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Senator Trish Crossin

Re: Senate Committee on Indigenous Education Funding

Dear Trish

Unfortunately, due to conflicting information I had the impression the last session of the hearing was only for ASSPA and Fred Hollow Foundation submissions, not school councils and had made arrangements to collect our daughter from soccer.

However I would like to submit, in no priority, the following for the committee's consideration.

- It concerns me that there has not been a greater understanding of the way in which a majority of indigenous people deal with change and the process of consultation. I speak not only of my experience on the Berry Springs School Council (5 years) but also having lived in Areyonga (Central Australia community) for 6 years. Talk of change in July 2004 was vague and answers to specific questions hard to come by. Due to the uncertainty and the eventual short timeframe for preparing a Concept Plan it was extremely difficult for indigenous parents and carers to be involved in the process. Asking remote indigenous parents and carers to comment on plans around December/January was inconsiderate. Especially in the Areyonga area due to ceremonial business, the holiday period and, it may sound trivial, but the heat and the desire (or lack of) to meet government officials during the middle of the day when it is normal practice to 'sit down'. I also make a point of referring to parents and carers because it is, unfortunately becoming practice, for family members (often older people) to take on the responsibility of caring for children other than their 'biological' children in communities.
- Given the restrictive guidelines for the allocation of funding to assist indigenous students that have not met the benchmarks in MAP testing, from the 17 indigenous students at Berry Springs School only 1 student is eligible. This is ridiculous! The system is waiting for these students to fail before we have government funding to assist them. Berry Springs School has values and integrity and will stretch resources to give all students the best opportunity to learn to the best of their ability. This means that a high number of students will be at risk through out the school.
- In-class tuition must be available to all identified indigenous students no matter what age or year level they are in. All children must have the opportunity to develop an interest and love for learning from a young age. While some indigenous students come from homes that do not have books, writing materials or parents or carers with the skills to develop keen learning minds, the students are not up to the benchmark of year 3 which is when this funding wants to 'pick them up'. Surely it is far more sensible to nurture these students as soon as they enter the education system and assist them to reach the first benchmark. Too many students enter the upper primary years unable to sufficiently read and write resulting in them leaving school at an early age.

- It is now week 6 of Term 1 and still funding from DEST for in class tuition is not available. Is this sending a message that the first term of education is not a priority for indigenous students that they may have the skills to fit 4 terms into 3? I would hope not. Why is it that this funding cannot be sorted out at the end of the previous year and then reconciled to the number of students in term 1? Schools can then commence the year with in class tuition and students are not left to 'float along' for the first 10 weeks of the year. The current administration of this funding is detrimental to the well being of indigenous students and will affect the entire school community.
- During the senate hearing on Tuesday I was interested that the question of increase development of indigenous staff was raised a number of times. If schools do not have the funding before the school year starts these tutors are either expected to 'hang around waiting' or they seek alternative employment. How then can you measure the outcomes of staff development effectively? Again the understanding of indigenous education is questioned. Indigenous students respond far more effectively to known tutors, therefore increasing education outcomes.
- The termination of ASSPA Committees again brings me to question the understanding of indigenous parents and carers. The majority of indigenous parents or carers are not comfortable in a formal, school council general meeting. Often parents and carers will only feel it is necessary to meet when they have something to discuss of importance and then it will take a few meetings to ensure all views are considered. School Council's welcome ASSPA's input at meetings however understands that it may be a representative of the group that will be comfortable in attending. In remote communities many of the parents and the majority of older carers can not read or write and it is understandable that the process of writing a Concept Plan is intimidating and one of the ways to deal with it is to ignore the request. This leaves the process to a few and in some cases one person to do the plan.
- Why is it uncomfortable to DEST to consider Concept Plans that include nutrition and breakfast programs? Educators are always offering incentives for achievements or awards to all students. If the breakfast program is an incentive for attendance surely it is the same as an award for return of homework for the week.

Thank you for the opportunity to express these items for your consideration. The process as it is now is not effective and unfortunately the indigenous students are suffering while governments work this out.

Yours sincerely

Michelle

Michelle Nuske, Chairperson School Council