

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into indigenous education funding arrangements

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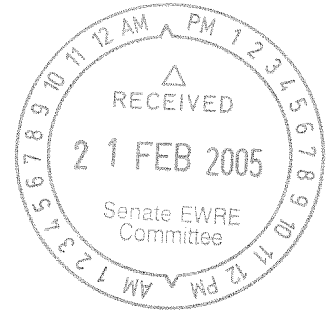
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**IEUNT SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE
EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE
RELATIONS AND EDUCATION
REFERENCES COMMITTEE**

**Inquiry into the implications of funding policy changes
contained in 2004 amendments to the Indigenous
Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000.**

FEBRUARY 2005

INTRODUCTION

1. The Northern Territory Branch of the Independent Education of Australia (the IEUNT) has prepared this submission for the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee's Inquiry into the implications of funding policy changes contained in the 2004 amendments to the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000.
2. The IEUNT represents the industrial interests of over 350 indigenous and non-indigenous education staff in the non-government school sector, including a number of community controlled schools and systemic remote schools, and has a recognised commitment in increasing the educational standards of indigenous students in the Northern Territory.
3. Many of the indigenous education staff covered by the IEUNT are involved in the every day delivery of IEDA and IESIP programs in classifications such as Indigenous Education Worker, Teacher Assistants, ATAS Tutors and Boarding Houseparents. Any changes in the funding arrangements can have a profound effect on the employment and involvement of these indigenous staff in the non-government education sector.
4. The IEUNT believes that such changes have a profound effect on the educational outcomes of indigenous students, particularly indigenous students who reside in the major urban centres of the Northern Territory – Darwin and Alice Springs.
5. The IEUNT also believes that the new framework of performance monitoring and reporting is a useful undertaking – particularly in determining the needs and development of individual students.

6. However, it would seem that the rationale behind the new reporting framework is not to enhance the ability of programs to improve individual student performances, but to deprive necessary funding from programs which are achieving those goals. The IEUNT does not support such a rationale as it is at odds with the goal of improving indigenous education participation over the long term.
7. The IEUNT is also concerned that the current rationale behind making funding for the new Parent School Partnerships Initiative (PSPi) at the expense of recurrent funding of the current ASSPA Committees is a step backwards in encouraging indigenous parental involvement.

Implications of the new IESIP and National Strategic Initiatives

8. The IEUNT supports the new focus of IESIP and the National Strategic Initiative, particularly its focus on literacy in remote schools.
9. All non-government schools in the Northern Territory are either Category 1 or Category 2 and schools without indigenous students are a rarity. The increased funding in the Northern Territory, in particular, is welcome and is recognition that schools, particularly in remote communities, face challenges which are unknown in the more populous parts of Australia.
10. The IEUNT believes that the increased funding provided through Supplementary Recurrent Assistance (SRA) will be particularly attractive for remote community schools who are determined to tackle the problems of illiteracy and innumeracy in indigenous communities.
11. One concern that the IEUNT believes should be raised is the potential loss of flexibility should the focus on proven successful practices be applied to rigorously.

12. It is the IEUNT's experience that the Scaffolding approach to ESL teaching can, in the right context, be very successful. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the right context is generally where English, while not the first language spoken, is used frequently in the community in which the students are drawn from. When the approach is used in communities where spoken English is a rarity – one member has termed this “English as a Foreign Language” – the results of the scaffolding approach are patchy.

13. The IEUNT also believes that any project funded under IESIP should contain some initiatives at supporting, training and including indigenous staff. Too often, previous IESIP funding has been used to purchase new teaching materials and hiring consultants to train the non-indigenous teaching staff as it is presumed that they will be doing the bulk of the ESL teaching. While expenditure of this kind may be necessary, the IEUNT believes that increasing literacy in a remote community school depends on the competence and morale of the indigenous staff who generally have a longer term commitment to the school and the community.

Implications of the new ITAS program

14. It is pleasing that the current funding changes recognise the importance of both during-school-hours and out-of-school-hours tutorial assistance to indigenous students in Northern Territory primary and secondary schools and do not seek to alter the basic concept of this program.

15. Anecdotal evidence suggests to the IEUNT, replicating the findings of the DEST Report, “Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program – Final Report” (2004), that during-school-hours tutorial assistance has demonstrably “improved literacy and numeracy syllabus

outcomes”¹ and has also improved attendance rates and social integration, particularly at the early stages of primary education.

16. The IEUNT also believes that one of the strengths of the during-school-hours tutorial assistance program is the fact that the student is not withdrawn from their immediate peer group and the program is clearly supplemental to mainstream teaching and learning in the student’s classroom.
17. Small group work is also a vital part of this program, allowing the Tutor or Teacher Assistant to work on specific areas of common weakness. Again, this practice is not necessarily replacing the mainstream delivery of a lesson as group work is a common teaching practice in mainstream teaching.
18. By co-ordinating with the central class room teacher, this practice can sit comfortably within the normal classroom setting and practice, enhancing the learning goals of the mainstream curriculum while focusing on the extra skillswork needed by the students.
19. This practice is vital in remote indigenous community schools where English is not the first language. Teacher Assistants who speak the local language and have community status are vital in assisting non-indigenous staff in delivering both ESL and mainstream curriculum and classroom management.
20. Outside-School-hours tutorial assistant is equally important in the Secondary and Boarding sectors.

¹, “Review of the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program – Final Report” (2004), p ix

21. Secondary school does not lend itself well to in-class tutoring as the teaching and learning is more structured and the curriculum assumes a basic level of literacy and/or numeracy. Tutorial assistance is subject-focused and is clearly supplemental to teaching and learning carried out in the classroom.
22. The same can be said for tutorial assistance provided in Boarding Residences. In the Northern Territory, the Boarding residences are without exception secondary school institutions and cater for almost exclusively indigenous students.
23. While the IEUNT is appreciative of the preservation of ATAS under a different name, the Union is totally opposed to the rationale that successful programs should be withheld funding on the basis that students are achieving benchmarks.
24. The limitation that indigenous students who meet the benchmarks at year 3, year 5 and year 7 are undeserving of continued support from ITAS undermines the principle of achieving and maintaining educational equality and equitable outcomes for indigenous students. Meeting benchmarks does not mean that indigenous students have equality, nor does it mean that students are being encouraged to develop further skills and improve their educational and training prospects in later life.
25. The IEUNT believes that using the success of the program to withhold the program is punitive and will lead to students being bounced back and forth between tutorial assistance and no assistance; between success and failure.
26. The IEUNT also believes that withholding tutorial assistance until the student has failed to meet the year 3 benchmark test is neglecting the

considerable educational research that has shown that the vital times for students acquiring literacy and numeracy skills in the early years of education.

27. It does not make sense to the IEUNT that the Government is willing to expend large amounts of resources to improve outcomes in years 4 and 5, when targeted assistance given in the early years could also improve those outcomes in a more cost effective manner.

28. The previous ATAS requirement of targeting students in the bottom 20 percent was effective in ensuring that students who were in the greatest need were receiving the assistance they needed, when they needed it. It also recognised that a student in early Primary could already be experiencing difficulties and could be targeted for assistance.

29. The IEUNT believes that the improved framework for collecting educational data is essential in identifying areas of further assistance and targeting areas of real need, but improving performance should not be the rationale for withholding further funding.

Implications of the new Whole of School Intervention Strategy

a) The new Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI)

30. The IEUNT is very concerned with the replacement of the old ASSPA program with the new PSPI.

31. The ASSPA program was driven clearly by the principle that to increase indigenous performance in all levels of education, indigenous participation had to also increase. The program recognised that many of the parents of indigenous students came from backgrounds of social and economic disadvantage themselves and were unlikely to have the skills and

confidence to participate in the normal structures of school governance such as School Boards:

“The concept of social inclusion and social exclusion represent beliefs, attitudes and actions relating to aspects of economic, social, birth or background and social politics constructed and fostered within a society. These aspects can impede or facilitate one’s ability to actively participate within society effectively as a citizen. A consequence of social exclusion can lead to a young person’s limited ability to be healthy, well educated, well housed or well nourished. At other levels it reduces the capacity of young people to actively participate in civil, social, cultural and economic life.”²

32. While the IEUNT agrees that the ASSPA program has not increased indigenous influence in school decision making³, however the IEUNT believes that this should be counter-balanced by the evidence that functioning ASSPA Committees can and do “significantly improve student attendance and retention”⁴.
33. In the IEUNT’s experience that the problem is not the ASSPA Committees themselves, but the lack of clarity and understanding of School Boards and School Executives as to need to integrate ASSPA Committees and their activities into the mainstream of the school community.
34. Anecdotal evidence, in urban areas, clearly indicates ASSPA Committees are often seen as outside the normal structure of the School and not a means of consultation and integration of indigenous issues into the mainstream of the school. More often than not, they are seen as a group

² p 4
³ p vii
⁴ p vii

that deals with 'just' Indigenous issues' and whose projects only apply to indigenous students rather than the whole school community.

35. The IEUNT also believes that there has been a distinct lack of support from the Indigenous Education Unit in promoting integration to the mainstream school management structures and providing support, advice and **training** to members of operational ASSPA Committees.

36. In remote community schools the situation is naturally reversed where 'just Indigenous issues' are the only issues and it is not surprising that the PSPI has taken the 'Indigenous Leadership Team' model which works in remote communities.

37. Remote communities are uniquely placed to fully integrate the ASSPA program into the formal management structure of the schools. They are uniquely placed to access the myriad of social services which are flown into the community on a regular basis and have immediate access to the local government structures – the community councils. It is not surprising that Northern Territory remote community schools will be strongly placed to access the bulk of the PSPI funds.

38. The IEUNT believes that the replacement of ASSPA with PSPI will only disenfranchise indigenous parents from the mainstream management structures of urban non-government schools.

39. Few indigenous parents will have the skills and understanding needed to participate in the mainstream school management structures and the positive contribution towards attendance and retention produced by the ASSPA program will be lost.

40. To argue that after 13 years of operation the ASSPA program has produced negligible evidence in improving educational outcomes of indigenous 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.

41. The IEUNT also rejects the competitive basis on which PSPI funds will be distributed. The IEUNT does not believe that funds addressing serious educational disadvantage should be targeted at those schools that can produce the most persuasive submission. Improved accountability is necessary, but it should not come at the expense of the social inclusion of indigenous people.

b) Homework Centres

42. The IEUNT supports strongly the retention of homework centres in the Northern Territory in their previous form.

43. The IEUNT believes that homework centres have a significant impact on ensuring that indigenous students, particularly urban students, have a supportive environment in which to undertake further work and skills development.

44. The IEUNT sees the Homework Centre program as an extension of the ATAS tutorial program and many of the advantages addressed in the ATA section of this submission also apply to the provision of Homework Centres.

45. The IEUNT notes that the 'Report' has concerns with the fact that Homework Centre funds are being used to provide 'inducements' and 'travel'. In the Northern Territory it should be pointed out that many of

these 'inducements' are healthy, dietary supplements to ensure that students are receiving at least one healthy meal a day. It should be remembered that many indigenous students are coming from an extremely disadvantaged background and the provision of food only enhances the supportive, caring principles that are at the root of Homework Centres.

46. The IEUNT believes that it is crucial in the Northern Territory that such inducements continue to be supported in the operational costs of Homework Centres.

47. The IEUNT also believes that like the ITAS program, the exclusion of students under the age of eight is ignoring the need to address literacy and numeracy problems from an early age.

48. The IEUNT supports increased monitoring and assessment arrangements as this will continue to provide useful data on the development of each child and allow further targeting of skills development. Again, such monitoring should not be used in a punitive manner and should be used to further the educational performance of students, not exclude them.

The current level of communication of the changes

49. As of February 2005, the IEUNT is concerned that the full detail of the funding policy changes have not been communicated effectively to the local school level – Principals, School Executives, Indigenous Education Workers and parents previously involved in ASSPA Committees.

50. The IEUNT is aware that briefings/seminars have occurred at a systemic level in late 2004 by the DEST Indigenous Education Unit, but it is

reported to the IEUNT that even this communication lacked the necessary detail to be implemented effectively in the 2005 school year.

51. In fact, the lack of information has already impacted on the employment of a number of indigenous employees in the non-government and government school sectors, with a number of ATAS Tutors and Homework Centre Tutors being informed that they no longer have positions because of the funding changes – when this may not be the case.

52. The lack of understanding and expertise in the previous funding regimes has complicated implementation further with many Principals believing that there is no funding available at all in urban based schools, based on what little knowledge they had of the programs – that expertise was isolated in the ASSPA Committees who no longer believe they exist.

53. It is also illuminating regarding the amount of consultation that has occurred in late 2004 and early 2005 when the IEUNT is being approached by members of the NT Legislative Assembly to explain the changes and their effects. They are of course being approached by concerned members of the community. Their lack of knowledge speaks volumes for the amount of consultation that has occurred.

Conclusion

54. The IEUNT believes that DEST, as a high priority, must ensure that information is being received at the school level immediately so that existing structures, some of which have been very successful in the past, can be supported by the new regime.

55. Training must also be offered to former members of ASSPA Committees to ensure that the disenfranchisement of indigenous parents that ASSPA Committees were originally set up to address is not reintroduced.
56. The IEUNT believes that the perception that urban ASSPA Committees have little impact on the decisions of the Schools is fair, but also believes that this is a result of the fact that Schools have often, through lack of understanding, left indigenous matters to the Committees with no effort on the schools part to integrate the Committees into existing school structures.
57. In our experience, the exact opposite is true for remote schools where both systemic and independent schools have formed Indigenous Leadership Teams which play a major role in the development and direction of the school and have played an active role in increasing attendance and educational outcomes.
58. To argue that ASSPA Committees should cease to exist because urban schools have not understood the need for integration is a destructive move and not conducive to increasing indigenous involvement in urban schools. It does the exact opposite and will have a profound effect on indigenous educational outcomes in the future.
59. Finally, the IEUNT believes that the changes have not been communicated effectively to the actual practitioners. Very few Principals or Indigenous Education Workers have been given any useful information in what is available and how it applies. Some employees have already lost employment – even where this was not necessary – because of the confusion and the delay has already done irreparable harm to programs which should be running in 2005.