other stakeholders in the schools and school systems rather than simply extend the hegemony of the Commonwealth.

Senator Trish Crossin  
Chair

