



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

## SENATE

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION  
REFERENCES COMMITTEE

**(Roundtable)**

**Reference: Indigenous education funding arrangements**

**TUESDAY, 1 MARCH 2005**

**DARWIN**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE



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## SENATE

### EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 1 March 2005

**Members:** Senator Crossin (*Chair*), Senators Barnett, Jacinta Collins, Kirk, Stott Despoja and Tierney

**Substitute members:** Senator Allison for Senator Stott Despoja

**Participating members:** Senators Abetz, Bartlett, Boswell, Buckland, George Campbell, Carr, Chapman, Cherry, Colbeck, Coonan, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Fifield, Forshaw, Harradine, Humphries, Hutchins, Johnston, Knowles, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mackay, Marshall, Mason, McGauran, McLucas, Moore, Nettle, O'Brien, Payne, Robert Ray, Santoro, Sherry, Stephens, Watson, Webber and Wong

**Senators in attendance:** Senators Allison, Carr, Crossin and Tierney

#### Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The implications of the Government's proposed changes to funding arrangements for targeted assistance in Indigenous education, as contained in the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Amendment Bill 2004, and in particular:

1. Proposed changes to the IEDA and IESIP programs, with reference to:
  - the new tutorial assistance arrangements and Whole of School Intervention strategy under IEDA, and
  - new strategic initiatives for indigenous students in remote areas and the new flagship project for teaching literacy under IESIP.
2. The likely educational outcomes of the Commonwealth's new indigenous-specific funding measures, with reference to:
  - the Indigenous Youth Leadership and Indigenous Youth Mobility Programs, and
  - the Government's objective of accelerating educational outcomes for indigenous students, as stated in the 10-point national agenda for schooling announced in November 2003.
3. The accountability requirements applying to funding agreements made under IEDA and IESIP programs, with reference to:
  - the new framework of performance monitoring and reporting on educational outcomes, and
  - the new financial reporting arrangements.
4. The effect of the proposed funding measures on current state and other systemic indigenous programs, and future implications for the operation of ASSPA committees.
5. The extent of consultation between the Commonwealth and the states and territories, schools and parents, especially ASSPA committees, about policies and details of changes to the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Act 2000.

**WITNESSES**

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| <b>RAYE, Ms Sharna, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, Malak Primary School; Parent, Wanguri Primary School; and former member, Palmerston High School Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness .....</b>   | <b>1</b> |
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**Committee met at 4.43 p.m.**

**AMBYRUM-ROLLO, Mrs Di, Representative, Anula Primary School; and Parent, Wanguri Primary School**

**ANSTESS, Mrs Margaret, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, and Parent, Sanderson High School**

**GREATOREX, Mr John, Coordinator, Yolgnu Language and Culture Program, Charles Darwin University**

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**LOCKWOOD, Ms Tanya Selina, Parent, Anula Primary School; and Acting Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, Namarluk Primary School**

**McCALL, Mr Thomas Gregory, Senior Teacher, Sanderson High School; and Secretary, Sanderson High School Parent Partnership Committee**

**McGUINNESS, Ms Kaye Felice, Indigenous Grandparent, Malak Primary School**

**NASIR, Ms Tanyah, Indigenous Parent**

**RAYE, Ms Sharna, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, Malak Primary School; Parent, Wanguri Primary School; and former member, Palmerston High School Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness**

**RAYMOND, Ms Patricia Ann, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, and Indigenous Parent, Humpty Doo Primary School**

**ROBINSON, Mr Sydney Robin, School Council Vice-Chairman, Taminmin High School; Representative, Berry Springs Primary School; and Member, Darwin, Palmerston and Rural Areas Combined Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Working Party**

**ROE, Ms Theresa, Literacy Coordinator, Fred Hollows Foundation**

**ROSAS, Ms Narelle Kaye, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker, Jingili Primary School**

**TAMIANO, Mrs Delsey, Indigenous Parent, Palmerston High School; and Member, Darwin, Palmerston and Rural Areas Combined Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Working Party**

**CHAIR**—Welcome to this discussion of the effects of the changes to the Indigenous education funding act. The committee has heard concerns that, in making these changes, the government did not consult parent and community groups very widely and that, since announcing these changes, there has been little consideration given to the consequences of these changes. It is certainly evident to people in close contact with Indigenous communities that there

has been considerable distress and criticism directed at the government over the changes to the act. We are here to find out in detail your concerns and the reasons for your criticisms of the changes. Governments are often accused of making decisions without regard to local and community opinion or need. The current government makes policy at the highest level, which is the proper role of the Commonwealth. But some would argue that it is now trying to manage the details of implementation without regard for widely different needs of children and communities.

For this roundtable session, we have a few people who want to make a statement for one or two minutes and then we will throw it open to questions and have some dialogue. I know that some of you have particular aspects and areas of concern that you want to raise with us. If at any time you have something you want to say in camera or in private, the committee can consider a request for that. That means, of course, that everyone would have to leave, so if you want to do that then you might want to do it at the end rather than now.

**Mr Robinson**—Thank you for inviting us along to this meeting. I was previously a teacher for over 25 years in east Arnhem. We acknowledge that there has been an attempt to change the process by which Indigenous education is funded. We have made several contributions to the process, specifically writing to Dr Brendan Nelson about our concerns. Our concerns are based broadly across all of the aspects in regard to the consultation process, which was, from our perspective, virtually nonexistent. The funding in relation to IESIP is of great concern, particularly the delays in getting the funding across. There are many issues that have been brought up in this room already that we are basically here to reiterate. We are here to support those views.

On the parent-school partnerships, my situation at Taminmin High School is one that I have heard echoed in this room. I am now the only parent left out of an ASSPA group of 24. I have been a fairly strong opponent of these changes all the way through simply because I believed this was going to happen—parents would vote with their feet and walk away. It is too confusing. It is too difficult for so many people to grasp. I resent the fact of being put into a position where I have to support something that I oppose for our children to get funding. I resent that fact. As has been said, the situation is that we are basically blackmailed into supporting submissions in order to get funding. I do not agree with that. I do not think that I should be the only person, out of all of the parents involved, who puts their name to support a funding application. I would like to pass over to the next speaker now.

**Mrs Tamiano**—Following on from what Robbo has said, we have had a number of meetings. We first formed in May last year after the announcement was made in April by Dr Nelson. After having several meetings and throwing a few ideas around, the main issues as we see them are as follows. The consultation process did not produce an adequate representation of the key stakeholders in Indigenous education—that is, Indigenous parents, students and the community; the review's recommendations were based on what seems to have been a majority of non-Indigenous people's opinions and experiences—for example, school staff; and the government's proposed changes to IEDA, specifically to ASSPA and ATAS, are not in the best interests of Indigenous students, parents or the community. Neither the review nor the proposed changes acknowledge the disparity in educational outcomes achieved between the Northern Territory and all other states and territories.



Other issues include the unfair reallocation of funding according to the levels of disadvantage of Indigenous students relative to each other—for example, urban versus remote—rather than relative to the rest of the community—for example, Indigenous versus non-Indigenous; the decision to remove tutorial assistance from transition to year 2 Indigenous students; the proposed changes which eradicate ASSPA as a vehicle through which Indigenous students, parents and the community can have a voice and be empowered; the removal of autonomy and real decision making for Indigenous parents; the imposition of a submission based process which relies on a presumption that there are adequate structures in place to support and nurture Indigenous parents through the process; the imposition of a submission based process that will further disadvantage those Indigenous parents who do not have the capacity or confidence to articulate or negotiate their children's needs; and the danger that schools will either write the submissions without proper consultation with Indigenous parents or not write them at all.

The proposed changes limit Indigenous parents in the school to conducting activities only as specified within the original submission. This will stifle initiative and seriously restrict the capacity to meet and be responsive to local needs and issues as they arise. Basically, this is an attempt by government to assimilate Indigenous people into the mainstream education system, instead of reforming the system to be more responsive to Indigenous people's needs. They were the key issues that we discussed over the last eight months or so, and that is all I need to say at this point.

**Ms Nasir**—We talk about the notion of partnership and what that looks like and means in reality. I think there is a big assumption being made that this will be an equal relationship and that there is an equal say. I know that it is very early days with the implementation but, as you can see, there is already a great deal of disharmony and dissatisfaction, and people are here to express that. Through that process we have already experienced the fact that, with the writing of concept plans—and it may be because of the deadlines, the time factors and the implementation time line—parents do not feel as though they have been included in that process or consulted.

I am a very confident parent and we have a confident ASSPA group, or parent group, at the school. However, it has been a very difficult process. Effectively—and I know that other people have raised this—systemically the structure is silencing the parents. It is making it too difficult; it is making it too hard. Every one of us has lots of other commitments—family, work, community—and school is just another commitment. So the whole process of saying, 'Let's get in partnership,' is great in theory, but the reality and the practice is causing a great deal of heartache for many people. That structure and those programs privilege Western ways of doing things and do not acknowledge Indigenous ways of doing things and the time factor that is required to talk about things.

**CHAIR**—Does anyone else from the ASSPA groups want to say anything?

**Ms Rosas**—My personal experience with the concept plan was that it took ages. We had to ring on numerous occasions to try and find the right format for what we were doing, and they would say, 'Just send it in.' When we sent it in, they would say, if you wanted a homework centre or tutoring, that it was just going to be knocked on the head straightaway. But the concept plan mentions all of that. It was just so confusing—and we are still waiting today. We got ours in with a lot of consultation and me running around and physically visiting every family to find out

their needs and wants. We have still had no feedback whatsoever. I actually put mine in on 14 February. So, even if you did get it in, you are still waiting.

**Mr McCall**—Our community has had the same experience—largely through the efforts of Margy keeping in contact with the DEST officers, seeking clarification and having meetings. Over the Christmas holidays I think we had three, four or maybe five meetings. That involved Indigenous parents in our school community. We did get our application in, and we relied very heavily upon the sort of successful stuff we have done in the past. There is very little room for creativity and wide-ranging consultation. I have to take my hat off to the DEST people. They were excellent; they were very professional; they helped out. They attended meetings with us and were happy to clarify things. But we do feel that they were under pressure as well. It is really not a very good way to go about making decisions. As Tanyah said, it is early days yet and, being optimistic, we hope that we will improve in that ability. We have had a very active and committed ASSPA committee at our school for many years, which has been supported for many years by the staff there—and the principal herself goes along to those meetings. But we wonder whether other schools which maybe do not and have not had such a tradition are going to be disadvantaged as well. So we are going into bat on their part as well. We have not heard about it. It is week 6, and we have programs that we would like to start delivering. It is not good.

**CHAIR**—Mr Holt or Ms Roe, do you want to say anything on behalf of the Fred Hollows Foundation?

**Mr Holt**—The concern for us is a general one—I will hand over to Theresa to speak about the programs. The Fred Hollows Foundation basically runs community development programs east of Katherine. Literacy rates in the area are in the order of seven per cent at year 3 level and four per cent at year 5 level. So, in some senses, this will actually advantage the community because so many of kids will be eligible. But the loss of IESIP and ASSPA money from the communities diminishes the involvement of parents in school activities both socially and communally. Drawing parents into the school environment is seen as a very productive way to get kids involved in their school environment. All of those changes affect the ability, first of all, to have language teachers in the school. That has been dramatically cut in the region, which means that senior Indigenous people who used to teach in the school no longer do. The ASSPA changes will now again erode that. Theresa, would you like to make any other comments?

**Ms Roe**—We are talking about the programs, but I say this on a personal level. They abolished the ‘Feppi’ secretariat—the ‘Feppi’ advisory council—which was the Indigenous education advisory council to the minister.

**CHAIR**—To clarify, ‘they’ is the Northern Territory government.

**Ms Roe**—Yes. The Northern Territory government disbanded it.

**CHAIR**—How long ago was that?

**Ms Roe**—It was a few years ago, as a result of the *Learning lessons* report that Bob Collins was commissioned to do. So there went our voice for all the representatives from around the Territory. ASSPA was another good way of having a local Indigenous voice and input into the education policies that affect our kids. The whole structure and everything has gone now. I

believe that, in their August meeting last year, the *Learning lessons* implementation team were looking at a draft model for a NT Indigenous advisory committee, but I have not seen or heard of anything since. Aboriginal people do not have a voice; we do not have input. I think it is quite appalling for the Commonwealth government to do this to Aboriginal people. That is just a personal observation.

There should be some equity in funding for schools, because what is going to happen now is that schools will put in submissions and the schools with the best submissions will get the funding. It will not necessarily go to where the greatest needs are or be divided to try to make sure that everyone gets a bit of the few crumbs that they dish out. I know your committee have terms of reference, but there are some really big key issues here that are not being addressed. For instance, we need some new schools out there. Recently I visited one community, Wugullar, where all the kids are going to school—100 per cent attendance—but they are just bursting at the seams. The classrooms are terrible. They do not have any space in the classrooms. The school does not have a library. Through the foundation we are trying to provide literacy support and resources for the staff and the parents, but there is no space to put them. We have all these things which we want to work on with the community in a partnership arrangement, but because of the infrastructure we cannot really assist them. I have been advised that they will not get their new school for another two years. So for two years there will be so much overcrowding in the classroom. It is not very good, and it cannot be good for the workers working there every day either.

The government talks about shared responsibility. Well, I think the Commonwealth government has got to take more responsibility in addressing Indigenous students' needs. An indication of that is the demise of particularly the ASSPA and ATAS programs, which are where we get our high achievers from. My daughter got tutorial assistance all through school. She would not have got to year 12 had she not got tutorial assistance. We are not going to have our kids getting to that level anymore without assistance. They virtually have to be failures to get assistance now. We are not going to have our leaders and high achievers in the schooling system if we go under the arrangements that are being proposed at the moment.

**Ms Nasir**—In terms of what Theresa just raised about the high achievers, I think we tend to constantly look at a lot of our programs at the state level and at the national level from a deficit perspective, as a deficit model. We keep looking at them from the perspective of: 'Yes, there is a lot of disintegration and dysfunction.' But also within our collective Aboriginal group there is real potential for a pocket of young people to succeed and do well. Yet we tend not to put money or resources into that, because they are only a small group of children.

We are constantly looking at it from the point of view of disadvantage, of what we lack—we cannot do this, we cannot do that—and we are unable to do everything. So we keep putting money into that. But as a parent I would like to see money being put into programs which look at high achievers and at creating strong leadership for the future. I think we keep concentrating on that area of need, which is there; but that is primarily a state responsibility, and this is supplementary funding.

**CHAIR**—I will now start the questioning. Mrs Tamiano, I know how active you and your group have been. Can you outline for us what actions you have taken since last May—whom you might have written to and whether you have got responses from those people? I am also

interested to know what your ASSPA committees have been doing. What have you done with the funds that you have got in previous years? Do you believe you have been successful, and if so why?

**Mrs Tamiano**—We had a forum and invited ASSPA committee representatives and any other interested persons. That was held in May last year at Sanderson High School. From that we formed a working party of a number of people that are present here today. The working party met on several occasions. We formulated a letter to be sent to Dr Nelson outlining our concerns. That was sent in July to Dr Nelson. We received a response from his adviser, Alan Tudge, in August. Then we sent another letter to Dr Nelson, in October, and received another response from Mr Tudge in December.

**CHAIR**—Are you able to provide us with copies of the letters that you sent to the minister and his responses?

**Mrs Tamiano**—Yes, I have got them here. Do you want those now?

**CHAIR**—When we are finished would be fine.

**Mrs Tamiano**—When we started, we decided to try to do an analysis of what we had, through ASSPA and ATAS, in the current funding arrangement compared to what it might look like from 2005 and beyond. I also have a copy of that for you if you would like that.

**CHAIR**—All right; that is great.

**Mrs Tamiano**—To try to get as much input from as many Indigenous parents as possible, we did a newsletter that was sent out to every school in the NT talking about the proposed changes and asking people to think about them and take them back to their own ASSPA committees. That has probably been the majority of the work that we have done as a working party. In answer to your other question about the sorts of things that we did as an ASSPA committee, I can only speak on behalf of the ASSPA committees that I have been involved in, which have included the Moulden Park one. I was involved in the ASSPA committee there for four years. My son left there last year and went to high school, so I have not had involvement with them this year.

**CHAIR**—The committee went to Moulden Park this morning.

**Mrs Tamiano**—Yes, I did hear that you were going there for a visit. I think you would find that the committee there would be one of the most active ASSPA committees in Darwin and Palmerston. As for the sorts of things that we did, we conducted a lot of cultural awareness activities that all children in the school were able to participate in, things like activities during NAIDOC Week and on any other significant dates, like harmony day. We brought Aboriginal artists in to work with children. Most of the time we specifically looked for family members, if possible, and other people to participate. We brought them into the school and did basket weaving and had culture days.

We also started a nutrition or breakfast program. That was the first one that Moulden Park had had. It had never had a breakfast program before. ASSPA initiated it. We actually had that in our report to the school council and one of the questions that was asked was whether it would be

available to all students in the school. We had to inform them that, as it involved Indigenous specific ASSPA funding, it would only be available to Indigenous students. But from that we ended up entering into a partnership with the school whereby we went halvies, so to speak, and had a breakfast program that all students in the whole school were able to take part in.

As a result of that breakfast program, about 18 months down the track we were approached by the Red Cross to start the first Good Start Breakfast Club, which you have probably heard about a little more over the last six months. So we were actually the first school in the Northern Territory to have the Good Start Breakfast Club, which is a partnership between the Red Cross and Sanitarium, fully sponsored. They also provided workers to come in.

**CHAIR**—That sprung out of the work that the ASSPA committee started?

**Mrs Tamiano**—That sprung out of the initiative that the ASSPA committee started. Other things: we have had careers expos which were open to all of the students in years 5, 6 and 7 but had a very heavy focus on Indigenous speakers. We brought in predominantly Indigenous speakers, but all children were able to participate in that. The benefit of that is having Indigenous people up there as role models, which is really good for kids' pride. I could probably go on for another half an hour telling you the sorts of things that we were doing.

**CHAIR**—What about someone else? What about some of the other ASSPA committees—what have you been up to?

**Ms Raymond**—At Humpty Doo we had a similar rural working party where the ASSPAs combined. We have had cultural days and, similar to Delsey's group, career days, where instead of going to the workplaces we brought the workplaces to the school. That enabled both parents to bring their work out to the students, boosting pride, self-esteem and self-worth—and of course that enhances their learning. So we have initiated a lot of work that seems small at a grassroots level but does go out into the community and out to the students. Similarly, the staff appreciate it.

**CHAIR**—We heard some evidence this morning that ASSPA committees had bank accounts and actual assets and that there has been a requirement that you either sell those and give the money to DEST or divest yourself of those. Can you give me an idea of what amounts of money we might be talking about here and what you have had to get rid of or hand back to DEST?

**Ms Rosas**—For Jingili Primary I do not know the actual amount because our ASSPA decided to hand over our assets to the school. We had a computer that was probably about 10 years old.

**CHAIR**—And DEST allowed you to do that?

**Ms Rosas**—Yes, but it has to be with the agreement of the full ASSPA committee as to what they wanted to do, and we decided that, instead of selling off the assets and then giving the money back to DEST, the school could still utilise the assets.

**CHAIR**—Have you done that?

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—Yes, because at that time the funding was only \$110 per Indigenous student and Narelle's school at Jingili is very low in numbers.

**Ms Rosas**—Yes, it is like a transients' school.

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—Whereas at Anula we are starting to get to that stage. We are just starting to hit 60-70 and we opted to keep ours with the homework centre, which follows wherever the Indigenous kids go, but it is basically at the school.

**CHAIR**—So you handed yours to the school council as well, did you?

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—No, to the homework centre itself.

**Ms Rosas**—It stays in the school, on the school council asset register, but the way we worded it was: 'If there are going to be any more Indigenous programs we would like it if these assets can be utilised towards them,' because we have bought resources such as CD-ROMs and encyclopaedias on Indigenous stuff—and you cannot just put them in the library; they might get lost or—

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—That is another thing with the ASSPA moneys. When the funding was given to us, the school would come to us and say, 'We need more Indigenous resources in the library. Can ASSPA pay for it?' And yet we were told that they were given money by DEET or DEST that we did not know about: why couldn't they use those moneys and we could use these on our programs? That is what skimmed us when we had to do our culture weeks and things like that.

**Ms Lockwood**—So, instead of having a whole week like lots of other people had, we only had one or two days for our culture week.

**Ms Rosas**—I think that is the thing about the ASSPA or parental committees being combined with school councils: we will lose our say in where we want the money to go. It is not in our hands anymore. We might come up with a great idea, but we might be the one person on the school council.

**CHAIR**—So you feel disempowered now?

**Ms Rosas**—Totally.

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—It is like when we were doing the concept plan—to one parent it was a brilliant idea, and I give her 10 out of 10 for standing up and saying blah, blah, blah, and then you get an assistant principal who says, 'No, that's not good enough, that's not how they want it.' It all came down to wording to do with the concept plan and that is what a lot of us—

**Ms Rosas**—On that same note, in a small school like mine, I do not have an assistant principal, I only have a principal, a senior teacher and myself as the AIEW. I had to go around and do a lot of the groundwork: get the information from the working, at-home and student parents and then take it back to the school and sit down. We had three Indigenous parents who came in at 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon to sit down and nut out exactly what we wanted in the

concept plan. On the same thing, I do not have submission writing skills and none of our parents do. My principal did it, so we rely very heavily on her help. In some schools, if you did not have that assistance, you may as the AIEW be left to do the whole concept plan yourself. It gets very nerve-racking if you do not have that expertise. If you are not writing it up well, they are just going to say, 'Sorry, it's not written well—chuck it in the bin.'

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—And then you have missed the deadline.

**Senator ALLISON**—Can I ask for a response, from anyone who chooses to make it, to the evidence we heard earlier today from Mr Griffiths from the Catholic Education Office, who said, 'There's quite a lot of romance about how well ASSPA committees work,' but in some schools they are non-existent and do not do the sort of great work that you have been telling us about this afternoon. I recognise that you are in schools and so you may have limited experience, but have you heard this said before? Can you comment on schools that you might or might not know where this would be the case, that this is simply a figment of our romantic imagination?

**Mr Robinson**—I think that is a fact. It was a reasonable statement that was made. The situation in my opinion is that, while ASSPA in some areas worked very well and efficiently, it was dependent upon the parents and their input within the group. In other areas they were very ineffectual, poorly organised and poorly run and that is what needed working on, rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak. I believe that was the area that needed working on. I do not think the whole thing needed to be disbanded because some were not operating efficiently. Work was needed on what we had.

**Senator ALLISON**—I see nods around the table.

**Ms Nasir**—In terms of comparison it is like a school council, where you always have the same core group of parents doing everything. It is the same sort of setup. You have the same sorts of parents getting involved with ASSPA committees, Indigenous committees and working groups. It is comparable and it is those same parents that do everything. I think the term he used was 'over glorified', which is his terminology. I guess there are reasons why some ASSPA committees did not function as well, like Robbo said. Overall, I agree with what Robbo has said. It needs to be revisited, reviewed and revamped rather than completely disbanded, because this is something that worked for such a long period of time.

As Indigenous people we come into this forum carrying all of our history and baggage. With that comes our history of colonisation, of our stolen generation and of our oppression. The position that we occupy within society is not a highly regarded position. We bring that and we know our position as such. When we come to the table with the school, unless we are confident, competent and articulate, we are not going to be able to get our voice across. It is a disempowering process that is operating, unfortunately. There is great intent in some schools; there may be no intent in others. It is very difficult trying to understand where Indigenous people are in terms of their positioning in society at this point in time. We are still trying to get there because of our history and our access to education in the long term and the big picture. It is very difficult.

**Senator ALLISON**—Can I go to breakfast programs and the like—some schools are even providing morning tea and lunch and so on to students. A previous inquiry by this committee

heard a lot of evidence of schools being a bit uncertain about whether to go down that path. Some thought that once they started providing all of these meals there was a greater expectation that they would, that they would even transport kids around and get them out of bed and so on, and that more and more of this was taking away the responsibility from parents. In your schools, is this also an arguable issue? Do you feel that there are other ways of making sure that families provide what is pretty fundamental care for children? I would like some comments from around the table about that.

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—That comes back to attendance and retention—if we want the kids at school they have got to feel welcome. I wrote a letter to Darwin bakery last year, because the church group we used to go to moved on to Queensland. We used to get bread from them to feed the kids. This is not just Indigenous kids; this is all shades of colour. I wrote it for Sharna's school, Malak, mine and Allawah, because we were all using that church group. We were allowed 50 loaves and then we were cut back to 40. We used to rotate to go to Winnellie to get it. It was for those kids so that they could have their breakfast and lunches.

If they knew we were feeding them, they would come to school. I said to them, 'Why didn't you come to school today?' They said, 'Cause I don't have no food.' I said, 'I need you at school and I'll give you food.' Then I saw them coming, so that told me it worked. Now the school is starting to pick that up. Even the teachers are noticing that as well: 'Okay, this one has not had breakfast today; can you give him double at recess?' I said: 'Well, send them to me in the morning. We can feed them and then they can go without sore bellies.' We have found that that works. That saves us from chasing these kids all over Casuarina or them hiding out in the park. It is a safety issue as well.

**Mr Holt**—In the communities where we work we have assisted the local women's centre to run a breakfast program. That is based on a co-contribution from parents. The parents do all the work. The anaemia rates in the community have come down from something like 60 per cent to 12 per cent in 2½ years. The teachers say that the kids are able to concentrate much better at school. Ameliorating the long-term health effects of not getting a good diet in the early years actually saves the government and the health department money in the long term. There are a lot of programs that are siloed into health and education, but I think this is a perfect example of where you are supporting something that has strong health outcomes, engages local people and gives people a sense of autonomy.

As I was saying before, part of our concern with this loss of autonomy is that our aim is to help people work for and take responsibility for their own business and affairs. This is just another case of where people who want to take responsibility are deprived of the opportunity to do it. The government makes the decision and people outside the communities make decisions more and more for them. You have things such as mutual obligation, which is based on having opportunities. If there are no work opportunities and there are no training opportunities, basically what you are saying is that people are not eligible for all the assistance that they might get if there were. If you live in a town where there is work and there are training programs and training organisations you basically have access to a whole suite of services and support.

**Senator ALLISON**—How typical is that for parents—

**Mr Holt**—In remote communities it is 100 per cent.



**Senator ALLISON**—to be involved in preparing the food and providing it?

**Mr Holt**—I think that is something the government has tried to encourage up here over the last couple of years. But because the program has been dependent on ASSPA that has made whole program vulnerable.

**Mrs Anstess**—I am from Sanderson High School. We have about 220 Indigenous students at our school, out of 650 students. We have had a high population for many years. I have been at the school for nearly 10 years. A lot of our ASSPA money—Trish, in answer to your question—we spend on workshops. ASSPA is about involving parents, and we try to get the parents to come in and look at the big picture—how their kids get their NTC, their year 12; what they have to do; and how parents can support them along the way. We have been successful in our submissions through VEGAS, and we were able to run the workshops for two days. After school, we would take the kids to a place and get people in to talk about traineeships, apprenticeships, time management, cadetships, tertiary education, TAFE education—you name it. We would stay overnight at that place, have breakfast, come back to school and then go back again in the afternoon, because we could not possibly get it all in in the one afternoon. A lot of that money was spent on those workshops. We did the years 11 and 12 together, the year 10s together and we did a parent workshop informing them of what the school system is all about, how students select their units and where it goes from there.

We do not actually have a breakfast program at our school. We have a room that is open for everybody—Indigenous students and anybody else. It is open all day long—recess, lunchtime—and seniors use it for study lines all day. Students can access toast, vegemite and jam, for which we raise money by selling chocolates. That is our food program. As I said, we do not have a breakfast program, but I am sure the word is around that if they are hungry they can come in any time and help themselves to food.

But the workshops have been successful. A number of year 12s from our school have graduated, gone on to uni with cadetships, got their degrees and are now successfully working in the community. We would like to do that for all of them, but uni is not for everybody and they can also do apprenticeships, traineeships or go through a TAFE course. We are trying to get to the kids to tell them about all their options and all the pathways they can follow—that it does not have to be tertiary education, that it does not have to be a traineeship, that they can do whatever they want to. We just want to let them know that it is all out there for them. That is what my job at the school is, with the help of Tom. I think we have been pretty successful at our school. Our ASSPA money has really been very helpful. I do not know if we would be able to run the program without it. We have made our concept plans the same as the programs that have been successful, but we have not heard as yet whether they have been successful. We will just have to wait to see.

**Senator CARR**—We are hearing evidence that one of the arguments about closing down the ASSPA committees was that they failed, in the eyes of some people in Canberra, to understand the need for integration—that is, that Aboriginal programs should be integrated into the system. The government at large is now going to this line that we have to mainstream everything. Have you heard this talk?

**Ms Raye**—It is happening with everything.

**Senator CARR**—Were you told that the reason you had to go was that you failed to understand the need for ‘integration’—the word that was used in one of the submissions?

**Ms Raye**—It sounds a lot like assimilation, doesn’t it.

**Senator CARR**—Yes—which is where I want to go next. The government says that we are going to have these new shared responsibility agreements, that there is a whole new ball game operating now and Indigenous people are going to negotiate with the Commonwealth directly—bypass structures such as ATSIC and others that have been around and talk directly to someone in Canberra.

**Ms Raye**—But the problem is: do these people in Canberra really understand what is happening in regional Australia and out in these remote communities? They would not have a clue—most of them have probably never left Canberra—and, with the stroke of a pen, they are making big decisions that will affect our livelihoods and our kids’ futures. Even with the particular changes to these programs, as far as I know the decision is going to be made in Darwin. A lot of the decision-makers who are going to decide who will get funding would not have even been to these communities, and here they are making decisions. At least it was equitable under the ASSPA program—every school got funding based on numbers and then it was up to the school, the parents and the Indigenous students to decide—whereas now you have people who have probably never visited your community making decisions about your funding and what you can and cannot do. That is the problem.

**Senator CARR**—Ms Nasir spoke before about the history that you bring to these situations. Do others share that view? Is it the case that people find it difficult to approach the school, that Indigenous people find it hard to engage with school authorities?

**Mr McCall**—It is one of the reasons we had the parent workshops. We did not get through to all parents; we only get through to those who have indicated they would like to be involved. It is almost like a professional development forum that we are setting up, which I hear other people saying is really needed for submission writing. How can you write a submission if you do not have the skills or you do not have the experience? We all need models to work from and we are all flying blind here. In our case we went back to what we know has worked at our school and that existed in our community.

**Mrs Anstess**—We have not even had a chance to look at other things that may work. We are just trying to get this one through.

**Senator CARR**—In every school, teachers talk about how hard it is to involve parents. In every school in the country I think you will find that same story being repeated. I would have thought that involving Indigenous parents would be even more difficult. Would you agree?

**Mr Robinson**—Yes, totally—100 per cent. It is almost impossible to get Indigenous people past the front desk. It is hard enough getting Europeans to overcome those barriers and to enter the school environment. I am on the school council; it has taken me five years to become comfortable in the school environment, to actually know the people and to feel comfortable. For Indigenous people it is a big ask to ask them to enter into that environment, to sit down in a principal’s office and be confronted with—

**Senator CARR**—So we are talking about a school principal, a person you should be able to get to know.

**Mr Robinson**—Yes.

**Senator CARR**—Parents should be able to get to know the teachers of their kids and talk to them. I know I don't get to know my children's teachers, I can tell you that now. We talk in these grand theories, don't we? We all say that parents should be able to go and front the teacher. I do not think it is totally unrealistic—

**Mr Robinson**—I make a specific effort to get to know the teachers and to get to know the staff because I am in there all the time. We had a twilight school, an evening school, just last week in Berry Springs. Parents were invited to come along and see what their kids did and to do the stuff with their kids in a classroom environment. There were no Indigenous parents—none. That was a very casual, very relaxed environment. It was meant to be that way to make it a nice place to be, but no Indigenous people arrived.

**Senator CARR**—We are talking about teachers, who are not the most terrifying people in the world. What happens when it is bureaucrats? This is my point about these shared responsibility arrangements, this brave new world. If you are having trouble getting people to front the school, how are they going to front the bureaucracy in Canberra?

**Mr Robinson**—They will not.

**Ms Nasir**—Indigenous people will vote with their feet, and maybe we will not articulate our grievances or our concerns because we are not all necessarily that confident, plus everyone is thinking about repercussions because we are all in paid employment and all that sort of thing. People are worried and they are concerned. So people will just not attend, or they will attend and not say anything and not participate.

**Senator CARR**—The alternative argument is this: what difference does it make having a few parent committees around the place? What do you say about that?

**Ms Raye**—ASSPA has been around for 14 years—I think it got introduced in 1990. At that time, the way it was designed meant it was very flexible; it encouraged a lot of parents to get involved for the first time ever in a positive light. Instead of going to fight the teacher, you were actually invited into the school grounds to sit down in a formal setting and have meetings to learn about the schooling environment and for the school to learn about the Aboriginal community. There was overwhelming parental involvement.

I know the department actually keeps stats on all the parents who were involved and all the students. So if you go back to the department and ask them for statistics on parental involvement from 1990 up until last year I think you will see a big climb and then it will dwindle because they started making changes to the program which made it inflexible, put too many restrictions on the committees. There was too much accountability stuff because someone stuffed up in Queensland. That is why you have lost interest over the years—because they have kept moving the goalpost.

But there were some really deadly outcomes, particularly in the early years. One example is when I was the combined chairperson of the Darwin ASSPA committees. We had one in Nhulunbuy and in each region of the Territory. We had one in Alice, in Barkly and in Katherine. Back in 1991 we did not have Aboriginal workers in the school. That was a big issue for us—we wanted Aboriginal education workers in the school. So we wrote to the minister. He just told us to get lost. He was drafting his IESIP plan, the triennial plan. We tried to get him to include Aboriginal education workers in his plan and fund them using Commonwealth funds, but he refused to.

So we went public; we went to the media. We had parents who had paid their own way from all around the Territory—we came here and we went into your House. Fred Finch was a minister at the time. Within a couple of weeks the whole plan was redrafted and Aboriginal education workers were in place. Historically they have done a lot of excellent work. These workers would not be in place today without the parents lobbying and those sorts of things. It is sad that the program has gone now. It has changed a lot.

**CHAIR**—Back in 1990, when the first Aboriginal education program was formed, the first goal out of the 21 or 22 goals was to encourage more Indigenous people and parents to get involved in the schools. Do you believe that the Commonwealth has now walked away from that goal, and perhaps has even turned its back on providing for and encouraging parents to get involved in their kids' schooling in this way?

**Ms Roe**—Yes. I think they just set up gatekeepers all around the country.

**Ms Rosas**—My personal opinion on it is they have said: 'We need Indigenous education workers in the department. We need them in the schools. In Indigenous education we are failing to meet the mainstream standards, so we need this help, obviously, if we are going to be making it up with all the other nations of the world. We have one of the least educated Indigenous populations in the world.' So they say, 'We need you,' and then what do they do? They take out all the programs. So it is a big contradiction. It is like: 'We need the wheel, but we'll have a square instead.' It does not make sense.

**Ms Nasir**—The goalposts have moved. It is all about literacy and numeracy. It is about retention and attendance. It has nothing to do with parental anything or Indigenous parent decision making. That is what is not there anymore. That is why there is such a struggle and there is such tension. Yes, there is this thing called partnership, and the whole notion of shared ownership and shared responsibility. I do not believe that we understand what that really means. Until we know what that really means and what that looks like, we are going to have this struggle continuously, because we are not on an equal footing right from the word go.

**Senator CARR**—That is the point I was making. The power relationship is so uneven.

**Ms Nasir**—It is uneven, yes.

**Senator CARR**—It is difficult. The truth is that these parent organisations did provide a training ground. They provided an opportunity for people to learn the ropes.

**Ms Nasir**—Absolutely.

**Mr Robinson**—They did that and they provided us with a forum through which we could speak. Generally within an ASSPA group there was somebody who was able to relate to the principals or to the school administration. There was generally some person in there who could carry the message for the people who were not willing to step forward. There was generally somebody there to take that forward. The ASSPA meetings were a forum for everybody's voice to be heard, and for that voice to be taken forward.

**Mr Holt**—There is also a benefit to the education department that is lost because, where you have Indigenous people involved in a school, when school attendance is down people in the school have got someone to talk to about how you re-engage with the community. What happened in Wugularr community a couple of years ago was that a teacher came in and decided that they did not want the language program, so the senior language teachers left the program and they were not around the school. So when attendance fell to about 30 per cent, the teachers basically said, 'This is a problem with community drunkenness.' They put it all back onto the community as their problem, but basically she was completely unable to relate to the school and did not have relationships with anyone in the community. It meant that the school became an isolated body. The next principal had a very different attitude and wanted to encourage people back to the school, but it took six or 12 months. Now attendance is 100 per cent or around that all the time. So that is a really important part of it.

Back to your earlier point about equity, it just seems as though a lot of programs are disappearing. I do not really want to call them slush funds, but it does seem that there are large amounts of money with no real guidelines and control being put in the hands of senior bureaucrats in the Indigenous coordination centres and other areas—often people who do not have an in-depth understanding of community realities. So, as much as they come up with schemes which might have an impact in an urban area, in remote communities some of these things are totally devastating. You have communities now where there is no education officer visiting, there is no employment officer visiting and there is no training department visiting, so the actual access point has disappeared from communities. There is no-one to talk to anymore about those things. You are basically saying to people in the bush who are illiterate in English: 'You get yourself access to a training program. You negotiate with a registered training organisation about getting access to a training program.'

Ten years ago there was someone who visited the community who knew about those organisations, knew how they were supported and knew where the funding was to support them. That just does not happen anymore. As I said before, with the mutual obligation agreement what it actually comes down to in the communities is that they do not have any alternatives or options. Therefore they are not eligible for any support. We co-opted the Centrelink manager from Katherine to come and work for our program so that there was something going on on the other side of the fence and so that people had options. We worked on developing options for people so that then that person was able to go back into the Centrelink system and was able to provide those options for people. In an environment where there is nothing available, there is no support available either, so you are in a hopeless situation unless you move to Katherine.

**CHAIR**—I want to finish by asking about the review of ASSPA that happened in 2003. Through estimates hearings we were able to find out that, of the 3,800 committees around the country, 400 were randomly selected. Were any of you here connected to one of those 400? Do you know of any ASSPA committees in the Territory that might have got a discussion paper?

**Ms Rosas**—No.

**Mrs Tamiano**—Moulden were asked to respond to phase 2—I think; I would have to double-check—which we did. But I think we put our submission in a week late and I am not sure whether it was considered.

**CHAIR**—So you might have been the only one that you know of that was consulted.

**Mrs Tamiano**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—There were some people who wanted to give evidence in private. Is that still the case? When we take evidence in private, it is just the witness and the committee; all the rest of you have to leave. So before I close this session, is there anything people want to say in closing? This is your opportunity to put it on the record.

**Senator ALLISON**—Can I just add another question to your question?

**CHAIR**—Yes, go on.

**Senator ALLISON**—Would people here around the table sooner be dealing with the Northern Territory government than the federal government?

**Senator CARR**—All the officials are sitting here!

**Senator ALLISON**—Yes. Would you mind moving out of the room? Should the federal government simply hand over a per capita amount of money to the Northern Territory government and let them get on with it?

**Ms Roe**—I think we need an Aboriginal government, then we would know where our money was going and that it was going to the right areas. I am only joking.

**CHAIR**—Do people have a view about that? Do people believe that, as Senator Allison said, it would be better if this money was handed to the government?

**Ms Rosas**—That is already in the works.

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—They already have money given to them anyway, from DEST to DEET, and stuff like that.

**CHAIR**—In terms of the ASSPA committee and the new funding for parent participation, would it be better if that was given to the NT government as well?

**Mrs Tamiano**—Personally, I think it would be better if it did come under the banner of the NT government, because in terms of education and a lot of other issues the Territory government seems to be a bit more responsive to Indigenous issues as a whole. That is my personal opinion, though.

**CHAIR**—I think Senator Allison is talking about the new two-stage process in terms of the concept and the funding. Whether the NT government would keep the same process or not, I do not know. But should the bucket of money for what was ASSPA be given to the NT government? Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo, do you have a view about that?

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—I am half and half on that. It depends on whether there are any legit guidelines attached to it.

**CHAIR**—Do you think the current guidelines are legit?

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—What I mean is that we know buckets of money are being given to DEET, and to us they are secret buckets of money; we are not really meant to know about it.

**Mr Robinson**—My opinion on that matter is that the NT government have been far more easily approachable; they are more accessible to us than anything we have had from the Commonwealth government. We have made a number of approaches to the Commonwealth government, and the reality is that the replies we have had back from Dr Nelson's office have basically been gobbledygook; they have not really dealt with the issues we have raised. I honestly believe that the NT government have been far more approachable and far more understanding of the issues in front of us. They are here in the Territory and they are travelling around the Territory; they see the issues. I would really like to see Dr Brendan Nelson come up here and spend some time in some Aboriginal households. That would be nice. Then he may get a realistic view of the issues.

**Mrs Tamiano**—Getting back to parent involvement, it seems that the new system is based on what they are calling 'measurable outcomes'. One of the things that has really come out of this is that it is very obvious that government do not consider parent involvement an outcome for Indigenous kids, whereas we all know that, in practice, having parents involved in the school is the best thing our kids could have.

**Ms Raymond**—Yes.

**Mrs Tamiano**—It encourages them to come to school and learn and participate.

**Ms Roe**—It is also grandmothers, uncles, aunties—everyone gets involved.

**Ms Raymond**—Yes, with ASSPA; it is an intergenerational thing.

**Mr Robinson**—I think another crucial point that has been missed is that ASSPA is not primarily made up of parents; it is made up of the extended family.

**Ms Rosas**—That is right—nannas and aunties.

**CHAIR**—Ms McGuinness, do you want to say something about that, seeing that you are here as a grandparent?

**Ms McGuinness**—I am a bit embarrassed actually. As an Indigenous parent, I was always in the school when my children went to school. My baby is now 23! I was a very active mother in

the school system and I did not have the beautiful program that we now have for my grandchildren. I am heavily involved in the school. I am there all the time, because my grandson is a testy little character and there is not enough support for him as an Indigenous infant going through the school system. Given that he does not relate well, it is very difficult. I think he has learning issues. He came a long way in the last two years from being involved in the ASSPA program. I would race home after work and get involved. I would say, 'Don't forget there is a committee meeting on tonight.' He loved it, because I was there. His mum has two other children so it is not always easy for her to come when she has little bubs.

**CHAIR**—So part of the ASSPA committee was the extended family as well, which you would say has not been acknowledged in these changes?

**Ms McGuinness**—That is right.

**Ms Rosas**—Last year we had four meetings and another six social gatherings. At one of my social gatherings we had 100 people. I then had to go and find somebody to come and cook all the food for me. There are grandparents—nanna might come along. I am a single mother, so my parents came along because they like to be involved in my daughter's education. Uncles will come along. My own personal experience, when I started at Jingili seven years ago, is that we did not have an AIEW; we only had an ARO, who was employed for three hours a day. There was no homework centre and no ASSPA. In the time I have been there, we have built up our ASSPA committee to about 10 active parents coming into the school at least once a fortnight, checking on what is happening. We now have three Indigenous parents on the school council. It has done brilliantly. We have had children coming from no schooling at all. They have been with me for one year and are more confident. The ATAS help and having their nanna around in the school with them has built them up and they are actually reaching normal benchmarks. That was in just one year. So it is sad to see it all being pulled away.

Today was a prime example. I had another nanna come up and say: 'Look, this is coming up. I need a bit of help with this. What can I do?' I had to turn to her and say: 'I am going to a big meeting. I will let you know tonight,' because I cannot give her any information anymore about who can help or what I can do to make sure that her grandchildren are going to be all right now. They have had six weeks of no assistance and she is feeling it, so she came to me and I said, 'I'm sorry, I can't help you.' It is a sad thing to have to say, but we have to knock back people every day and say: 'We don't know anything. We can't help you at the moment. We're trying to find out all we can.'

**Mrs Ambyrum-Rollo**—All the schools are using us as teacher aids in classes.

**CHAIR**—I thank all of you for giving up your time this afternoon. We certainly appreciate that. This is the first day of our hearings. We are going out bush tomorrow, to Milingimbi and Galiwinku; we are going to Alice Springs on Thursday; and we are planning to go to Queensland, Western Australia and probably near the bottom of Australia at some other stage.

**Mrs Anstess**—I know you have been to two schools today. How were those schools chosen for your committee to go to?



**CHAIR**—That was raised with us today by the people at Wulagi Primary School. We had representations from principals and parents from a range of schools around the Territory. We could not go to all schools, so we had to pick just a couple. We went to Wulagi Primary School because we had some very strong representations from there about the impact of the in-school tuition and also ASSPA, and to balance that I thought it would be fair to go to a Palmerston school so that we would have a sort of Darwin CBD school versus a Palmerston school. I knew that Delsey had been involved in Moulden Park and the background to the breakfast program there. That is how they were picked. If we had a week and if senators from interstate had time we would go to a lot more schools, but we had to make a choice about which schools we would go to. Similarly, if I had time I would take the committee to Amanbidji, Kalkaringi and Ntaria because we have heard significant evidence from those schools about the negative impact of these changes. We have also heard it from east Arnhem Land. It is the same in Alice Springs, where we are going to Ross Park and Yiparinya. We just do not have the time to go to every school, so we are trying to get to as many schools as we possibly can. By the time this week is finished we will have been to about nine schools in about 3½ days.

To compensate for the fact that we did not get to your school, we decided we would have this roundtable discussion and try and hear from as many people as possible. That does not stop you, though, from writing anything else that you want to add. If you think of things that you forgot to tell us today or if there are issues that you feel this committee needs to know about—we do not report for quite a while; this is just the first day of hearings—you only need to send a letter to John and the committee, at Parliament House, and we can include it as additional evidence. I want to get the message out that if you want to say something else or if you have missed something, or if we have missed something, do not think that when you walk out of the door today that this was the last chance to tell us. There is plenty of opportunity for you to write to the committee and have some input into what is happening. We intend to try and meet up with as many Indigenous parents as we can around the country—predominantly, of course, in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It was hard—I was not sure whether we should go to Wulagi, Malak or where we should go.

**Mrs Anstess**—I was thinking that Wulagi does not have many Indigenous students, so I was just wondering how that school was selected.

**CHAIR**—They have 52. I guess we predominantly wanted to get evidence about the impact of ITAS as well—the in-school tuition. Thank you very much.

*Evidence was then taken in camera—*

**Committee adjourned at 6.14 p.m.**