

## **Government party senators' report**

2.1 Commonwealth funding for specific school support programs focuses on specific learning outcomes and should be regarded as strategic in its purpose rather than comprehensive or recurrent. At the core of criticism levelled at the Government in the majority report is a misunderstanding of the role of Commonwealth specific purpose education grants in relation to total national investment.

2.2 The Government, working through MCEETYA, negotiates arrangements with the states, territories and non-government schools to provide specific or supplementary funds for programs identified as likely to bring about measurable improvements across the curriculum. National priorities change: new needs emerge, and when achievement is apparent, success can be 'mainstreamed'. The Commonwealth can find other targets for its funding. The Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) is the umbrella policy under which targeted assistance is offered, and the components of this are the objects of Opposition and Australian Democrat senators' criticism in the majority report. Government party senators put this report on the record to give some perspective to the more exaggerated claims of other senators on the committee.

### **Funding principles**

2.3 It needs to be pointed out that the Commonwealth is providing record funding for indigenous education purposes. The funding for the quadrennium 2005-08 is \$2.1 billion, representing a 22.3 per cent increase over the previous quadrennium. Such an investment in indigenous education requires the application of funding principles to ensure program effectiveness and accountability. The three principles which underlie expenditure in the new quadrennium are:

- a focus on funding programs most likely to achieve success, rather than those to which there is some emotional or historical attachment;
- a concentration on funding programs which help the most disadvantaged students, mostly those in remote and very remote areas; and
- the use of Commonwealth funds as a means of leveraging additional state and territory funds for mainstream indigenous education.

2.4 Commonwealth funding may be described as 'strategic' in that it influences the way states and territories direct their resources. As the Commonwealth does not run schools it is in a stronger position to make objective assessments of the worth of programs and the relative needs of students across the country, as, for instance, the needs of students in very remote areas. Such students were disadvantaged by mainstreaming policies which took no account of their circumstances, and the far larger costs of running schools and education programs to serve their needs. Under amendments to the Indigenous Education Funding Act, additional funding is directed to these needs.

2.5 While Commonwealth funding is supplementary to state and territory funding, it is targeted and selective. It is not intended as a 'top up' for funding from state sources. The Commonwealth is not bound to continue funding programs such as ASSPA if it considers that other initiatives are overdue and more in need of 'seed' funding. ASSPA has been continuously funded since 1991. If state or territory authorities believe that this program is worthy of continued funding, as evidence to this committee from school communities clearly indicates is so, then the way is open to them to take up this responsibility. The Commonwealth chooses to fund on its own terms.

2.6 Criticism has been levelled at the Commonwealth for its failure to maintain funding for successful programs which are bound to disappear when funding ceases. The Commonwealth does not own these programs. They can and should be continued by state and territory governments once their value is known. In other words, they are ready for 'mainstreaming' and the benefits of normal recurrent funding under state and territory programs. When the Government refers to the principle of 'leverage', this is what is intended: that states and territories will increase their total funding to include new programs which have proven to be successful, but which the Commonwealth may no longer choose to fund.

### **ITAS funding changes**

2.7 The majority report concentrates on two programs affected by the amendments to the Indigenous Education Funding Act: ITAS and the ASSPA committees. Opposition comments and allegations are misleading and indicate a less than secure grasp of facts and findings.

2.8 To deal with ITAS first, over the 2005-08 quadrennium, funding for tutorial assistance will be \$179 million, including \$105.5 million for in-school tuition. This represents a 51 per cent increase over the previous quadrennium. The targeting of ITAS in particular years is intended to supplement other available funding. It is not intended as a substitute for efforts supported by state and territory funding. Nor is it intended as a supplement to other Commonwealth funding under IESIP and the new literacy, numeracy and special needs program.

2.9 The in-class tuition intervention is a strategic, targeted Government response to assist indigenous students who fail to meet the literacy and numeracy benchmarks in years 3, 5 and 7, and to improve the achievement levels of indigenous students in years 10, 11 and 12. There is some flexibility in this funding to allow schools to use ITAS funds to help students with identified learning needs in other levels of schooling. For instance, students in years 1-3 may receive supplementary tuition through reshaped programs.

2.10 While in the Northern Territory, the committee heard a great deal of evidence of dissatisfaction with delays to ITAS funding. This reflects more on the lack of initiative shown by the Northern Territory Government in failing to anticipate, at an early stage, the need for bridging funds to tide the program over until a funding

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agreement was made between the two governments. The Northern Territory Government has only very recently begun to act on this need. Only a serious intention of rejecting the funding should have prevented the Territory government from making such arrangements much earlier. The majority report notes the 'risk management' of the Catholic Education Office in Darwin, and the decision of the CEO to spend in anticipation of funding. A government is in a much stronger position to make such a decision. Nor is this funding delay without precedent. In 2004, 92 per cent of tutorial assistance money was not provided until after March.

2.11 Government party senators will be interested to learn if the concerns of Northern Territory officials are shared by their counterparts in the states. So far the committee has received no submissions from Queensland and Western Australia on what it has been led to believe is an urgent problem.

### **ASSPA**

2.12 The majority report is critical of policy changes in regard to ASSPA, and makes some oblique criticisms of what it believes to be the new administrative arrangements for the parent-school partnership program. The majority report suggests that the ASSPA program is 'highly successful', but the IEDA Review which looked at ASSPA came to some different conclusions. Several problems were identified.

2.13 It was reported that the ASSPA program does not adequately recognise the roles and responsibilities of schools. The primary responsibility which schools bear for the relationship between schools and the parents and community, should be reflected in the way Commonwealth resources are allocated, how policy is developed, how performance is monitored and how support is provided.

2.14 Another problem was that while ASSPA was designed to empower indigenous parents to influence education decisions, the establishment of ASSPA committees as separate entities to school councils served to distance and marginalise indigenous people in regard to overall school management.

2.15 In addition, the ASSPA program is not considered to be sufficiently flexible to give local communities the power to operate and to select and organise programs and activities in ways that best suit their needs and priorities. There were suggestions from schools and school staff that the ASSPA program by its very nature inhibits ASSPA committees to develop innovative solutions to addressing needs and aspirations of students, their parents and their community. The result was that ASSPA as a program was largely preoccupied with process, and consultation, planning and organisation became ends in themselves.<sup>1</sup>

2.16 The Government remains committed to strengthening parental and community involvement in schools. The significant change with PSPI is that school community

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1 DEST, Review of IEDA, *op.cit.*, pp.41-42

funding is no longer an automatic entitlement. Funding must be applied for, and the purpose of that funding must be aligned more closely to the educational programs of schools.

2.17 Government party senators are committed to the funding and the educational principles underlying these improvements to indigenous education funding arrangements. They see them as fitting the role which the Commonwealth has in setting national agendas and identifying funding priorities.

Senator John Tierney  
Deputy Chair

