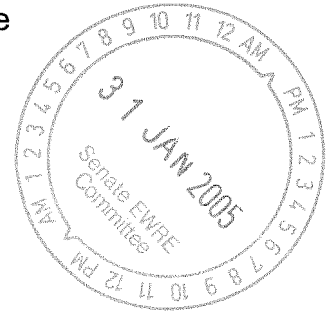


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Ref: - Indigenous education funding arrangements

January 25th 2005

Senators

As the grandmother and custodial guardian of an indigenous schoolchild I am tendering this submission to you to express a real concern over the proposed changes to the Tutoring Programme as administered by DEST. The submission is based (is almost exactly) a letter that I wrote to various politicians before the last election.

In 2004 my granddaughter was in year 8 in an Alice Springs School and had in-school tutoring. The school she attends placed her in a tutoring programme in year 4. She has had real academic problems in the areas of literacy and numeracy and has had in-school tutoring in both subjects. This year she achieved at a higher level than I ever expected, now I have real hopes of her continuing to successfully complete at least year 10 and probably some year 12 subjects. Or rather I had hopes of this but have learnt that it is very probable that the tutoring will be withdrawn in 2005 her year 9. Without the help of a tutor I believe that she will once again fall behind and failure become a real possibility. She has very viable plans for her future and is very focused but needs some extra assistance at this stage in her education.

That the government has funded a programme, which is to be withdrawn just as it, is about to produce a successful outcome appears to me to be a failure in duty of care to that child and to every other child who is participating in the programme. Indeed it could be thought that the children have been set up to fail, something that does wonders for self-esteem and self-worth. It also appears to be a waste of government funding (tax payer's money) to initiate a programme then withdraw it before it can produce positive outcomes.

In-school tutoring has advantages to the child that no parent or external tutor can provide. I have worked as a tutor in several schools and am aware that a tutor who works within the school has a relationship with the teaching staff and the expectations of the curriculum that few parents can have. Those of you who are parents will also be very aware that most of us make very bad tutors to our own children; we carry far too much baggage.

In-school tutors learn to be flexible working with classroom teachers to help develop skills whilst providing access to the general class lessons and activities. Where there is a tutor present teachers can adapt and guide lesson plans to suit the tutored child's level knowing that they will receive the right assistance to reach the required outcome. They can do this without taking valuable teaching time from the other students in their class.

I have been told that tutoring will be offered in years 4, 6, and 8 after a child has performed poorly on MAP tests, it would seem that this is a very reactive policy, surely to start tutoring as soon as the child begins to have serious difficulty would be more proactive and would have the effect of a safety net.

I have also been given to understand that a child must sit and do poorly at the relevant tests before they will be considered for funding for tutoring; that the school, who deals daily with the child and can produce examples of their work, are not to be part of the selection process. From experience I know that most children who cannot achieve at class level already feel bad about themselves and are developing low academic self esteem; some will do anything to avoid being tested and therefore 'have their noses rubbed in' their poor abilities. Children, who play truant, claim to be sick, are sick or are away on genuine family business and do not sit the test are immediately deprived access to tutoring funding. Why bother attending school if you cannot participate in most of its activities? Tutoring encourages participation, gives the individual access. Just knowing that they have a tutor for assistance encourages attendance. The relationship between student and tutor can be very positive with students striving to do well knowing that their best effort in a small group is recognised and rewarded, in appropriate ways, when, against the larger class they struggle against what they may see as insurmountable odds. Tutoring is not necessarily an 'all of school' experience. This year I had the pleasure of working in a class with a young boy who, after three years of tutoring, had been encouraged to work unaided. At first we watched him struggle with the idea of going solo but by the end of the year he rightfully gained the award for 'Most Improved Student In Year 6' and now is making serious plans for high school (year 7 in the NT) and his long-term future.

There are many reasons why people need tutoring, from learning difficulties through 'maturing' late as a learner to missing school for long periods etc., but whatever the reason depriving someone of the opportunity to learn is against the human rights values espoused by our country and against realising the best potential of our citizens. Most children want to learn but many will need special programmes to help them. Adults only return to school to do general education courses when they know they have a need and really want to learn.

I have worked as a tutor with indigenous students, children and adults, for over 6 years and take great delight in watching the response of most students who suddenly realise they can do something that has for years evaded them. This may be anything from realising *they* can now read independently a simple primer (at an age when their contemporaries are reading novels) to conquering the abstraction of long division or algebra or producing their first proper assignment on a subject they have researched with reasonable independence.

Certainly I believe that tutoring should have outcomes, surely the first one of these is a regular attendance at school, once a student feels comfortable within a school environment the that individual will be more prepared to take risks in learning. The more competencies someone gains and that they recognise they have gained (however small) the more risk they are prepared to take in learning new ones. The knowledge that they can readily access the assistance they need makes learning and assimilation into a larger school community easier, more comfortable.

Children and adults with special needs are assisted through special needs programmes it is students with specific needs that end up being tutored. Needs that can be both addressed and redressed.

As a long term resident of Central Australia I regularly feel that models of service are imposed on the outback that are more suited to the seaboard. I am aware that 80% of Australians live along the more populated seaboard. Logically this would also mean 80% of students and that (at a distance) one set of rules for all would appear more equitable, certainly cost less, but the uniqueness of the Northern Territory and the remote outback of other states is consistently ignored. The factors that constrain remote Australia should be apparent, cannot be changed nor ought they be imposed on urban Australia, equally there is a limit to how much we can adapt to urban parameters.

Proportionately to population a greater number of culturally bound indigenous students live in remote areas than in the cities. I believe I would be true in saying that for many of these students English is not their first language and, where it is used regularly in the home, families often speak two ways. Many indigenous students do not start school with the wealth of oral vocabulary of a child in the generic society. Whereas most white families have books around and spend at least a little time reading to children this too is not a regular indigenous custom where story telling not reading is more often the norm. The language of books is not familiar. Many adults within the Aboriginal community either cannot read English or, if they do so, are not confident enough to read aloud. Most children's books are written in English.

Much of tutoring in literacy includes the development of an enriched oral vocabulary, one that not only includes our basic needs but the wealth of words we all have. Most of us are of an English speaking background and have absorbed words from birth; our 'hearing vocabulary' is great, most students who are tutored have missed out on this wealth Their wealth lies in other languages, many of my students, young and old, are fluent in several aboriginal languages (languages not dialects) and, when they come to school may have very little English beyond their practical needs but are expected to do the same work as children for whom English is their only language.

Schools from more remote towns, have a higher proportion of children who are closely involved with their culture and who, because of the nature and distance needed to travel to many ceremonies, miss school time.

Other services offered through the department are also to be cut or amended; I know one is the nutrition programme yet for several children I know a 'breakfast' snack keeps them alert and awake. These children catch the only possible bus at 6.00am to get to school at 8.00am for an 8.20am start. ASSPA provides a basic breakfast – cereal, milk and toast. These particular students are in receipt of tutoring being academically seriously behind yet they now attend school most days, have started to develop valuable academic skills, enjoy the school community and participate fully at every level. They are bright and nice (to use an old-fashioned term in its best way). I would hate to see them deprived of the opportunities they want and need to learn. If nutrition programmes in the future are to have an academic outcome what better outcome academically is a child at school, awake, alert and eager to learn.

I have deliberately ignored the tutoring of adults although I have been involved with adults attending a general education course and, very slightly, a course designed for adults who have never been to school and who speak poor English. Suffice to say that

adults only return to school when they want to learn, that the classes I have been involved with are generally small but have students of very disparate levels. In the general education class most are good readers but with written English and numeracy you find some students have eat understanding of some parts of each subject with huge gaps in other part. The amount of 1:1 time students need cannot be supplied by a single teacher but can be successfully supplemented by a tutor.