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**HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION**

**NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION**

**MR Chris SIDOTI, Commissioner**  
**MR Tim ROBERTS, Co-Commissioner**

**TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS**

**AT MELBOURNE ON FRIDAY, 12 NOVEMBER 1999 AT 8.33 AM**

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**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** For the record, this is the hearing of the rural education inquiry in Melbourne on 12 November. Good morning. Thank you very much for coming so early. I'm sorry that we weren't ready for you when you actually arrived, being a longer period. Would you like to introduce yourselves down the line and then make whatever comments you wish to make, and then Tim and I could ask some questions to you?

**MR COLLINS:** Thanks, Chris. I'm Rob Collins. I'm the incoming Chair of Country Education Project (CEP) and I'll take over this afternoon.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks, Rob.

**MR ROGERSON:** I'm Ian Rogerson and I am the Secretary/Public Officer for CEP.

**MS WHITE:** Esme White. I'm the Executive Officer for CEP.

**MR BESTER:** Laurie Bester. I'm Principal at Murtoa Secondary College. I've been associated with CEP for 21 years I think now.

**MR CRAIG:** My name is Bob Craig. I am Principal of Leitchville Primary School in Northern Victoria. I've been a member of the CEP organisation for the 12 years I've been in that area.

**MR BALFOUR:** And my name is Al Balfour. I am the outgoing Chairperson of CEP Inc. I relinquish my position this morning.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks.

**[Country Education Project]**

**MR COLLINS:** Chris, I'd like to begin by talking about why CEP has a right to be represented at this particular activity. The Country Education Project has as its vision that it would be the leading voice of country areas on issues on rural education in Victoria. It claims to be an advocate for all rural education in Victoria in various ways and so we're very pleased to be able to be here today. The Country Education Project is the only organisation of its type in Australia and we're glad that we're able to put a point of view.

What we'll be saying today will be in the context of a general decline of rural areas in Victoria and across Australia and the threat of closure of schools and reduced resources and the population decline and loss of economy in so many of those areas. That's been evidenced by a number of things which have occurred recently, and one being the state election here and the referendum. There's been comments about

that all over Australia, so that's the basis on which we want to make our comments. I'd therefore like to hand over so that Ian can speak next.

**MR ROGERSON:** Yes, thanks, Chris. I'm from Hopetoun in North-West Victoria and I've been involved with Country Education Project since it started virtually. One of the things that stands out now of course is that decline of rural population and the effect of that, in that most of that decline is young people. Therefore as we look around towns like mine, the majority of people are elderly people. The Koorong Village, which is the elderly people's home, is full with waiting lists and yet the school populations are falling drastically in that area.

### **[Declining school populations]**

When I first went to the school there were 250-something students there. There's now 116 for next year. That sort of population decline has occurred right across Victoria in the rural areas. So we lose those young people and we're not able to have them as part of our community structure, and therefore we rely very much on a few people say in their 40s, early 50s, to be involved actively in the community. The elderly people need their support; the young need a lot of support and yet they're the ones who must go away in order to find a job or to find education.

The cost of tertiary education remains high and it is a problem continuously that those students have to go away. The parents have to pay the cost of the university education; they have to pay the cost of the children living away from home whilst they're attending university and other education, and of course they never return. The biggest problem with education in rural Victoria is it educates a child to live somewhere else. Unfortunately the jobs aren't there; using their education is not there, it remains in the big rural cities, provincial cities, or it remains in Melbourne and Geelong.

We've overcome a lot of those things though. I mean, one of our biggest problems is the capacity to offer a curriculum at schools. We've had reduction after reduction over the years. How do we handle that? It's a positive thing; simply teachers are working harder, working longer. We may have had regulations on how many hours we're supposed to work; we simply can't do that. In order for a school like mine to survive we have to offer everything we can.

### **[Curriculum offerings at Years 11 and 12]**

For example, next year we'll have only 23 students doing VCE at our school and we're offering 46 different subjects for VCE, including VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING subjects. The reason for that is simply that the teachers will continue to take an increased teaching load or catch up to the students at lunchtime or after school, have weekend classes, because that's the only way that school will

survive. If we can't offer the VCE the students will leave and go somewhere else. So that's a very important factor, that we just continue to have to work harder.

We've struggled still with the specialist services such as visiting teachers and speech therapists. They're not available in the local area. If they are available through a pooling of resources as an area-wide thing, they normally reside in Stawell or Horsham, somewhere like that. Once again, if we can get them maybe once a fortnight for a couple of hours we're very lucky. So even though we have the capacity to have those people at times, they are not readily available.

One of the things with the decline in population is a slight reversed trend that people from Melbourne and other areas are seeing cheap accommodation available - because the houses are empty in town - and are moving into and buying those houses. What that's meant is that we've got a different type of population, because often when they move in their children have been transient and therefore have educational problems.

So we often have students who - their parents buy a house in town, they move into town and their education level is probably three years below their age level. Therefore we might, for example, have a student who moves in grade 5 at the primary school and we have to then offer literacy resources to that student, whereas really the resources should be used at prep 1 and 2. Therefore our resources are stretched by the introduction of these people.

Some of these people in recent years, we've had a number of people over the age of 21 trying to come back to school. I mean, they've realised as they settled into a tiny town like ourselves that they may be able to go back to school and be accepted there. Now, the government doesn't fund adult education. It doesn't fund schools for being able to have people over the age of 21.

### **[Disability]**

**MS WHITE:** Thanks, Ian. Further to the information presented by Ian regarding the range of difficulties experienced by students in rural and remote areas of Victoria, we would also suggest that these are exacerbated for students with special needs. For the purpose of this presentation we include in that group students with intellectual or physical disability, as well as the needs of carer students. In rural areas students with disabilities are disadvantaged by the lack of available specialist support services, particularly in the area of allied health professionals; for example, physiotherapists, speech and occupational therapists. Outreach services are extremely limited or in most rural areas non-existent.

One example we would like to highlight relates to children with cerebral palsy integrated into rural school settings. Generally between the ages of seven and 10 years they require follow-up orthopaedic surgery. As a result of that they require specialist physio treatment in the rehabilitation process in order to get them back on their feet and also back to school. There's both a lack of funding as well as a lack of therapists to address this situation and the Australian Physiotherapist Association have actually prepared papers on this issue and could be contacted for further information.

Whilst there are real problems associated with accessing specialist practitioners, there's also a lack of choice between integration and some special settings. Specific purpose centres, for example, Yooralla, the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind and live-in accommodation is generally only available in the city, with limited facilities in regional centres. However, we would point out that in some regions positive models of best practice have been developed to overcome this in rural areas.

At Benalla East Primary School and Wilmot Road Primary School in Shepparton deaf annexes have been established to accommodate hearing-impaired children in a mainstream school environment, so that's very positive. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that good outcomes for children with a disability might have more to do with the persistence and determination of their parents rather than a systemic response to those needs.

### **[Indigenous students]**

In the area of Koori students it would seem that at both a primary and secondary level a range of cultural, social, economic and attitudinal factors impact on educational outcomes. Consideration such as the formal school structure, curriculum choice and relevance, welfare-related issues, as well as a lack of successful local role models in the education system, need to be taken into account. We suggest that the Indigenous programs that provide traineeships within state schools should be supported. Currently it's only available through the Koori 2000 program and funds supplied by the individual school.

The areas of retention rates, numeracy and literacy standards within the Koori population probably also require further examination and analysis. Commissioner, we understand that during the course of the hearing today other delegations will probably more specifically address and articulate the needs of some of these special interest groups. Thank you.

**MR BESTER:** Thank you, commissioner. I'm going to start on a positive note. I too, like Ian, have a lot of pride in my school. It's one of the best schools in the State, but it's as the result of staff working very hard;

parents working very hard; the community working very hard to make sure the school is one of the best in the State and that the children don't lack anything.

### **[Funding formulae]**

There are a couple of concerns that we do have. The facilities for country schools in Victoria are based on an antiquated formula on the number of students. If you're a school below 500 you don't qualify for a gym, you don't qualify for a drama area and there's a lot of other cases. You do need to cover all the key learning areas with a small school, and it's fairly hard to do that without a gym or without a drama area or without an art room or whatever.

In most cases - and it's the same with Murtoa - the community has actually funded these essentials for the community, but it's mainly for the schoolchildren. After they do that they're actually left with a huge cleaning bill, maintenance bill and insurance. Insurance on our gymnasium is \$1,00 every year. That's got to come out of our global budget and it comes out of basic resources for the students and we're left with excess teaching space. It's not really excess teaching space, because we have a metal craft room, because we have a woodwork room, and that's been historical. They're saying it should only have one area, but how can you convert a woodwork room into a general purpose classroom or a drama room or gym? So it's very difficult with facilities.

### **[Transport]**

Transport is another worry. Bus travel is - the cost is actually enormous. At the moment the government is picking up the free bus travel, but it is actually being reviewed with the thought of parents actually having to pay. But it's not just to and from school; it's for excursions or travel to a centre for a production or whatever. The Country Education Project has always subsidised travel to address that disadvantage, but it's not just the cost, it's also the time; because we're so far away from the particular thing, the time wasted when the kids could be doing something else.

We are addressing a lot of it through videoconferencing, sharing of resources and most times we actually try to take the facility to the students and not vice versa. Thanks.

### **[Professional development]**

**MR CRAIG:** Bob Craig from Leitchville Primary School in the Loddon Campaspe Mallee region. I'm going to talk about professional development of staff and staffing issues. I would just like to start by saying that there is a lot of rhetoric around about the quality of teachers across all of Australia and I think we all agree that the quality of teachers depends on the quality of the education that teachers receive.

In that light, professional growth is attached to our professional development programs that are on offer to our teachers in rural Victoria.

**[8.48 am]**

We have a number of problems across Victoria and some of them are unique to the geographical position of some of those schools, but there are some issues on professional development which are systemic. They're the ones that I hope to talk about in the brief moments I have. We all know that professional development assists teachers to improve their delivery and builds their professional growth and there are many factors restricting this, such as the high cost of professional development programs.

Although over the last number of years - say 6 years - the cost of these programs has risen, the PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT funding in schools across Victoria hasn't matched the rise in the program costs. The access is a big issue for many schools in country Victoria. Many of our teachers would love to go to some of the subject associated PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT offerings, the distance however, for some schools could be one hour's travel, it could be two or three hours' travel and most of these programs begin at 4.30 pm and last until 5.30 pm or 6 o'clock at night. So therefore you can't access those programs without some form of release from your school.

Because of the distance it's very difficult to actually release staff for the one day. Many schools have to release a staff member for two days. So there's a high cost to schools in country Victoria in terms of replacing teachers for those two days and overnight accommodation. This is for programs which metropolitan and regional teachers take for granted. We just cannot access that from the school Global Budget.

In my school I have 6 staff and in 1998 we received \$1,500. Now, that equates out to about \$250 each staff member. The cost of one conference would be around about \$180. You name the conference, that's about the cost. To replace a teacher for a day you're looking at \$175. So the money doesn't even cover one conference and the replacement of that teacher. So we have a lot of difficulty funding a lot of the professional development that teachers need to do.

There's a commitment that teachers across Victoria and Australia will have professional growth built into their workplace. It's very difficult to actually maintain and increase that perception that we are professionally growing because of the access and the cost. Technology has been and will be in the future alleviating this problem. However, even with technology and with teleconferencing, there are

problems in schools financing the facility, the infrastructure for teleconferencing.

### **[Cost of technology]**

We were mentioning this last night that the VicOne service, which is terrific in Victoria at the moment, around country Victoria. It's a 68K line that comes into your school. To do teleconferencing you have to have a minimum of 128K. Now, metropolitan schools I believe pay \$3000 for every doubling that they have and the further out you go from your major centres - in the case of my school which is about 150 kilometres, it's going to cost me \$8,500 to do that. Another hour and a half from me it's about \$11,500 for that school to do that. The cost of that infrastructure grows exceptionally with distance.

### **[Staffing]**

Sorry, I am getting the time so I better move on very quickly to staffing, because this is another big issues. Replacement staff in schools, short or long term, is a big problem in the country. It's becoming even more difficult with the ageing teaching force, okay? That's a big issue. I could talk for another five minutes on that one, but he won't let me up there.

Also in Victoria with staffing we're having a lot of difficulty attracting good quality teachers to country Victoria. At the moment, for example, we have schools classified as Remote A or Remote B in Victoria. A young teacher with no dependants receives a massive \$169 a year for teaching in these remote schools. In comparison to other states this is just a ridiculous figure. So there are no incentives in place to attract good quality staff into the country.

Housing has been reduced, therefore making it even more difficult for teachers to move; either single teachers or teachers with dependants. So these are all issues that we know affect our communities, affect our schools, affect the education of children in rural Victoria. I could go on, but I'm not allowed to, so I will wrap it up there. Thank you.

### **[Country Education Project]**

**MR BALFOUR:** Hello, my name is Al Balfour and I am the outgoing chair of the Country Education Project. My role is just in two minutes to try and sum up some of the issues that have been raised. In the first instance Rob referred to the Country Education Project as a voice for rural and remote education. It is a unique organisation of teachers, parents, school communities, borne out of the former Country Education Project. It's now an incorporated stand-alone body that gains its resources virtually from a service agreement with the Department of Education, which is a fairly minimal agreement, by submission writing, grants and by fees and by self-funding programs.



Our aim is to try to provide support for rural schools in Victoria by advocacy; a voice for rural education; to act collectively for the benefit of rural schools; to support rural schools' teachers, parents and their communities, because we believe the school and the community are integrally related. We also are interested in and actively participate in an innovative program development to address the needs of rural schools, but often this extends to both rural and metropolitan schools. We promote concepts of sharing, caring, participation, access and community involvement.

Moving from there, the next point that was raised I think by Ian was that rural communities in Victoria and elsewhere are in the process of decline due to change - changing economics, changing demographics - but also they have been marginalised by the impact of government policies, particularly in Victoria. As I said before, we are concerned about rural communities as well as their schools. I think we have pointed out there have been some successes in terms of rural education by the Country Education Project and by others. For example, the introduction of technology and in particular videoconferencing as a means of distance education.

#### **[Arts and cultural programs]**

In terms of arts and cultural programs to overcome cultural isolation, innovative curriculum programs - such as one that we're developing ourselves at the moment called GAPS - Group Activities and Primary Science - to support primary teachers in the teaching of science, shared resource programs where schools come together and share their resources; in parent support programs, for example the parent support programs in teaching literacy and mathematics, in camps programs and in shared specialist programs.

The issue here is all of these are good programs. They do address some of the needs, but the potential for these programs is not fully realised because of resourcing issues. On the other hand there are overriding negatives and these I think have been presented in terms of first of all the impact of government policies on rural communities and the reduction of services and school closures in Victoria which have created insecurity and uncertainty in respect of the schools.

There is an insufficient resource provision and there is a belief that - well, yes, I think there is a belief abroad, that the cost of service delivery in metropolitan areas and country areas is really much the same, except for the rural isolation allowance that's provided to schools. But in point of fact the cost of service delivery in remote rural areas is quite considerably more than in metropolitan areas.

There are increased costs to parents in terms of school charges, the Vocational Education and Training courses, tertiary education and this has a negative impact in terms of the lower socioeconomic groups. There are issues of curriculum access and spread and choice. There's the issue of specialist support for schools in terms of literacy and numeracy and special services in terms of student disabilities. There are issues related to Koori education facilities and staffing.

I think schools have worked harder and smarter, but they cannot of themselves provide all the answers. In fact these answers must come in part from support from government. Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much. I thank all of you very much. This is very concise, I have to say, and well organised, which makes it much easier for us to understand the major points that you wanted to make. I thank you very much for that. Tim, have you got some questions?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes, I do actually. One thing that's come up through our meeting yesterday was a problem with contract staff. Teachers are disinclined to come to a country school because of the cost added or out of the fear of not having their contract renewed there. They don't want to move their entire belongings to a country area for a 10-month period. I was just wondering what your thoughts are on that issue and whether it is prevalent across the state.

**[Teacher contracts]**

**MR BESTER:** It is. We've actually got a biology/science position up. We were trying to renew the contract for the teacher who has been there for three or four years. I can only offer it for a one-year contract because we've got a person returning from family leave. She has now got a job in Melbourne, the contract teacher, because she wanted more than just the one year. I have only got, I'd say, two applications for that position, so it is very very hard to attract contract teachers into the country.

**MR COLLINS:** I would like to comment on that, too. The quality of the teachers is the major point at issue. The very best teachers are going to be attracted by schools all over the state and if they're working in a remote or rural school and they haven't got job certainty beyond Christmas, then they will certainly go somewhere else and they do. That is a major impediment to rural schools right across the state.

**MR ROGERSON:** If I can just throw a further one in there, Tim. One of the other things is we've got a teacher who's been there all year. He's just had his contract renewed for another two years. One of the problems is the financial institutions will not allow those sort of people

to get a loan to rent a house or buy a house or - sorry, to, you know, buy a flat or something like that, unless they've got a major contract. Often it's say three or five years before the financial institutions will make money available for a loan, and that's turned out to be a major problem because even if they've got a one or a two-year contract, they still can't borrow.

**MR CRAIG:** In my area we've had difficulty with some of the schools trying to attract particular subject teachers. Languages Other Than English, second language teachers, very difficult to attract into the country, but now some of my principal compatriots are finding that even maths and science teachers in their secondary schools are getting hard to attract. There's just not enough of these teachers that are prepared to come out to the country.

When they do ring up to find out about the position they say, "Oh, is that near Melton?" We say, "No, have you heard of Swan Hill?" and they say, "No." "Mildura?" "Oh, I'm not teaching up there." So they're the responses that many of the principals get when they have applicants ring up for positions.

**MR BESTER:** It's not all doom and gloom though, Tim. We do try to encourage graduates. We go and visit graduates at the universities and so on; try to encourage them with cheap housing and, "Look, it's a lot better teaching in the country than in the city. The kids are, you know, well behaved," and so on. But, yes, there's now a distinct shortage of teachers all round and it's getting harder and harder to attract them.

**MR CRAIG:** That leads me to talk about the professional growth side, because a lot of the teachers in my area had to upgrade their qualifications to actually cater for some of the subject areas we cannot attract staff members in. I'm talking here like second languages. In my school alone two of us have trained in a second language, so now we have that provision in our tiny rural school to teach Indonesian.

Before that training was available and that commitment was made by staff members, we could never attract anyone in our area to teach a second language and yet it was a key learning area dictated to us that we had to teach. So there is a commitment by schools to try and cover all these areas, so there is a link between the lack of staffing, professional growth and commitment of teachers across Victoria.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Laurie, you said, "We visit students when they're going through." Who is the "we" in this case?

**MR BESTER:** Well, there's three or four principals from the central highlands, Woomera, and I'm sure other regions do it as well. We

actually go and visit all the teaching institutions, including South Australia, to try to attract teachers.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, so it's very much left to you as individuals.

**MR BESTER:** That's right. Look, the region does support us though. They support us with a grant for travel and so on. Yes, they do try to help us.

**[Housing subsidies]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. With the housing subsidies you've mentioned, do they come out of the school global budget or is there provision elsewhere?

**MR BESTER:** Yes. No, usually.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So you find the funds - - -

**MR BESTER:** There are THA houses, Teacher Housing Authority, but they have now gone back to market rent for everybody. They were subsidised, heavily subsidised, by the government, but that's been cut out now.

**[9.03 am]**

**[Country Education Project membership]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Can I just run very quickly through a few things if that's all right, as we just wander through. Firstly just a bit more about CEP. You gave us an outline, Al, about the nature of the membership, but how many members have you got of what categories?

**MS WHITE:** At this stage anybody from any of the Victorian schools who attract Commonwealth Area Program funds are invited to become member schools at CEP. The number of COUNTRY AREA PROGRAM schools in Victoria is approximately 391, that includes government, non-government and independent schools. So they are all invited to become financial members of CEP. Our current year figures are probably around the 200 mark of that percentage. Last year they got up to about 272, so we're looking at over two-thirds of those schools becoming member schools.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, so the membership is actually school based rather than individual or group based?

**MS WHITE:** That's right.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay.

**MS WHITE:** We've actually got information we're happy to leave with you, commissioner, in regard to CEP which probably will give you some - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's great. Okay, thanks.

**MR BALFOUR:** I do have our annual report.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR BALFOUR:** Which gives some idea of the scope and nature of the project. Also last year the Country Education Project in Victoria, CEP Inc, conducted a national conference on rural education. The theme was Rural Community Partnerships, Education for the 21st Century. It was an Australia-wide conference. It was held in Ballarat. In fact we invited international people in respect of rural education as well as people from across Australia. It raises a whole series of issues that relate to the delivery of rural education in Australia. So we'll leave those with you.

**[Teacher incentives]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you. You might give those to Isabel, if you don't mind. Laurie or Bob, I'm not sure which, talked about Remote A and Remote B schools. How many Remote A and how many Remote B schools are there in the State?

**MR CRAIG:** I couldn't tell you that figure. They are scattered across the country regions and it all has to do with distance from their major centre, okay? The formula isn't actually anywhere where I can find it in my books at school, but you are funded by your classification. That \$169 I quoted was for Remote B schools and that would have to do with the distance from a major centre of I would assume about 5,000 people.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, and is Remote A higher or lower?

**MR CRAIG:** It's higher, but it's only around about 200 and something dollars compared to \$169 a year.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So it's about \$5 a week, less tax?

**MR CRAIG:** Yes, exactly. In comparison to some other states, I believe South Australia has around about \$5000 as an incentive to its staff. New South Wales actually has an incentive for acceleration to positions anywhere around the state if you teach in a remote area for a length of time. Victoria, with its full staffing flexibility rules and appointment on

merit rather than seniority, that incentive cannot work in schools any more in Victoria, but financially we could bring in an incentive. It just doesn't seem fair, when we can't attract the right sort of teachers we want, to offer them \$169 a year to go to places like Underbool and Manangatang. It's not a very good figure. Not an incentive.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** No, well, you point out between \$3 and \$5 a week before tax.

**MR CRAIG:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's chicken feed. A block of chocolate.

**MR CRAIG:** It wouldn't buy you a cappuccino.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. The Australian Education Union may tell us more shortly.

**MS HEAP:** No, we think you're doing a really good job.

**[Minimum school population size]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It seems to me that there have been, just anecdotally, more small schools closed in Victoria in the last 10 years than in any other jurisdiction. Is there now a minimum school size that the government has imposed?

**MR BESTER:** For primary schools it's 12. Is that right, 12?

**MR CRAIG:** Yes, minimum 12 students. If you fall below 12 students with no prospect of gaining any more enrolments you must make measures to close service. I was actually a head of a one-teacher school which closed under those auspices back in 1992. As the Kennett government came in, I left. I wasn't closed by Mr Kennett, we actually closed because we fell below the ruling on primary school size. Through natural attrition of my dairying area we lost families and the ones coming in did not have children.

**MR COLLINS:** That number changed about 6 or 7 years ago from 7 students per school and it's now 12 students per school. That's one of the reasons that there was a large number of school closures.

**MS WHITE:** And my understanding, Chris, is that just at present that number is actually stabilised in recent times, although word from the Department is that there are a few remaining schools who are probably a little bit nervous in terms of where they may sit in regard to that for next year and the year after, but given the change of government and

the consequence of rural communities' vote in this election they may actually have reprieves. It will be interesting to - - -

**MR CRAIG:** Some schools actually closed a bit quicker than they should have, because parents' nervousness about the viability of the schools caused them to withdraw their children.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CRAIG:** That has accelerated the process for a lot of those schools.

**MR BALFOUR:** On the other hand also communities have advertised for people to come and work in the community so as in fact they can increase their school enrolment and maintain the school as a community service.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** There must have been schools though that were above the 12 that also closed because of views about distance to other schools and those kinds of factors, too, I assume.

**MR BALFOUR:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Is there any minimum size for secondary schools?

**MR BESTER:** No, there's not. There's not at the moment, but it gets to a stage where - I know Balmoral High School has only got 70 kids and it's very very hard to run VCE classes and so on. You get just natural attrition because the kids can't get their subjects and so on, so they go to a bigger centre, boarding school or private schools or whatever.

**MR CRAIG:** I'd say the one benefit of the threat of closure for us in our small schools has made us work harder and smarter. It's made us give up our weekends and school holidays to study. I mean, when you have to provide either key learning areas and one of them is Languages Other Than English you've got to do it somehow, so we gave up 5 years of weekends and one week of our school vacations for five years and we studied overseas for four weeks to make sure our students had that offer, that provision. Many schools are doing that. We're not Robinson Crusoe.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The last question is what are the three most important recommendations you would like us to make?

**MR CRAIG:** More funding, more funding, more funding.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** There's not much we can do about moving the National Gallery of Victoria to Manangatang, for example.

**MR CRAIG:** No.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** But I'm finding actually in moving around the country that people are pretty reasonable in what they're saying.

**MS WHITE:** I guess I would think one of the things that we would hope to achieve simply from being participants in this hearing, Chris, is the opportunity to have the issues recognised initially. We probably haven't prioritised in terms of, from Country Education Project's point of view, what the actual recommendations would be in terms of priority areas. It's quite apparent that the people who've spoken this morning have particular views and probably we would differ individually and from an association point of view we don't actually have a stance on what those recommendations would be, but certainly the issues that we've brought before you today should be considered in the overall context of what you've already gathered from around the country.

**MR COLLINS:** Commissioner, what I would say is that to me it's quite obvious that there are disadvantages for teachers and students and schools, and if that's recognised then a positive discrimination to redress those disadvantages would be a recommendation I would want to come from our group. In other words, recognise that there's a disadvantage and do something positive about it. Don't just leave everybody either funded or supported or whatever at the same rate, but make a positive discrimination to try and redress some of the disadvantages.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** If you individually or collectively actually want to come back with something specific about what can be done to address the problems that you've outlined, please feel free to do so. There may be some particular ideas that you have got that we haven't dreamed up yet that can help us to address the issues themselves rather than just recognising them. Thank you very much. I hope that yesterday went well and today goes well as well for you.

**MS WHITE:** Thanks very much.

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[9.14 am]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Sharan, would you like to introduce - or you can each introduce yourselves - - -



**MS BURROW:** Sure.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** - - - and then go straight into whatever comments you want to make.

**MS BURROW:** Well, I'm Sharan Burrow, the Federal President of the Australian Education Union. Roy Martin is our National Research Officer. I think you've met a number of our colleagues around the country.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS BURROW:** And so the AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION of course is a national union which has 8 branches throughout the country, most of them called the AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION, several called something slightly different.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Teachers Federation.

**MS BURROW:** Yes, New South Wales Teachers Federation, Queensland Teachers Union. Most of the rest of them have moved over to the common name. We have about 156,000 members and we represent educators from preschool through to TAFE colleges and by educators, teachers and other education workers who are support staff, allied staff, Aboriginal and Islander education workers, etcetera.

What I thought we'd do, Chris - because it's a huge area and I know you've been at this for months, so I thought we'd walk you through our submission, tell you what a couple of the deficiencies are because we like to actually put things forward that we know what we're talking about and there's a couple of areas where we're actually engaged in current research, and then answer your questions. Does that sound like the way to go?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks, Sharan. The first thing I notice with your submission is that you've got a nice long summary of recommendations at the front and that's very helpful. Thank you.

**MS BURROW:** We've done this a time or three before. Well, just so that you understand the summary of recommendations is there and I'll go through those in general very quickly and not to the detail of each. The introduction sort of gives you a sense of not only ourselves but what we think are the priority issues there on the bottom of page 1. We talk to you a little about the Australian Education Union, but we more importantly talk to you about the importance of public education.

**[Decline of public education]**

Public education is contestable in the 1990s in a way that I suppose none of us ever believed it would be. One of the issues when you look at the debate going on in Australia is the myth - we call it the myth of choice, but nevertheless it's a big issue for many people. Our concern is that already we can point to you the decline of funding, resources, quality, probably more importantly public perception around public schools which again we would argue largely is mythical in the urban areas.

When you get into the argument of choice in the bush - and I have some understanding of this; I'm actually a bush girl. I grew up in Warren in New South Wales and I taught in places like Kandos and Bathurst for a very long time. So what happens is that choice - and I've used quotes from the federal government's review, the previous federal government, of regulation of what we call the 'New Schools Policy' where we show that choice is actually easier to use as a rhetorical term rather than to operationalise it, because it does mean that choice for a lot of people means no choice for others.

I guess our advocacy is clear; if we aren't as Australians committed to a free universal schooling provision, that is a public school that's free in every community, then the equity questions can't be delivered. Now, you've just heard from country principals and of course the differential costs of rural schooling, well, we'll talk a little bit about, but the impact of change on rural communities means that, as you've seen, a lot of them are in decline. That worries us enormously.

We actually think that in a technological era that shouldn't be the case. We should actually be turning around a lot of those questions about lifestyle and settlement because we can provide an economic and an educational base and we don't believe that there is anywhere near a visionary technological plan for Australian schools, let alone for Australia generally. You might want to talk about that. We do take you through the human rights background. I wear a hat as vice president of our world body, the Education International, and consequently see a lot of schools in a lot of countries.

There is no doubt that while when we talk about human rights, governments like ours have all too often believed that was someone else's business or that was their paternalistic or global citizen responsibility in terms of developing countries. Whereas we would argue that all the educational issues that have been international debates since the late 80s, but certainly the early 90s, through the meeting of ministers, the World Summit in 1990, Jhon Tien, the World Conference in 91, those issues, all of those debates, have been seen largely by our government to be somebody else's responsibility. They went there as a gesture of solidarity and we took a bit delegation. I was lucky enough to be part of it to Jhon Tien in Thailand in 1991.

### **[Funding as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product]**

Despite that we've argued what was a great promise to the children of the world, not a lot has been delivered. If you look at participation rates, quality of health, quality of educational services in Australia, then we would argue that in fact the commitment has declined. We do put figures in here that show you that if we had just maintained our investment since the early 80s as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product we would have \$5 billion more in schooling budgets. So that's the level of decline of commitment between the Commonwealth State partnership, and that's in schooling alone.

We talk to you about access participation and outcomes and how the figures stack up, and we basically say that there are big issues. Communities are no longer guaranteed a local school, and that's on page 7. In fact public schools are no longer free. The breadth of curriculum choice in secondary schools is unequal across urban and rural settings. There's no cohesive national, state or territory plan to guarantee technological infrastructure.

### **[On-line curriculum]**

There's no national state or territory government which has yet adequately invested in on-line curriculum development such that the existing curriculum is universally available, let alone where we'd urge them to go. That is the provision of innovative simulation such that you can actually experience structured workplaces. If you're in Bourke or Brewarrina or Cunnamulla and you want to be a graphic design person or you want to work even in agriculture, you're not going to find the capacity to do that in those local settings with all the best community or industry school partnerships.

It is, however, possible now to use technology if we were serious about it to do those things and through a network of ours, the National Schools Network, we've actually developed a prototype that shows what's possible. Actually getting it funded, creating a digital curriculum market here which is essential if we're going to do something about equity in rural areas is something that we are incredibly frustrated about.

### **[Early childhood education]**

Then of course there's the early childhood area. We know that if educational outcomes in rural areas are lower than by comparison with the students in urban settings then early childhood education, all the research shows, will give a big start to improving educational outcomes. The provision, we didn't bring it for you today but we do have a mapping of what happens in terms of provision of early childhood education and I'd have to say that it's just a total lack of priority that renders it almost the poor cousin, I suppose, of educational

services. It costs parents at a setting where we should actually be seeing it as the first step to a much richer educational experience.

### **[Educational outcomes and employment]**

Then of course the prospect of long term unemployment. We know from all the research, the Australian Council of Education Research and so on, that you're four times more likely to join the long term unemployed queues if you don't complete Year 12 or equivalent. Yet the completion rates of course in rural Australia, you've heard them from others, are something that is disturbing; down to 44% of male students and so on.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS BURROW:** So there's a range of things about educational outcomes and achievement levels. We've indicated that the literacy outcomes are quite alarming. We participated in the National Literacy Survey which we think was terrific methodology because it allowed teachers to work with students over a period of time in curriculum friendly settings. It showed that rural students can be up to 10 points below their counterparts on the literacy scale and that in terms of Indigenous students of course that they're three to four years below achievement in terms of mainstream Australia students.

That's quite alarming and that leads to the complexities of employment competition anyway, but then in rural communities where it's even tighter then we do have to do something in an affirmative sense about that. We talked to you about the history of the national perspective of rural schooling and really you have to go back to the Schools Commission to look for any definitive research. There is a very comprehensive report which we've just included as appendix; the recommendations for you from the Schools Commission in 1987 called Rural Schooling. That's the last time there was a significant study done nationally.

### **[Country Areas Program funding allocation]**

There have been some state reports and if you go back 10 years before that, in 1985 Quality and Equality was the report from the Schools Commission that recommended the Country Area Program (CAP), which of course despite hearing some advocacy around the table for it this morning has now been diluted to a more generic approach. Only two states, Queensland and New South Wales to my knowledge, maintain their declared areas and aggregate the funding. Most of it's been diluted into a more generic literacy and numeracy base.

We don't argue about the centrality of literacy and numeracy, but there are specific cultural and educational experiences required by

country students if they're to understand the world in which their locality is situated more broadly that you can't afford; you simply can't afford. That COUNTRY AREA PROGRAM program allowed for a lot of that breadth of curriculum and cultural and educational expense to be provided. That's a great pity that that and the disadvantaged schools program - the national equity program - has disappeared and we argue in a different way that they be reset up.

So going right through we've talked to you about physical and human resources. You've heard some of the concerns about increased casualisation, about teacher supply this morning. We are facing a teacher supply crisis and no system around the country will sit down and work with us about how to actually get more teachers into the profession. There's a very good reason for that. It means that they would have to improve the status of teaching. That costs money.

### **[Teacher salaries]**

You can't expect when you look at the professions available, the capacity to move into science and through science into engineering and Information Technology, it means that it's very hard to attract science teachers to a starting salary rate of up to \$35,000, let alone to suggest that they can work for their entire lives and if they want to remain teachers as opposed to administrators they will never earn more than \$50,000 on the current scale. It's simply not attractive. When you add all the sort of costs of rural access then there's a whole set of issues around that.

So there's physical and human resources we've tried to cover for you. Then we've put in a whole section on Indigenous education because we felt we should treat it separately. It certainly is linked up in the rural and remote framework, but I think that there are very different issues. Some are issues for Indigenous students who are smaller in number, but in regional or rural schools, and others are remote Indigenous communities. I know that you've travelled extensively through the Northern Territory and Queensland and so you understand those issues, but we'd be happy to answer any questions on those.

I suppose one of the most innovative recommendations that we would urge you to pick up is we believe that there's a fundamental need to allow communities to develop their own future, so rather than arguing again to set up separate and distinct educational equity programs like COUNTRY AREA PROGRAM and like Disadvantaged Schools Program, we would argue that in fact you set up - we declare disadvantaged areas. When you look at the research - and I'll find it in here somewhere. Roy knows probably more about it than me, but when you look at the sort of Gregory and Hunter research, that shows that inner generational poverty is now increasing and it's largely geographically located.

### **[Disadvantaged Area Program]**

The demographics mean that people living in poor communities suffer all of the things that mainstream Australians suffer around unemployment, lack of educational opportunity, but they do it, you know, five-fold. So that sort of congregation of poverty is something that we need to address. We would argue that to declare disadvantaged areas or the DAP program as we've affectionately titled it, would be to nominate those areas of extreme poverty.

Some of them will be fringe urban areas, but a lot will be regional and rural areas, and that we allow communities to work together across infrastructure development, industry policy, educational equity, job creation - particularly in terms of child care and aged services - where some communities can show those differential demographics. Those sorts of things must be allowed to be put together in an integrated development program and we would hope that on page 12 and indeed in the recommendations that you would have a look at that.

There's definitely a need to look at a different focus. There's also a need to consider far more - and we haven't gone into it in detail - extensively how it is that the knowledge or technological era can underpin community development so that we no longer deny rural Australia - which is a pretty nice place to live I'd have to say - to be seen as the poor cousins.

I suppose finally we would say to you that our fight rests on three issues really. One is to reassert the free universal base of public schooling and we will continue to advocate around the nature in which you do that, but unless a community - particularly a rich nation like Australia - is dedicated to free universal public schooling, then we're not much of a citizenry in terms of caring for our children or indeed providing for a socially cohesive or economically prosperous future.

**[9.30 am]**

The second thing on top of that, we would say, well, within that free universal schooling there must be differential funding for the costs of rural and remote education. It costs four times as much to fund a school, six times as much to fund a school in the Northern Territory as it in fact does in Melbourne, in urban Melbourne. That's simply got to be recognised and it's got to be built into that guarantee of a community standard where the full costs of schooling are met.

If you want to have a sense of what's it like for families, we do refer to the Smith Family research in here. That is quite shocking. It shows that up to 50% of lower income families can't afford core

educational experiences, camps, excursions, even the purchase of computer disks. They can't choose courses like home economics or technology because they have to buy their equipment and their food. It's not acceptable. It's never been part of Australian philosophy around public schooling, and voluntary contributions were the added bits that you gave to a school.

Now we are relying on voluntary contributions or quasi fees and fundraising for at least 7%, and that's the Senate figure. Roy and I would argue it's much higher, but at least 7% of running costs are over and above staffing. So if you take staffing out of all the discretionary money available for managing schools, at least 7% of it is being raised by parents. That is, we believe, the tip of the iceberg. Of course that's differential. So when you come to poor rural communities there's no way they can raise 7% of their running costs so they're absolutely at a further disadvantage than the more reasonable regional or urban settings in terms of the income base.

So that's the free education thing. Then there's an equity component. The equity component is about recognising that where you have a convergence of disadvantage so it's about - it's not just, we would say, rural and remote or to be seen as part of the costs, but in addition to that there are conglomerations of poverty. There's a concentration of poverty and there of course is then the disadvantages associated with lower outcomes for Aboriginality or Indigenous students and for students with disabilities, and of course students from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

It's not always recognised that our rural communities are not all Anglo, and we know of course in Indigenous communities that's not the case. In the National English Literacy Survey 17% of students nominated themselves as being from homes that don't speak English as a first language. That's a huge percentage and you know we don't have to go into the bilingual debates in the Territory. We have given you an initial response to the Collins Report. We think that by and large it's raised a lot of very incisive issues. We are still very worried about the respect that the bilingual programs in places like Papunya and Yirrkala deserve because they're not Indigenous communities.

So I suppose free education, equity differential on top of that - and we are arguing that ought to be now part of a community program and that the school ought to get additional funding providing its plans are part of that development program for the community. Then the third area is the whole question of Indigenous education and we could probably talk a lot about Distance Education, technological provision, etcetera, but we won't given the limited time. That's probably enough from me. I would say to you, Chris, we've not touched disability.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS BURROW:** The reason we did not touch disability is because quite frankly while we've prepared numerous submissions like this about the issue, it's so complex that we don't even know at the moment what we think the educational guarantees have to be. But we are engaged in research about that. We've set up a program that says what is it that you need to make a school technologically relevant? What is that you need to make a school able to deliver vocational education? What is it that we need to give a literacy guarantee?

Now, we've done all of that work and while it's not in here it's available if you're interested, because we've set those benchmarks. No government or system is doing it, so we've undertaken to do that, but we're still engaged in the disability one and while there are others who probably have more expertise than us, if you need more information about that we're certainly willing to share with you where we've got to.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That would be good, Sharan, if you wouldn't mind. If you would send us that.

**MS BURROW:** What we've put in your folder, by the way, is the statistics that we did for a submission at our own national public education day a couple of weeks ago, which is 'Public Education - Prince or Pauper', and it goes through the funding generally for you. We've given you the only national recommendations that still exist around schooling in rural Australia and they're from the 1987 report.

It's actually very disappointing that the national goals for schooling don't acknowledge rurality in the way that they should, but in our submission we've in fact listed these generically, uprofessional developmentated them and showed you how they're still extraordinarily relevant. We've given you another submission that we hope you'll see as integral to our submission, which is 'Talk the Talk, Now Walk the Walk'. That's our submission to the Senate inquiry about all of the issues and all of the solutions and strategies put up around Indigenous education from all of the various reports that have been done over the years and have never been implemented or very rarely implemented. So that would sit in addition to our section on Indigenous education - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks.

**[Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers]**

**MS BURROW:** - - - where we've summarised it for you, I suppose might be fair to say, as well as the outcomes. This is some work we did with DETYA some years ago about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Workers and the absolute indignity of the way that they are treated and how we need to go about making sure that educators,



including support staff, come from communities, are trained to be able to do the job and have appropriate remuneration and career paths.

We could have given you a lot more. We decided that was probably enough and we're happy to answer questions. I'm not sure if Roy might have picked up something I missed.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks very much. Could I just clarify on that last one first, the Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers. It seemed to us in Western Australia that the workers there weren't covered by the Teachers Union. You mentioned earlier that you have got coverage of them. Is that right across the country?

**MS BURROW:** It's a split coverage with the Miscellaneous Workers Union in the main.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, I think the Miscellaneous Workers Union had them in WA.

**MS BURROW:** But in WA we have rules, but we've tried to be respectful of their coverage. However, I have to say that it's my projection that we are currently fighting for an award for these workers, a national award.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS BURROW:** And it's my projection that at least they'll be covered by our efforts in terms of increased remuneration if and when we're successful. But we will probably increasingly take the coverage or come to some arrangement about it, because the career path development is critical.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS BURROW:** You can't put these people into schools and pretend they don't make a difference, because all of the statistics - we did years ago a competency standards evaluation and it showed that the contribution to the learning outcomes from allied staff generally - but Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers in particular - is up to 35%. You can't ignore that. They're critical educators in those communities. They're even more important given the cultural role they hold.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I must say I was worried in Western Australia by the coverage by the MWU in that I felt it was certainly putting them off into a different type of strand and in some senses even equating them with admin staff, for example, in schools, rather than recognising the educational role they played.

**MS BURROW:** We're very worried about it, too. It's a controversial issue for us and - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Sure.

**MS BURROW:** - - - we try not to tread on our sister union's toes, but on this one I think we'll increasingly do so. We have already, but we'll increasingly do so. But we have supported a professional body of AIEWs which is largely based in the Northern Territory and South Australia but is extending its reach, because that way we can at least make sure they are supported professionally. Then that means we can do our bit from a different area while we clean up the coverage act.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, thanks. Tim?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Okay, this is probably something that's more relevant to you in an administrative sense. Just from my own experience and in discussions yesterday we found a lot of government policy in the sense of when they implement it, when it's taken to a rural area it seems either impractical or in some cases just plain stupid. So I was wondering like what evidence have you got of examples of that and do you know of any research by government departments into the impact on rural schools?

**MS BURROW:** Can you specify an area? You mean administratively or curriculum development or professional development?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Just one out of interest would be transport.

**MS BURROW:** Transport, yes, absolutely. Well, I mean, the transport one is clearly very different. I mean, the whole transport area is something we probably should do research into and haven't for a long time, but it varies from state to state. It's free for some people, it's subsidised for others and we would say that transport - and we do say it actually in here, we touch transport very briefly, and say that it's absolutely got to be part of access to a local public schooling provision.

**[Merit selection]**

We also touch on it in the professional sense. I can give you a much better example of what you're asking and that is the notion of merit selection. We don't oppose merit selection of people for promotions, positions or principals, but when you've got principals who are - it's a little bit like the contract teacher. You've got people who are prepared to work in a rural setting, can't access the sort of academic or intellectual life of our profession because they're too far away. So they

can't go to conferences, they can't actually access the level of professional development. Many of them don't even have the regular contact with their colleagues.

When they've actually given long service to rural schools and they want to move on and they're faced with merit selection, then the dreaded piece of paper they call a CV looks very slim. Now, we would say that's impractical. You have to look at issues around rural experience or equivalence or what we would call, you know, prior learning or whatever it is to actually give those people an incentive to say that rurality counts. If you're going to go and work in a rural school then you will be much valued back in an urban setting, you know, via merit selection. Otherwise it's like the contract teacher; why would you bother? If you can't structure a career path for a 30 year stint, then it's a pretty big disincentive.

### **[Technology]**

There are now ways you could get around that. For example, the technology issue. We've established technological benchmarks for schools and for our professional members, but in fact no system - no system - has a plan to actually provide free of charge the tools for the job. You can't be a teacher without a computer any more and in fact we would argue you need one at home and one at school. Now, it is not possible for teachers to do the job, yet I could show you the statistics of how many teachers actually have access to the Internet. It's very few and for very limited periods of time by comparison with a whole of school approach to modern technology.

I mean, there are a whole lot of those areas where there's simply no thinking about how you provide for rural education and how is it different from the urban setting.

**MR MARTIN:** I think if you go to the opposite - both the Disadvantaged Schools Program and the Country Areas Program actually encourage local participation and there's been a bit of a move away from that and much greater tendency to control things from the centre. I think the programs have to be designed in a way that allows local people to make the decisions that are appropriate for them at their level.

**MS BURROW:** In fact the original construct of both of those programs were a national, a state and a local element for that very reason. There are country people in particular very angry about the imposition of national or state priorities, which mean they don't have any say. A lot of bureaucrats have never been to a lot of places where rural schooling exists. You know, I'm not suggesting that's a prerequisite to taking up a job in a system, but there must be local input. You must listen to the professionals in our community and to the parents, and indeed one would argue to the students, but it's not done often enough.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I'm pleased to say that everywhere we have gone we have had meetings with students.

**MS BURROW:** That's great. That's really terrific.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Every single town.

**MS BURROW:** You will often find much greater wisdom coming from students, I might add, than the rest of us.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's why we have also got Tim as our Co-Commissioner for Victoria.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** You spoke of the needs of rural students and you quickly touched on a cultural sense. What programs are in place to expose especially extremely remote students to cultural awareness or - - -

**MS BURROW:** Well, the Country Area Program was fundamentally a cultural base, because what it allowed people to do was to either provide for broader cultural experience such as instrumental music and so on by aggregating those funds across a number of rural schools, or it allowed you to invite cultural events. Often the Country Area Program money seed-funded cultural activities in the community that would not otherwise be possible, so theatre groups, music groups, touring companies of all sorts were able to be brought into the community.

Equally students were supported to go to regional or capital cities so that they could actually experience what the broader world and the broader environment was like. Now, without that differential funding and without parents and teachers being able to say, "These things are really important for our students," then by and large it comes back to a user pays environment and that's where those statistics about which parents can afford cultural experiences for their students show that we've become - well, become a mean little rich country really in terms of how we simply don't acknowledge that some people are missing out.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Has that funding been withdrawn?

**MS BURROW:** It's been what they called initially broadbanded, which means instead of having distinct programs you actually sort of spent it on the priorities, which are literacy and numeracy determined by this government, and again, you know, we feel uncomfortable sort of if we don't clarify that we think that literacy and numeracy are fundamental. There's no doubt about that for us.

If you provide a determinant from the state or national level, that's where you'll spend the money, and in the broadbanding. In many states it's been diluted, so for example if you go to Western Australia, the disadvantaged schools money, where you would pick up up to \$30,000 which often meant a part-time teacher for music or for welfare or for something, and now you get \$1,000 because it's been diluted across a range of schools, then it's ridiculous. Like the bar of chocolate on a slightly large scale that you were talking about earlier, Chris.

We would say you must target - you must target - very clearly and in terms of rurality the culture question is really significant. Even the mix of cultures. What we've seen schools do in terms of providing understanding for the cross-cultural set of understandings across Indigenous and non-Indigenous or multicultural Australia was able to be supported by targeted funds. It's just not there any more in terms of the level of funding or the targeted nature of it.

[9.45 am]

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Sharan, we might come back to you with more questions after we've gone through the submission.

**MS BURROW:** That would be fine, and you can do it by e-mail or fax or whatever suits you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay.

**MS BURROW:** That's fine for us. If there are things that we touch on here and you want more detail or in fact if there are things we haven't touched on - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We will do that, too.

**MS BURROW:** - - - then feel free to ask us.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. I would just like to raise with you though while you're here just two questions of where ideology and flexibility meet. The first relates to rural incentives. Given the long-standing views of the AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION on the need for incentives first, which I do not question for a minute, but also the need for a proper award coverage, I wonder what your attitude is to greater flexibility in designing individual incentives packages. I mean, it's become clear to us as we've gone around that different teachers look for different kinds of incentives.

### **[Incentive packages]**

**MS BURROW:** I don't think we would have a fundamental objection to that. We now have an approach to salary packaging, for example, that is I suppose restricted in that we do have some principles about eroding the tax base to its ultimate extent, but at the same time we recognise that there are certain areas of tools for the job, superannuation, vehicles where that's seen to be appropriate, that we can accommodate through salary packaging given that it is the legal base now of the Australian tax system.

So I think that there would be absolutely a capacity if you had some ideas to sit down about that. I guess what we want to preserve is the fundamental guarantee of two things. There are two things that attract teachers to the bush, and here I can speak from personal experience. One is that it is a bit attractive in terms of salary differential and that's not only about - in my view shouldn't only be about the cost of living differences. It also ought to be about saying, well, look, you know, we recognise that to award teachers for working in those schools that's a good thing. So some salary differential; we could talk about what that means.

A guarantee of transfer back to the communities from which they came, and that's more problematic given the devaluation that's gone on around the country, although now that we're in a time of teacher shortage I think people are rapidly starting to think, well, how are we going to staff rural schools. While it's sad that it's taken so long, there's no doubt that that's going to have to be a focus. But there's a third area, too, and that's professional growth. There are all sorts of flexible ways we could look at professional growth. We would love to see a professional guarantee.

Not for all teachers I would have to argue, but so that you can say to these teachers, "Look, we will put, for argument's sake, 5 cents an hour of your salary into a trust fund that we can build up over X amount of years and that will guarantee you a sabbatical after" - you know, I would have to do the figures, Chris, but, "after a number of years, which allows you to go and exchange in an urban setting, go and study at a university, go and look at schooling overseas; whatever it is that's the professional base of your future." So let's look at how we treat teachers like professionals, both in terms of the physical and remuneration base, but also in terms of their professional growth.

The other thing I'd urge you to look at - and again we haven't spent a lot of time on it, we've touched on it - is teacher education. It is about time we started to provide incentives and capacity for teacher education training for people in local areas. A lot of people grow up in rural areas, they want to stay there, but the employment opportunities are not there. So when we talk about that Disadvantage Area Program

we would see that we've got to involve educational settings from schools to TAFE colleges to universities. We haven't talked about TAFE colleges much, but we think the skills guarantee - which is very modest here - has to be a focus for anybody who wants to genuinely put some sort of skills base back into rural communities.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Certainly just looking at the teacher training thing, we've had a lot of very positive comment about the in-location training opportunities for Indigenous teachers or teacher aspirants and comment from non-Indigenous people who say, "We'd like to see those same kind of opportunities for us." I think that's quite right.

**[Teacher training]**

**MS BURROW:** Well, precisely. What we don't want though is to simply see - and there are people who would love to see that - the status of teacher education eroded further by taking on the British model which is simply to contract it out to schools. That would be disastrous. Teachers don't have the time. We didn't bring you to the workload survey, but we can show you from recent research that if teachers worked their award hours you would need 23,000 more teachers across the country. So that's the level of quite dangerous hours now that teachers are working, so they don't have time to do all of that.

Mind you, if their job description involved a component of mentoring around practical experience in partnership with a university, then there is no doubt that we could look at more constructive - and we've done work around site-based - this very university has done a very instructive piece of research around site-based teacher education that is about partnership work. We champion that through the union and through the national schools network.

I think you might have met Diane DeVere from Papunya. I cannot understand - and we've put it to a number of universities - why they wouldn't see Diane as a point 2 or a point 3 teacher educator, build into her school the extra support she needs and have her partnered with a teacher educated in this university or Queensland or New South Wales. It doesn't matter much these days where the partnership comes from, or even bachelor itself, but find new ways to do exactly what you're saying.

We think we've got some models that are very instructive and have proven to be workable, but it's very hard to change the entrenched nature of the way funding is applied and of course the crisis in the teacher education funding probably equates with the crisis in public schooling, so - - -

**[Cross system cooperation]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The second area I wanted to raise with you is about across-systemic cooperation. There's a little bit of that cooperation occurring for example between Catholic and government schools in relation to the Country Area Program, but in very few other areas that I've come across. We can have situations in some country towns where there's a Catholic school, there's a government school; neither of them have the numbers to be able to provide a full-time music teacher and yet it would seem to me that the employment of a music teacher across systems provides better opportunities in both schools and better opportunities for both lots of kids, yet it doesn't happen.

**MS BURROW:** Well, it does. We take a slightly different approach. On the Country Area Program front and on many of those sort of programmatic areas there's been terrific collaboration and we would absolutely support that. All of the evidence that comes from our representatives on - what were representatives on the original Country Area Program committees and so on, shows that they find that very comfortable. By and large we advocate that equity program. While we believe that there should be a cost incurred if people choose to send their students to a private school, we don't believe that the equity program should be for one sector only. Again we didn't go into that here but we have very full policy about funding formulae and partnerships across Commonwealth and state.

On the subject of the town where the Catholic school fundamentally can't provide or the public school because the students have been taken out of the public school - it's not just Catholic schools, there's a range of them - we would argue that we should throw the challenge back to the churches. Why is it that they want to retain separate governance? Rather than saying, "What is it about a total schooling sector" - so let's say you amalgamated all of those schools; "What is it that will make you confident that the values you want to instil in your children are actually available through a broader public system?" because we are segregating our children.

We are very worried about this. I speak extensively to community groups including the Ethnic Communities Council. We are increasingly dividing our children by race, religion and wealth through schooling. At what point does Australia stop and say, "We actually are fundamentally committed to a multicultural nation where social cohesion is absolutely guaranteed because our children grow up together, they learn together, they accept the basic human right of tolerance and multicultural understandings," and so on.

So our challenge would be to the churches in those communities. Let's do something different. Let's build a common school. Let's allow our children - and I grew up in a country town where



the taunts between the Catholic and the public school children every day became fundamentally a class-based warfare on a minor scale. So people grew up with entrenched views about where they fitted into the world, what the role of religion was. It was about segregation. I suppose this is a bit of a passion for me, Chris, and I'm known to feel very strongly about it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS BURROW:** But I actually think that if we could get the churches and people like ourselves and the public system together and say, "How can we build a common school, particularly in rural Australia where you don't want to divide communities, that actually meets your needs?" because we're not opposed to a values-based schooling system and we're certainly supportive - and we've said it in here - of the right to religious tolerance. It's fundamental in our society.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I mean, I don't have a fundamental objection to that, but I think it's still quite a way off. In some senses moving towards sharing of resources, whether it's personnel or others, can in fact be an incremental step towards achieving the kind of discussion that you're talking about.

**MS BURROW:** I think that's right. That's possible now. I mean, there's no argument that - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** But take that example that I gave, you said it's already happening. Where, what, a teacher is - - -

**MS BURROW:** In terms of the Country Area Program?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** No. When I talked about sharing a music teacher between schools.

**MS BURROW:** Well, in the Country Area Program there are teachers employed who service instrumental music across a range of schools, including Catholic schools, so that's why I said that doesn't really - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** But the person tends to be a mobile or transient - - -

**MS BURROW:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I haven't come across any example where two schools have said, "(a) we haven't got the resources for a full-time teacher and (b) we are unable to attract somebody part-time."

**MS BURROW:** There are multi campus structures, particularly in South Australia, and in New South Wales there's a couple as well where librarians are shared, for example.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** But that tends to be within the one system.

**MS BURROW:** They're employed by the public system and they're shared - no, no - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** All right, because I mean, where I've come across it it's been within the one system shared between a primary school and a high school.

**MS BURROW:** No.

**MR MARTIN:** No, there are schools in South Australia that have three different schools on campus; government, Catholic, Anglican in one case and something else in another.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MR MARTIN:** And there are other examples as well of that and they share library facilities and those kinds of things.

**MS BURROW:** But there still is a fundamental question here and even though, you know, we watch those experiments and people could argue on the positive that it's about, you know, sort of greater cooperation - but you should go and have a look at what happens. There is absolutely a segregation divide and the kids in the public school are made to feel that they're somehow second class. That's absolutely abhorrent I think in an Australia where the churches would argue themselves that they're not on about that kind of segregation.

I would say there's no impediment either technically. If there are two schools in a town and the two principals have got capacity for point 5 each or point 4 and point 6 or point 7 and point whatever, you could do it a number of ways. You could actually offer it as a package advertised by cooperation; there would be no problem about that. I would imagine if they rang up the system and said, "Look, you know, we want you to employ this person but you can invoice us to 30% of the cost of the salary a year," I don't know any system that would actually reject that out of hand.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, that's great, thanks.

**MR MARTIN:** I think as well though there are elements of competition between the schools. We haven't worked - the schools exist for a

variety of different reasons to different people. In the current climate the federal government, for instance, is very much pushing it as a market competitive model.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MARTIN:** In the market competitive model you don't collaborate with your competitor. If you're in an area - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I agree with you, Robert. One thing that I can say clearly and unequivocally now is that the recommendations we make in this inquiry are going to start with the kid up and not with the system down.

**[Human rights education]**

**MS BURROW:** I think that's critical. If you do that then there is that whole human rights base about what it means to be a citizen. I would say to you that despite our abhorrence of competitive practice, and we think it's been really destructive in Australia, nevertheless if we're going to maintain a public system and 70% of kids - in fact 90% of Indigenous kids rely on the public schooling system - then we've got no choice given the aggression of the private sector to go out and show what is in fact the absolute truth that public schools are world class schools.

When you look at any analysis of the values base which the private sector often denies exists in our schools, we can show you campaign after campaign where we've fought as systems and professionals to implement measures to respect the human rights agenda. We can show you how we've embedded that in curriculum and we can show you how the curriculum standards right around the country have been built for public schools. So I guess we've got to the point of being absolutely intolerant of a private sector who preaches cooperation and collaboration in their own interests, but in fact goes out and allows community perception that their schools are better.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It sometimes promotes it.

**MS BURROW:** Absolutely.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Look, thank you both. If you could give us some details, Roy, about that Adelaide or South Australian model that you were talking about.

**MR MARTIN:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We would be keen to contact them and get them to tell us what they're doing.

**MR MARTIN:** Yes.

**MS BURROW:** We will e-mail it to your office.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Sure, yes, fine.

**MS BURROW:** And just get back to us.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, thanks, Sharan, thank you very much.  
Thanks, Roy.

**MR MARTIN:** Thank you.

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**[10.07 am]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Would you like to introduce yourselves formally first, Don, if you can, if that's all right.

**MR TYRER:** My name is Don Tyrer. I am General Manager of School Programs Division and General Manager of Western Metropolitan Region of the Department of Education. I have with me Ken Peak who is a Senior Project Officer within the School Programs Division.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you.

**MR TYRER:** This morning we would like to make a submission to you in two parts. We have, and you have in front of you, a submission that has been put together by the Department. You also have there a set of overhead slides or they're slides of the Powerpoint presentation we want to make which captures some of the fundamental parts of the submission we put in front of you. We do though at the end of the submission - and I understand we need to finish about 11.00 or 10 past 11?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, 11.15. We're starting a bit late so it can go a little bit longer.

**MR TYRER:** What we would like to do is to actually show you, using the technology we have with us, the example of what we see as a major means of technological support towards students who are located within distance education parameters. We will do that in terms of the proposal we have to extend our distance education provision and an example of some of the content that we're starting to develop for those

students to access. So that last part of it will be a practical demonstration of where we're at at the present time.

Ken is just searching up the slides that we have, but as you indicated, Chris, in putting together our submission here there has been on your part an acknowledgment that with the new government coming to power we are still in a situation where whilst the policies are quite clear and they're now being implemented within the department, that implementation is taking some time in spelling out the details of the specifics of some of those initiatives. Nevertheless, we feel that we've got enough now in terms of specifics to be able to at least take you through some of those details.

### **[Provision of schools in Victoria]**

I would like to start just with some demographics about Victoria. The schools in Victoria you can see either within the little handout you've got of the Powerpoint presentation or on screen there, that from 1994 to 1999 there has been a reduction overall in the number of schools in Victoria. In 1996 there was a voluntary process of merger available with incentives for schools to consider that and a number of school communities did.

You will also notice within those demographics though that there's a significant increase in the number of P12 colleges over time. I couldn't but help hear Sharan's submission to you on that issue. One of the things we've found - and as a personal aside I went to a small rural school as a primary-aged student and was a regional director in the country for four years, so have some direct experience of the country in administrative background terms.

The Preparatory to Year 12 colleges have been an attempt by the Department, and there's been a significant increase, to create an educational community within country towns that has a single entity, so that there are not school councils even within the government system vying for community support, but rather one entity that is in itself cohesive, that has a capacity to represent education within that community; has a capacity to share teachers across the sectors in terms of primary/secondary and make major benefits in terms of that learnt knowledge.

### **[Cross system collaboration]**

I would also indicate within that that whilst there are examples in South Australia and New South Wales given in terms of intersectorial cooperation, that certainly happens in Victoria. As a practical example I would indicate to you a town like Colac. There are three secondary schools in Colac, two of them being Department of Education schools, the other being a Catholic college. They run one Victorian Certificate program, the Victorian Certificate booklet is a single booklet and

students choose courses which may be undertaken on any of those three campuses.

There is significant bussing arrangements that are put in place within those communities for the students to be able to access. Now, that occurs throughout places and there are certainly opportunities - and we would encourage those opportunities - for intersectorial cooperation within our own - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Are there other examples like that, besides Colac?

**MR TYRER:** It's simply that I was the regional director down there, Chris, that I know that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, so you came across it.

**MR TYRER:** I'm sure there are. I know that there are Victorian Certificate in Education classes that are shared, but I don't know of another booklet that's quite so - and it's quite such a structured program down there.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, thank you. Sorry, I didn't mean to take you off the track of what you were presenting.

**[School demographics]**

**MR TYRER:** No, that's fine. Please do ask. If you look at the issue of location of schools you'll see that 20% of all Victorian schools are actually in the remote areas, whereas there's only 8% of the students who are actually located in the remote. You'll see within our submission we use these words, "metropolitan, provincial, rural" and "remote" throughout and we use them as a basis of resource distribution.

The definitions of those are "metropolitan" by the traditional metropolitan boundaries that we've established; "provincial" are towns with a population of greater than 20,000; "rural" are those towns between five and 20,000; "remote" are those towns and communities less than 5000 students. The next slide simply indicates that which I've put to you, that within the range of schools 8% - although 20% of our schools are in the remote and 15% of our students are in the rural.

You will notice within Victoria though, interestingly, being a small state, when you look at the schools that are actually put there in a graphic sense you can see clearly a density within the metropolitan area, but then you start to look around and you start to see the major provincial centres.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** So you can see the Bendigos, the Sheppartons, the Milduras, down in Gippsland the major towns down there, the Moes, the Bairnsdales and then down on the other side you see the Warrnambool that's there, and even around Portland. I would just indicate at Portland that people - while we're talking about the access to cultural activities, that people like Don Burrows has now for the last some 10 years taken a particular interest in that school and has a very close liaison.

They have put out several CDs of performance, both by Burrows and the students down there to try and ensure that there is opportunity for students in that location and that geography to be able to access the very best of some of Australian's cultural performers.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Could you show us where Cohuna is, Tim?

**MR TYRER:** Cohuna?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** This is Tim's school. I still haven't found it.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** It would be up near - see Mildura?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Down slightly and to the right.

**MR TYRER:** Here?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes, around - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Maybe that one there.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Around there, possibly a little lower, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay, thank you.

**MR TYRER:** You will notice where Tim comes from though that there is a sparsity of schools.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** You will also notice down in the high plains of east Gippsland interestingly there is also there very little population. It's an area of some remoteness.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's interesting also the coast north of Bairnsdale.

**MR TYRER:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Very little through that north-east area.

**MR PEAK:** Also around the Mallee area, too.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, thanks.

**[Indigenous students]**

**MR TYRER:** The issue of Aboriginal students and Koori students within Victoria is again part of our submission to you. About two-thirds of the students who are identified as Koori students within Victoria are located in the metropolitan area; about a third of them outside of the area. Within our submission we draw your attention there to the Koori 2000 program where we've put in place a very substantial program to try and increase the support. There's certainly a clear recognition and a clear desire for us to improve significantly the performance of Koori students within Victorian schools and within the Victorian community.

Those appointments in terms of Koori education development officers have taken place over the last three years and they now are becoming a very closely tied network and their effectiveness we anticipate will increase in terms of both the skills that the Koori students are able to acquire and the retention that we're able to achieve once we've linked the success that those students have in educational terms.

**[Students with disabilities]**

There was also mention of the issue of students with disabilities. We currently have a disabilities and impairment program which I'll show in the next slide a little bit that budgeted for \$140 million. Of that, that covers about 2.6% of the Victorian student population. About 20% of that funding is targeted towards rural and remote students, but that's not targeting in the sense of there's an allocation to them. It just so happens that the issue of disabilities and impairments is not something that we find either culturally or geographically restricted. That is not our criteria.

The criteria we use associated with students with disabilities are those in line with the World Health Organisation and we have six levels of disability and then we fund the student within the school global budget specifically, depending upon the outcome of the assessment of the disability. So that funding may vary from a funding of some \$4000 up to nearly \$30,000 depending upon the extent and multiplicity of disability that a particular student may display. That indicates just the



students, but not the levels, but again that in our experience is one of those issues that we look at carefully and it is a student focused issue.

### **[Technological infrastructure]**

The new initiatives that we've undertaken within Victoria under the new government are shown here. As I've indicated to you and you've acknowledged, some of these still need to be spelt out in greater detail. But there is a strong desire for greater use of virtual technologies, particularly for rural students. Let me just say I'm going to demonstrate to you at the end a significant technological approach towards this, but I don't want to at all be seen as lessening the importance of social and cultural activity and opportunity for those students. We don't do that within our submission, but what we are indicating is that we do need to keep up with the very best in terms of learning technologies because we do believe both for rural and for other students that is a major way of learning and a major way of societal organisation which will increase in the future.

There's also the establishment of regional post-compulsory committees. These committees are going to be formed both by schools, TAFE, service providers, industry, universities in regional centres within Victoria who will have a focus of bringing together all the providers that are dealing with the student cohort of 15 to 19. We are finding that in that particular area there is sometimes confusion and overlap and these committees will enable all the institutions and all the industries associated within those areas to be brought together.

Within the government's three-week time they've also announced a shared specialist teacher program for rural schools. What this does is allow rural schools of less than 100 students to receive additional funding. That funding will enable them to employ specialist teachers on a shared basis who are then able to provide access for students to specialist programs. There's also to be a review of the bus services. We currently have an extensive service of bussing for rural students to schools. That is to be reviewed.

There is significant money being put by the government towards reduced class sizes and no doubt you're aware now that the policy is that all prep, grade 1 and grade 2 classes should reach the goal of 21 students. We see that as very important in terms of opportunity later on. The improved technological infrastructure is really not only an issue for Victoria, but a national issue. Each secondary school is to receive additional funding for school welfare coordinators. That we also see is an issue that's specific to rural education. We do see the provision of a student welfare coordinator within rural communities as an important link within those communities between the students, their aspirations, the community and an acknowledgment of some of the issues they face.

**[Exit plans for students]**

There's also within the policy that we will need to develop exit plans for students whose future is uncertain and there's a very clear commitment that we will do that for all students. As you will see the retention in the country area is less than one we would like and less than the metropolitan area, and the exit plans will focus around that. There's also to be established a youth employment line for young people to be able to contact authoritative information on it. There's also a broadening of options at the senior years which is there.

**[Scholarships for trainee teachers]**

Sharan also spoke a little bit, and you asked the questions, about teacher training. Within the policy, I would indicate to you, too, that there will be 250 scholarships for trainee teachers to encourage graduates to move into the area of teaching. The global budgets for schools are established by a process of core funding and that takes up about 80% of the funding. The other 20% of the funding is that which is differentiated depending upon the profile of the school. So again we're picking up that issue of the need to acknowledge the various student needs that are there.

**[10.22 am]**

The five areas that take up that 20% of funding for students for whom English is a second language, funding for students with special learning needs and they are seen as most often - that equates in terms of the basis of that funding to socioeconomic disadvantage; the old DSP-type area, it's now called SLN, special learning needs, those students with disabilities and impairments. An acknowledgment of the need to fund schools because of their rurality and/or their isolation and the need to acknowledge priority programs within the funding base; these are detailed on page 20 of the submission.

It does include things in the country area such as mobile area resource vans, and what this is is a library if you like that is available to all schools and it is itinerated around the schools that it serves, or a MACC van, mobile area craft centre van which again has a teacher that's trained in the area of the arts but also has specialist art equipment and so that also is itinerated around a group of schools.

**[Curriculum review]**

We're in the stage now where we are reviewing our curriculum and there has been a review of the VCE and the implementation of that review and the new structure toward it begins next year and will take two years in which its implementation will be put in place. There is also a review of the curriculum in the years Prep to Year 10 and we're anticipating that that new curriculum and standards framework will be

available in January next year and will be used by all schools as the basis of their planning.

### **[Technology]**

That I would indicate to you on this issue about cross-sectoral cooperation has involved both the Department of Education, the Catholic Education Office and the Independent Schools in putting together both those developments. Infrastructure in Victoria; we are we think the only education system of the extent that we are that actually now links every school to each other on a cost-free basis via an area network called VicOne. What this means is that a student no matter where they are is able to contact a student no matter where they are via our own intranet. So teachers and students can participate in that.

We're currently finalising what we're calling an educational channel, which is really the gateway that we will use in which to organise the materials that we replaced within our educational centre in a virtual world. We have software - you may or may not have heard about this; the Schools of the Future Web page. This is and has been consistently within the top 100 Web sites in Australia. It is the top educational Web site in Australia and it is used extensively by students, teachers and the community.

We have programs such as the primary access to languages program and the secondary access to languages program, and the science program, which are all available on a TV basis. All of our schools have television dishes on their rooves and a decoder which allows them to pick up these programs. I would indicate to you that we are now right at this minute transferring them to a digital format - from the analogue to the digital - which will actually mean not only will we have terrestrial connectivity between all schools in terms of VicOne, we will also have connectivity between schools in terms of a digital satellite. Schools of the Future Net (SOFNet), as I've mentioned, the SOFNet studio which is our TV studio beamed to all schools.

The issue that again was brought up in the previous submission about teachers having laptops as tools; by March 2000 all Victorian teachers will have a laptop. That particular program is being rolled out over the last 18 months and over the next 18 months it will be completed. That program not only rolls out a laptop, this is one of them, to teachers, but it also provides professional development training within that process. Teachers, in order to access the laptop, do agree to undertake that. That has been widely picked up. We've sped up the implementation simply to meet demand. It's just been a very popular process.

We have also better than the 1:5 computer to student ratio in our schools; we are now down to 1:4.9 and my colleague in charge of

this area says there is nowhere better in the world in terms of a system that actually achieves that computer student ratio. So what I'll be showing you in terms of the use of learning technologies is based upon there being a sophisticated and a well developed infrastructure support to it.

We've also within schools though found that they've had some difficulty maintaining the computer equipment and the local area networks. In a budget that schools will receive next week, the minister yesterday has indicated that within that budget there will be funding for technical support to schools which will allow schools individually and collectively to hire high level technicians to be able to maintain the equipment and maintain the networks within those schools. That's previously often been undertaken by a teacher or schools have sometimes hired other people, but we see that as a major development.

Our vision is that in a very short time - and I think 2003 is probably too far away because this is happening now - students will have personal laptops. They will use that for diaries, for communication, a virtual library, a learning space, the virtual classroom will exist for them. We could show you and take you to schools where this now occurs. Places like Bendigo Senior Secondary College is a school that I will talk a little bit about later on, but it uses this technology just as a matter of course in the way in which students in that country town are able to access their education.

I would, in case I forget to tell you, say that school indicates that over the last two years its VCE results have improved by 10% and in a report prepared by the department which again I can give you, they indicate they believe most of that improvement has come about because of the use of learning technologies as a means whereby the students are able to access it. So all the teachers' plans are available through IT. If you're away for a day or if you're down here as part of a submission, you could go and find what the lessons were you missed; what was the substance, what were the expectations and you can hook back into the program. You e-mail teachers, you talk that way all the time. So what we're intending to do is take the distance out of distance education.

We have though a range of quite structured approaches to distance education and country education which is not only provided by schools within rural localities, but by particular institutions within the Department. The Distance Education Centre of Victoria provides distance education provision for 2,500 students. That has traditionally been pen and paper based and post based. We're moving that to a new platform. The Victorian School of Languages also has within it 1,500 students who undertake via distance education study of languages other than English.

We have 84 schools and over 1,000 students involved in a Telematic program. This program last year in an international competition came third in the world in terms of providing quality support to those students via a Telematics approach. What it is, is a teacher who may be at Portland will be teaching students at Hamilton or in a remote area; they could be teaching them at home within that process. The Primary Access to Languages via Satellite and Secondary Access to Language via Satellite I've talked about, the Languages Other Than English programs that are available, but it's not only TV that's used there, it's also supplementation in terms of the notes and teacher guides that are provided.

It is from us an opportunity to try and make sure that the expectation that all students have access to a language other than English is not only refined to those in the metropolitan area, but is also available to those in rural communities. The Science and Technology in Education in Primary Schools is a program developed to make sure that our students do have better access to science activity, that we do use it to improve teacher confidence and competence and that's part of it.

We're also keen about the issue of gifted - and it's an interesting area because in rural areas gifted students are there as much as they are anywhere else. What we've done here, again it's a small percentage of the population that are within this category, but we have provided virtual mentoring, we have provided VCE extension opportunities and we use there a learning technologies base as the basis of that. We undertook a review of distance education last year. The focus of the review was on those students unable to attend a regular school. That wasn't always distance because distance education is also accessed by some students who are ill, some students who are in fact incarcerated and who are wanting to access education; but the traditional view of this is those students in country areas.

Also other than just isolation you can find in some country areas, whilst there may be a secondary school available, simply the number of students within that school means that some subjects are not available or even if they are available they timetable clash with another subject, so that the notion of not only the number of subjects but how often a particular subject is offered is related to the size of the cohort. So what we're wanting to do is to give students, no matter where they be, either in a school or at home, either in the country or in the city, access to the full range of programs by offering those programs via distance education model.

What the proposed new model reported, through the Switched on Learning recommendations, that we look to work towards on-line provision and that there ought be quality processes associated with it. The issues for us were three. One is we had to establish a sufficient infrastructure. That is, you've got to have the landlines down. You've got to be able to switch the computer on and get through to the other point. The second thing we had to do was develop content. I would say to you within this context there is not sufficient content of an Australian nature and part of our desire is to make sure - and it's especially true for Indigenous and rural communities that what we do is develop content that reflects the values and the experience of those communities.

Because the Internet world is becoming an international phenomena, if we don't take up this opportunity the content area of education will be swamped; mostly by American programs rather than our own. We'll show you an example of our own and the opportunities Victoria has taken up in terms of trying to lead that development with other states. The plans are still under consideration and they are being developed. The model also has within it that third phase that it is not sufficient to have a computer-to-computer connectivity and content developed, but we acknowledge the need for students to have human interaction within it.

We see teachers adopting a mentoring and facilitating role. We actually see that as increasing the student to teacher interaction, so the mentoring role would involve videoconferencing. That videoconferencing can take place not only between a teacher and a student, but between students and students. The latest initiative we have in terms of connectivity, it actually allows videoconferencing again from any point in Victoria within the schooling system to any other point.

#### **[Isolated children]**

I again will mention here that in our model and review of distance education we acknowledge that there are only something like 67 kids, Ken, that were actually unable to attend a school where they were in more than an hour, an hour and a half, in bus transport terms away from a provider that they went to, so we're talking a very small number who were actually physically so isolated that attendance became such an issue. But for those students part of our model was that we would place within their own home a computer, we would place within their home a dish which would allow them to act as if they're at school in terms of the capacity to access on-line material.

**[10.37 am]**

#### **[Technology]**

We have talked with rural communities about this process and been absolutely acclaimed in the process. It is interesting though that in talking about the cultural - the affective side of development and whilst we try and build that up in terms of virtual mentoring and on-line teleconferencing, we see within our model that the younger the student is the less relevance learning technology has towards their support. This is trying to show that in that prep to 4 area the notion of mum and dad and local experience and the provision of that support is able to be provided, and that we don't want to be seen as learning technology picking babies up and taking them through and it's the only way they learn, but we are indicating that as students get older their capacity to use learning technologies as a part of their every day learning environment increases.

The challenge for us is in finding the best curriculum and by that I mean content, assessment and reporting systems which are consistent within opportunities there. What we're trying to do is have an engaging enriched curriculum. Outcomes focused - and outcomes focused is a bit of an equity issue for us, because if we are expecting all students to be able to perform to particular levels what we've got to do then is come back to looking to the input to ensure that occurs. If you don't have the expectation of all excelling as the outcome, then we believe that the focus then on inputs may well be falsely based or inappropriately based. So we are looking at outcomes at the basis. We're looking at professional development for teachers and the access questions.

We've had success with programs like the Global Classroom Project. There are 55 projects which allow students and teachers to exchange ideas, opinion and research. I mean one of those is the Claymore Project which is - a teacher and her husband have gone down to Antarctica. They are living there for a year in a small shed. They are connected and it's been sponsored by New Idea and by the department. You may have read it within the popular press. What they do is they provide e-mail access to kids no matter where they are throughout Australia, but within Victoria it's here.

Now, the project is managed within the classroom and the Global Classroom Project is just one of them. There are 54 others that go on that way, increasingly becoming very popular and part of the reason why this process is one of the top 100 sites in Victoria. If you look at the current snapshots, I won't run through these but they just give you a whole range of areas where we are looking to - yes, section 8 of the report goes into those. Within the next slide, Ken, there's a list of appendices which is here - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** All right, thank you.

**MR TYRER:** - - - which, Chris, I'll leave you there and whatever you want other than that we will of course provide for you. The issue of what we intend to do in designing development and delivery of on-line content is that we want materials to be in electronic format. We want the content to be able to cover a 40-week course. That is not just a couple of weeks here and there, but be comprehensive and then be able to be picked up by the learner to meet their needs.

We want provision for student self-assessment within it. We want to not only be multimedia but truly multimedia in the use of video and the use of learning technologies, this, and the use of telephones. I mean, the restriction currently on distance education in most states is that it is paper based supplemented by telephones. We're looking to expand well beyond that. Our initial trialing in this area has certainly shown great popularity with engaging students.

A typical on-line course and that which is provided in Bendigo as an example - and if you did have a chance to visit there it is impressive to just have a look at it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I've been there three times this year, but I haven't actually been to the school. I haven't heard about that.

**MR TYRER:** The senior college.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Next time.

**[On-line mentors]**

**MR TYRER:** I mean, it's just interesting to see a group of kids from a sort of country area operating in a senior environment, using learning technologies and within that the sort of social interaction that takes place. It's quite remarkable. It's a room four times as big as - well, there are computers in every room. If nobody else is using the computer any student can go and use them, no matter what's being taught. You can just sit up the back and operate it, but there's a central area where kids just sit down and work in cooperative groups. I mean, it not only allows individual activity, but cooperative activity in a range of ways. Those courses would have a range of processes like that.

We do we use words like "synchronous" and "asynchronous" and I ought to define them for you because we get a bit caught up in the jargon. Asynchronous is where you can access the program any place, any time. So if you wanted to undertake a study in physics and you felt like doing it at 9 o'clock at night, you simply hook in, log in, and you undertake it. A synchronous part of the program though would be timetabled where at 11 o'clock on Friday you would have a hook-up with your mentor and your teacher that's providing that support.



What happens within an environment is tasks are prepared on-line. The students put back their efforts in the area on-line. The teacher corrects and so it takes place within that. Again the challenge for us is to find ways of delivering, so let me hand across to Ken and, Ken, if we can just have a look at that CD Rom that's there.

### **[The Virtual School]**

**MR PEAK:** Okay. As part of our review of distance education we wanted to, in our consultations with parents and students around the state, explain what an on-line environment might look like, because to those people who are familiar with technology that was something that people understood; but for people unfamiliar we wanted to explain what a virtual environment might look like. We developed this platform so that students when they open up they log on and they're logged on part of the - in this case - virtual school.

On the right-hand side would be a list of the subjects that the student is studying. This is just a prototype but if students at VCE are studying five subjects then they would be listed on the top right-hand side there. We've got Human Development, English and Information Technology. This week section would be information posted there by the teacher to indicate to the student, "This week you have to hand in that assignment and don't forget to read chapter 3 and don't forget to answer the questions, and how are you going on that assignment, it's overdue," and so on and so forth - particularly if it was my son it would be overdue.

On the left-hand side there is the virtual library, the resource centre, which provides information, technical help that's on-line, scanned articles. I'll take you briefly through some of this stuff. The forums part is where kids can take part in both synchronous and asynchronous chat sessions with each other and with the students in terms of various topics. Down the middle the student lounge where kids who just want to chat with other kids about whether they're watching television or what they saw at the dance the other night and so on. The opportunities for videoconferencing and the opportunities for students to post their own Web pages as part of that development.

For example I'll just briefly take you through this. A human development subject; you've got the unit details there of what unit 4 is. Work sheets that are all available; Microsoft Word that would be downloaded - I won't do that now. Work sheets for that particular unit, what the work requirements are, who the teachers are and their e-mail addresses, buttons to link with the teachers. On-line exams is always something really interesting where the Board of Studies exams - you can go to 1997's exam. The kid can actually do it and enter your answers and away you go and post them down the bottom to the teacher.

So what happens is down the bottom you go through this exam, you submit, it e-mails straight to the teacher, the teacher can correct that sort of material. Now, in fact this is available now at Bendigo Senior Secondary College, they offer that particular service. So you can see the kinds of things that we had in mind in relation to that. If I take you through - let's take English this week. What happens is there's a message that's posted by the teacher. It will just take a couple of seconds to load.

(Computer Web site demonstrated)

**MR PEAK:** Peter talked about the scanned articles. The cyber library has information on scanned articles which kids can then download straight to their own computer and this is an example of newspaper articles that have been scanned in and kids can download to their own equipment. The other thing that we do - just bear with me, I will have to log in again. Sorry about that, but you can see the platform upon which this is based is not a teacher replacement exercise. Not at all; a teacher is a key part of this whole arrangement.

For example, the forums that I spoke about, the English text discussions that Peter spoke about, the Lost Salt Gift, Death in the Lost Salt Gift Book, the teacher posts the question, "Sandy Black's class. These stories are full of death and misery. There's nothing positive," and so you can see there 11.50 at night this particular student makes that comment. Another student comes and says at 11.58, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, take the good with the bad," and so on and so on and so on, posting from various students after midnight, etcetera, in relation to this particular class and adding information on that particular class.

**MR TYRER:** I would just say there one of the things kids don't have access to is other students' writing within the normal classroom. One of the most powerful learnings is actually getting access to what other kids do who are good at it. This, even within a non-rural environment, is a marvellous way for kids to get that sense of what is an expectation you can have about your own performance.

**MR PEAK:** And what happens in the experience at Bendigo and other places is that that community of learners notion is actually enhanced where e-mail to the student who might be 100K away saying, "How did you go with section 2 of that question?" or, "How did you go on that assignment? Can you give us a hand?" is something that now happens very regularly.

In terms of Virtual Veronica here, if - as my son does regularly, needs help with research but hasn't got this facility, where he could fill out to the librarian at the school what course you're doing. So there's

the list there; what subject. "My assignment is due in," and there's a button there for "Due in five weeks ago. Help me, please," e-mails to the librarian at the school the request. If the student is at school then the material will be available the next day or within two days or three days posted out to the student. Whether it be documented material or anything that's available in digital format will be e-mailed immediately. So the student need not feel that they're on their own even at 9 o'clock at night, "I better e-mail the library and get that information."

So that's just, if you like, a snapshot of the kind of platform that we thought was appropriate. I'll just quickly show you that the kids have an opportunity to chat synchronously. This is a snapshot of, "Hey, did you see the X-Files? Yeah, yeah, what about," and that sort of stuff, so that there's that notion of where human face-to-face contact is not possible the kids can actually feel like they're socialising with their mates. So that's the kind of notion that we had as a prototype if you like. Now, the videoconferencing thing - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That example you gave, by the way, could have come directly from our computer at home.

**MR PEAK:** Exactly, and certainly mine. What this is going to show is that the use of videoconferencing where Don talked about the synchronous relationship of 11 o'clock on Friday, teacher wants all kids on-line to go through in this case legal studies - it just takes a moment to download, but it's that notion of - - -

(Computer Web site demonstrated)

**MR PEAK:** So if you're a kid you would be seeing this on screen. The teacher will be on screen. If you've got a camera and you have camera for laptops, then the teacher could see the five or six students on the screen at the one time. I will stop that there. That goes on for quite a bit. The issue there is whilst Talking Heads is one thing, what happens in these exercises is that after a few weeks of using the technology where the Talking Heads was fun and Mr Okimura on the TV ads - where all the Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland all came up on the screen, that's fine, but what happens is it's the sharing of information that's really critical to this thing.

After using this the material that we've got back from our research shows that suddenly it's away from the Talking Heads; "Let's talk about the material, let's share the work on the computer," and so on and I've seen that myself in action. Do you want me to do the science thing now?

**MR TYRER:** Do the Web page. Let's have a look at the students' Web page.

**MR PEAK:** Okay. In terms of the students' Web page, the kids are encouraged - you can see that she's done a - her Web page is under construction in actual fact, but you've got opportunities to post photos of the student, friends and so on where they can share what's important to the particular students. They can share as a school community, "This is me. This is who I am. These are my friends. This is what I'm interested in," etcetera, etcetera. It's a way of communicating, particularly for those kids that don't get an opportunity to regularly meet other kids.

[10.52 am]

This is a great opportunity where they can share themselves with others and part of our efforts were not only in the education side of things, but also in the notion of socialisation it's really critical, particularly for those kids. Here's some kid who's obviously interested in Wayne's World - it could be my son - and he's built a shrine and all the rest of it and sounds are available from Wayne's World. Who would want that, but anyway, that's the kind of thing that we have in mind.

**MR TYRER:** Christie Evans is interested in horses, isn't she, but that gives you an idea of that.

**MR PEAK:** Yes. Pigs, pigs she's interested in. Cattle, sheep, horses and pigs. So this is an example of a kid obviously from a rural - - -

**MR TYRER:** That structure that we put up there you can see allows then students in rural communities - and I would say to you not only rural communities - to actually access education provided in a different way. It will start to change approaches by teachers to teaching, not only in rural Victoria but elsewhere, because as we develop the content the quality approach is going to be there.

What we've been doing is trying to work with other people in acknowledging that issue of content, which is a real issue I think within your inquiry in terms of those things I've raised. We have within the department put together a submission and we were successful in gaining some funding to undertake the development of a science program. As a member of a national committee we've been working on that national front to try and have other states cooperate around the development of content and there has been a willingness for people to do it; more in the rhetoric than in the reality, though this is the first case of the reality of what it is that's going to occur.

So what Ken will show us is just a notion of the way whereby we might be able to develop our own science program. We took science, and this isn't culturally bound, because in the initial part we

were trying to look for a development of something that was fairly neutral in terms of demonstrating what the technology could do and it had therefore cultural acceptance no matter where you were within either Australia or New Zealand because they're also becoming interested in what's happening.

We also thought that this might have some - the reverse of this - application overseas, but we would see that if we can get it right within these low risks areas such as some of the science areas, we could then start to move into some of the much more culturally sensitive as part of that development. So, Ken, just - - -

**MR PEAK:** Just quickly, we're currently trialing this particular module. It's only 16 hours of on-line work. We're currently trialing it as we speak with students who are in face-to-face contact with the teacher in three country secondary colleges, as well as with some students at our Distance Education Centre. We're trialing it with two remote families who have students who for distance reasons can't attend school who have computer equipment and are trialing the material, plus a student who's studying the Victorian curriculum in Fiji and another one in the Philippines, so who are also trialing this particular module.

I will just go to the end here and what we've got is this module - this is only a prototype. This is the science units that would be available in a series, in a course. We've only got one here available. Skip the introduction. So there's a range of activities that the student can do. These are the sections of the unit. This is 16 hours' work down there and there's a range of activities. If we go to the range of activities, what we see here is a quiz that kids can take years and years to do. They can keep doing it if they want to.

You have to grab the cloud and put it into whether it's gas, liquid or solid, so I'll put it in there; correct, five points, I did well. I don't know what that is, but I'll put it into solids and see what - if I can grab it. I was right, it must be sand - "sugar" it says up the top. So you can see the notion of - there's another solid. That's a liquid, I'll put it into there, gas, so I was wrong. So and so on. You can keep repeating that particular exercise. This whole notion is around solids, liquids and gasses in terms of the size component.

I'll go the next page, there will be another quiz, another arrangement here. It's about the physical states of matter and kids can play and replay this as often as they like. You've got a piece of ice sitting there and suddenly the sun comes out and melts the snow away. We've often found that kids like material read to them, so - - -

(Computer Web site demonstrated)

**MR PEAK:** So you can see there that there's always a safety tip. If we go to the next page, this has the demonstration about particles and atoms. The demonstration is the football notion; North Melbourne and Essendon it looks like.

(Computer Web site demonstrated)

**MR PEAK:** You can see there that it encourages kids to go to the workbook. So if we go to their workbook, the workbook for example will have solids, liquids and gasses, "In the correct columns list the substances you caught in that exercise of putting them in the bottles," and then they can send it to the teacher. They don't like the draft they made, so they have a new draft. They can print it.

You can see down the bottom there that down the track we want them to be involved in that chat, bulletin board, in box, other resources that might be listed. They're not there now at the moment, this is only a trial, but being able to send to the teacher and get the draft back is part of the deal that's going on at the present moment. Kids are finding that to be something that they're really very very keen on.

I will just go to the next page and show you quickly. Another activity; the crowd animation. Discuss with kids in the classroom or discuss with others via e-mail, which is what they're currently doing, and again answering the workbook arrangement. Going further on, "Did you know that things are called atoms?" and so on. The model of the football arrangement. "Understanding this better". Now, what this does is bring this together and starts getting into the science book.

(Computer Web site demonstrated)

**MR PEAK:** Now, a kid can replay that and play that. My son is actually in Year 9 doing this, or has been doing this, and found that very useful in terms of understanding the relationships between physical change and so on. "Do you want to look at real atoms?" - this is a plug for IBM, but we won't worry about that too much, where you can see the size of what it takes - an atom. If you read the thing - - -

(Computer Web site demonstrated)

**MR PEAK:** Kids have indicated to us they like the idea of being read to. How that is going to work in a classroom of 15 kids all playing the sound is beyond me, but kids have indicated - and we've gone along with that - that's the story. I could keep going and showing you more of the thing, but you get the idea.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR PEAK:** This is not an exercise to simply put the print-based materials in a digital format and send them out to students. This is not an exercise of replacing teachers with the computer. This is an exercise of using the media to develop high quality learning experiences for students, particularly for those students who can't attend school in a regular way. We think - and as Don has indicated - as part of our review and as part of our push to integrate the learning technologies into the curriculum, this is an opportunity that we believe will enhance opportunities for kids, particularly those in remote areas.

**MR TYRER:** So we, as a department, acknowledge those issues of teacher supply that we need to continue to work on; the professional training. We've got professional development modules now where we are using virtual technologies as part of that process, so not only will the teachers get their own laptop but they'll also then have an opportunity to undertake professional development at their own time, both synchronously and asynchronously as part of that process, in rural areas as well as non-rural. The students will be able to do it.

Like everywhere else in the country, we are keen to build and develop learning communities in the country areas. Within the government's push you will see constant reference to that particular need being recognised and the need to develop education along with industry as part of the infrastructure support to country students.

I would just finish off by saying that whilst we've concentrated on learning technologies this morning, I would just again reiterate that we do see it as a major way of overcoming some of the issues being faced, but it's got to be seen within that other context that's been well put by other people. We are happy to answer any questions, Chris.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much. Thank you both very much actually, it was extremely interesting. Tim, do you want to start off?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Okay, yes, I'll begin. With the distance education program, I'm involved heavily in that. Most of my course comes from Distance Education. I just want to know what's being done to promote the IT side of distance education, because as you said it is very much pen and paper. That's how I do it entirely. I have not been exposed to this kind of technology in regard to distance education. I think it would be fantastic. I would just like to know the selection criteria in the schools that will get the IT. Why Bendigo? Not in a critical sense, but just - - -

**MR TYRER:** No, that's fine. Bendigo did receive additional funding some years ago to become a pilot school for the trialling of it. Having

had that kick start they picked it up and then they've put significant moneys of their own. What that allowed them to do was to be able to attract some teachers who had particular skills and interest in that area. Your school, your local school, now is connected to VicOne and you do have within your school a computer ratio of something like 1:5 I bet.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** What we haven't done is put the Distance Education program to this extent there. As we've indicated it's still a model under development. The Distance Education Centre - you may have picked this up, too, in the correspondence - is moving from South Melbourne to another location. At the moment it's Blackburn. What we're doing is establishing that centre as a technology centre. Now, what that then requires is within that a look at the staffing structure of this evolving entity and a professional development training of those teachers so that they can undertake that activity.

[11.07 am]

We do though have another model which we haven't fully explored, and that is that places like Bendigo are offering to become the virtual centre for a particular subject or a particular geographic area. So that instead of you coming to Melbourne for physics you may well have been able to go to Bendigo.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** Now, had you done that you would have then accessed their virtual activity as one of their distance students. Now they've started to trial that. It is a new and costly development. In some ways the science stuff you saw today is not good enough, but it is so expensive to produce that unless we can actually act collectively within Australia we will never be in the position to be able to develop the sort of materials that on-line you should have.

We want to move from you just getting the teachers' notes on-line, but even that's a big improvement, which is largely what Bendigo does because instead of you posting back you would e-mail back and the next day you would get a response from the teacher as a reaction to the work you had done. That feedback needs to be closed down to - well, within this model we're saying 48 hours maximum.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Does the VicOne line cover just general Internet access as well?

**MR TYRER:** Yes.



**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Who pays for that access?

**MR TYRER:** Within VicOne it's a network. What we've done is cache down from the Internet a whole host of sites, so we've put them down and located them, because we're then able to give quality assurance. We're then able to make sure that there's nothing untoward within those sites. If all you want to do is access those sites it will cost you nothing, but if you want to step outside our own cached site, then the charges will be those that are associated with any access to the Internet.

Part of our process of giving each teacher - now, when we say we give, it costs each teacher \$3 a week for one of these machines, but they get \$100 access to the Internet free because it's got a modem built into it.

**MR PEAK:** In schools at the moment - Bendigo for example is running what I believe is a subsidised program for the Internet because Bendigo is able to - it has such a large backbone. Bendigo Senior Secondary actually runs the whole Internet backbone for Bendigo. There are a whole host of community organisations that come into Bendigo senior. So they're able to get such a cheap rate as an Internet Service Provider. They're offering very cheap advantageous rates to kids and families as a result of that relationship with community and other commercial organisations. So it's something like \$1 a day for kids to access the Internet from home, for example, at Bendigo, which is pretty reasonable.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** \$1 a day? Unlimited access for a day, \$7 a week?

**MR PEAK:** I don't know about unlimited access, but it's \$1 a day for a set period. I forget now what the rates are, but it's pretty cheap because they're able to access it at that arrangement. There are ways in which you can assist the connectivity for kids. I think half of the kids at Bendigo are actually hooked on to Bendigo's area network, so about 500 homes are hooked up to the local line anyway, out of 1600 kids.

**MR TYRER:** Every student in Victoria has an e-mail address and that's available through the school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We might try and do it by topic. Have you got more Internet ones, because I can - - -

**[Cost of technology]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes, just one more. On the basis of the virtual mentoring program which I also took part in, one of the biggest

deterrents from people in my school was the added cost of the travel to - I did mine through Bendigo, so we had to travel to Bendigo once every two weeks to access our mentors simply because the cost of accessing the Internet at home is accelerated and it wasn't subsidised in any way. It actually ended up costing me about \$800 to take part in the program. I was just wondering has that been evaluated, has that been reviewed at all?

**MR TYRER:** Yes. The issue of your home to the school is one that I'm not quite clear about in terms of cost, but the latest development - and it's only been announced in the last couple of weeks - is there will now be no cost in the videoconferencing capacity provided you are within VicOne. Now, some students from their home are actually accessing VicOne and kids at Bendigo are doing this. They are accessing VicOne as their carrier. Now, provided that can occur, the videoconferencing could be at no cost within it.

We are saying within this particular proposal that if you're a student who's traditionally enrolled in the Distance Education program, then we would see your accessing that in the same way as the cost associated with current pen and paper.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** That's really good, thank you.

**MR TYRER:** It's expanding. The other thing we've found - I mean, VicOne gave connectivity of 64k to every school and we've found it insufficient. It's just too small. So the digital television program that we'd be putting out through the - the swing over there to digital is going to give us the capacity, as I indicated, to go both terrestrial - because the videoconferencing takes up a lot of space as well as to go then through the satellite process.

It's interesting to hear of the difficulties you had because we're just really to pick them up. That's what I said, the first challenge was to get the technical platform. The second one is the content. The third one is the student support. Like everywhere, we're still grappling with the first but getting much closer to the solutions.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** How is the budgeting worked out these days for schools to access Internet, to actually get the equipment? I know you've got the computers going out at the moment, but do the schools have to take the actual cost of the phone calls and the Internet accessing from their own budgets or are they all met centrally through the system?

**MR TYRER:** No, they're by each school. Again VicOne allows school to school interaction at no cost.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MR TYRER:** So it's only when you want to step outside that. Nowadays you wouldn't fax.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** You would e-mail to each other because it's no cost.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The school will pay though for access to sites for outside the downloading - - -

**MR TYRER:** The school pays for anything else. As it pays for its own telephone calls it pays then for any cost associated with connectivity. Now, that's recognised in part of that formula I showed you where 80% of it is core, 20% of it is programs and the rurality and isolation of loading, there is to say acknowledgment that you will have much higher costs and it's been quite an issue.

I suppose the issue for the system is as we move much towards an increased use of learning technologies, whether or not we do need to increase and recognise those costs. We will review that, but at this stage, Chris, because it's not heavily used and hasn't become part and parcel of every day activity for everyone, we don't quite know what they are. But schools will clearly be able to show evidence. You know, our telephone costs are X, Internet costs are X and we will look at that and review it.

**[Bandwidth]**

**MR PEAK:** Can I make another comment on that in relation to - it's a national issue. I know that there are funds available nationally through the regional telecommunications fund through the sale of Telstra and so on, that have been made available to support a range of activities in infrastructure and information technology, particularly in rural areas. But I'm not sure that there's been enough done to develop a national approach to the backbone and the national infrastructure that enables rural communities to log in.

What I see funded are things like the Dromana Chess Club and the on-line cyber something, but the actual backbone of the thing - and I'm not a technical person - is an issue that I don't believe has been strongly addressed as a nation that we have to focus in on, and Victoria will be no different to some of the other states to build on that 64k to make it easier for - because notions of bandwidth, bandwidth, bandwidth are going to be critical over the next three years. They already are. So 64k is the bare minimum. But if we're going to be doing the kind of multimedia exercises, some of which we've demonstrated,

we're going to need more bandwidth, particularly in rural areas. So I believe that a strong national approach needs to be taken, so I just take that opportunity to make that point.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Another cost issue associated with that though different from bandwidth is that the emphasis through the Telstra regional telecommunications programs has certainly been to provide a localised fee, which means that you've got local call rates rather than STD rates, but the actual cost when you need access in some of these communities is just absolutely enormous.

**MR PEAK:** I guess that's the point I was raising, too.

**[Technology in the home]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. It will remain a problem say for your students so that - well, it remains a problem. If the schools are going through VicOne, the students presumably at their homes can go through VicOne as well if they're registered with Distance Education.

**MR PEAK:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** But then if they're moving outside that it becomes quite an expensive proposition for them in some of these rural communities to actually do the broad research, so I suppose your issue of quality control and the downloading of site access through VicOne becomes a critical one to ensure that that's as many and varied as possible.

**MR PEAK:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And up to date.

**MR TYRER:** And it's chosen by use.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The sites the kids go to.

**MR TYRER:** Yes, the sites kids go to. We look at the use of that and then we cache that which is, you know, being used by a number of kids to try and reduce that costing arrangement. We've also been able to strike a range of very lucrative deals with software suppliers by the way in which we're able to purchase as a system a range of programs.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** They are being passed on to teachers and to students and the access of those programs.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So they can actually purchase the programs for home usage?

**MR TYRER:** They can.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The students who are obviously from poor families, the cost of setting up the home system is very difficult. Are there arrangements developing for after hours use of school computer systems? Is that a local school issue or is it a statewide issue?

**MR TYRER:** Well, it is a system issue but it's addressed within the local school community. I've indicated to you for those students who are isolated our proposal would have them provided with the hardware and software. For other students who are able to access a school but may not have access at home, yes, the issue about school hours and the flexibility of that is one being picked up variously by communities. Again I'd say to you that you might want to look at individual schools to just see what arrangements they make for night and weekend access.

**MR PEAK:** There was also some of the research, from the United States admittedly, but where schools - K to 12 schools - in the United States are moving towards 20 or 30% of the school time being spent at home on a computer. In other words there seems to be a changing relationship between particularly senior students working at home and interfacing that with working at school. If that's true and that model keeps coming here to Australia, which we believe it probably will, then it's going to mean I think local communities making decisions about Internet access and about equity and about access to equipment and so on.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR PEAK:** In the same way that in the past we've provided textbooks for kids who couldn't afford them and all the rest of it, I think schools will probably start having to look at that access notion.

**MR TYRER:** Rural schools are now having banks of these that are available for loan and students can - so if they haven't got a computer at home they are able to access it that way. It is an equity issue and one that we need to pick up on.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's a huge one. The after hours access in terms of the school making itself available and having the teachers to supervise it, but then also tying into what is clearly a tortured issue here is transport. Even if the kids are allowed into the school and can get access to the machines, if they can't get a bus home afterwards they're really stuck.

**MR TYRER:** That's right. But if you can have the programs which are available, asynchronous programs - I mean, provided you've got a television line at home you can access the program. You could log in. Borrow a computer, take it home and log in then to the mainframe of the school and you would be able to pick up any of the programs that are there, as you would be here. If you were a student at Bendigo you would be able to log into Bendigo from here through this and see what you had missed today. You would be able to submit any of the assignments by the click of a button here that would go back. In part it overcomes that need to travel. Not remove it, but it lessens the need to be able to travel provided you can get the computer at home.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, that's right.

**MR TYRER:** I think we ought to be able to deal with that issue, because in cost terms to provide these on a loaned basis is a far more economical thing than to try and run those buses, you know, at all hours all the time.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I agree with you, provided there's the maintenance support within the school. I mean, there are some schools that have got fantastic hardware but because they haven't got any maintenance they won't let the kids go near it.

**MR TYRER:** Well, next week you'll see this announcement about the technical support. It's been a big issue for us.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** A huge issue.

**MR TYRER:** And it's a very large budget. It would be fair to say as my role as a regional director the schools have been delighted with the quantum of support they're getting for technical support. Not teacher support, but technical support.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** In the very short time that we've got - we are a bit over time already and I'm sorry to be running over - we better move a bit beyond IT because we've concentrated on that this morning. The next area I wanted to mention was the question of teacher incentives and packaging. It seems from our short discussions here this week that the incentives available for rural and remote teachers here are much less than they are in other states.

[11.22 am]

**MR TYRER:** Yes.

**[Teacher incentives]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Particularly with the movement or compounded by the question of contracting and the restrictions that that places then on guaranteed transfers. Incentives it would appear in Victoria are now virtually non-existent. What is the department's view on the current incentive arrangements and do you think they're working? What flexibility is there and how will they develop?

**MR TYRER:** It's an area that the government does want to look at and it's been an area of some concern. You'll know that the government are moving away from the former government's approach towards contract teaching and moving away from that they're looking at the range of issues that you raise. So at this point I couldn't comment further about it, other than to acknowledge the issues that you raise and that they are part of those discussions, and a quite deliberate part of those discussions.

They haven't occurred yet though, Chris, and other than to acknowledge the scent of what you're saying, the need for us to shape up an approach which would do it. The previous government had tried to do it by providing opportunities for some schools to be freed of any structural constraint to salaries and offer a range of packages and salaries that might have attracted people to particular schools, but the move is to make that much more systematised than to make it individual.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Is there a time-frame for those considerations at this stage, or is even that too early?

**MR TYRER:** I would have to get back to you on that. I know that there is within the framework the establishment of an institute of teaching and this is seen as being a very high-powered development and top priority. Within an institute of teaching those sort of issues are going to be discussed. I'm not aware just at the moment of the time-frame associated with the establishment of that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Tim, your turn.

**[Indigenous cultural awareness training]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Going back to the subject of Aboriginal Studies; how widespread is the availability of the subject and corresponding with that are teachers in rural areas given compulsory Aboriginal education or cultural awareness education in their training?

**MR TYRER:** I would have to get back to you on as how widely spread it is. It's available for all students as part of the process, as is any subject that's there. As is physics - you can choose it.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** We hope through the process we've got here that your access to any subject which may have low enrolments would be dramatically increased through that process. I don't know its spread, I would have to find that out for you. The second one is about the compulsory nature of pre-service training. Again I'm not aware of whether that's required of pre-service teachers or not. That's an issue associated with the training institutions.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Is there any thought being put into incorporating Aboriginal history into lower years, primary school years?

**[Indigenous curricula]**

**MR TYRER:** Absolutely. The new curriculum and standards framework has within it - and what's interesting about the new Curriculum Standards Frameworks is it talks about learnings as being essential learnings. We've moved now to defining a much more core curriculum than we did in the past. It theoretically would occupy about 70% of a student's time with 30% then being discretionary for the school. It's not nearly though as tight-jacketed as that makes out because the approach taken by the school in coming to the learning outcome will vary, but the learning outcomes are there.

There is specific reference to these issues within various levels of the curriculum and standards framework where there are now expected outcomes that all students will achieve in understanding issues associated with Indigenous education. The details of those outcomes are now spread right throughout it. Consultations have occurred with the Koori community and satisfaction has been expressed by them in the design of what is now to be proposed and come into play next year.

You will now find that at level 4, Year 6, students will come to an understanding of an outcome about the history, about the relevance, about the development of Koori culture and its relationship to current society. Then there are indicators. There's an outcome like that and then there's a series of indicators as to how a teacher would know whether or not the student has developed that understanding. So we are focussing strongly in on that area and the area of Australian history which incorporates that at all levels.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** So is it a compulsory - - -

**MR TYRER:** Yes, it is, in the sense that those essential learning outcomes are expected to be understood by all students.



**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Back to Chris, if you've got another issue.

**[Indigenous Educators]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The other question in Aboriginal education is just the role of Aboriginal people within the schools. The education workers that we met yesterday were talking about the difficulties they faced in firstly being accepted into the schools, the lack of clearer career paths for them than currently exist. There doesn't seem to be in Victoria - though I may be wrong - the same kind of remote teacher qualification training, if you like, teacher education training, or programs that we found in some of the other states so that the Aboriginal education workers can upgrade their qualifications and become qualified teachers if that's what they want. Are these issues about career structures, payments, pathways and so forth for these workers being considered as well?

**MR TYRER:** They are, and I will send you some additional material in the area. But what we've done is provide specific courses for Koori persons to undertake to become teachers and we've contracted with universities to run and provide those teachers. We've then, additional to that, offered these people employment opportunity which we've not done to any other sector in terms of career opportunities. So we've provided paid study which has been contracted to a university and then guaranteed employment as part of the process of encouraging people into - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So paid study, you mean that they actually get work release on pay to undertake the studies?

**MR TYRER:** Yes, they do. They may not have even been with us, but undertake the study and get paid - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** As a scholarship arrangement.

**MR TYRER:** - - - as a scholarship.

**MR PEAK:** Some of that information is detailed in section 8 of the submission.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Is it?

**MR PEAK:** Where we refer to that program.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks.

**MR PEAK:** Recruitment of Aboriginal - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** With the submission as a whole we'll actually probably come back to you with some further questions.

**MR PEAK:** Sure.

**[Transport]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So we can pick that up in that context if you like, thanks. Transport is the other thing I wanted to raise with you. Is the cost of school buses borne by the Education Department or the Transport Department here?

**MR TYRER:** The Education Department.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** There's a major issue raised, you would guess, by non-government schools about their access to the buses. It's also come up in the context of TAFE students as well, that the school buses it seems give priority to government schoolkids, but non-government school students and TAFE students can use the buses if there are spaces available on the buses, but there's no guarantees of free buses for anyone except government school students. Is that understanding correct?

**MR TYRER:** No. My understanding, Chris - let me preface it by saying that, because it's my experience rather than expertise in the area having been a regional director - is that we provide busing to the school of choice; the nearest school of choice. Now, if that happens to be a Catholic or an independent school we provide it. So, for example, in Portland where there is no independent school and you want to go to one and there's one in Hamilton, we actually provide buses up the highway from Portland to Hamilton for you to access an independent school.

My experience and my understanding is that we do not discriminate between whether or not the sector you attend - but we provide access to the nearest appropriate school. So if you want to go to an independent school, the nearest independent; the nearest Catholic or the nearest government - and there's no discrimination.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Is a TAFE classed under that as well?

**MR TYRER:** No. Again I ought to be cautious in saying that because my experience is with schools rather than post school. Let me say I'm not aware, to be more accurate, of any busing arrangements that are made with the TAFE area. I am the schools area. There is - and it's in our submission here - to be a review of busing and that might be part of that review.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It could be. Certainly my understanding from the submissions that we've received - unless the submissions themselves have got it wrong - is that it's almost optional busing really for the non-government school students. So maybe either the submissions have got it wrong or else maybe your experience in the western regions is a bit different from elsewhere.

**MR TYRER:** The other thing is we only run buses where the cohort is large enough. It's not economic to run a bus if there's only three or four students, and so for them we provide a conveyancing allowance. So there are two sorts of support provided and whilst these people may not have been able to access a bus they may well have been able to access a conveyancing allowance. That applies no matter which sector you're in, too.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** With the cost of transport for school excursions, does that come out of the budget provided to the school or are there additional funds other than COUNTRY AREA PROGRAM available for that?

**MR TYRER:** No, those are provided by the school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So the rurality factor would be the way in which it's seen as schools compensated for those - - -

**MR TYRER:** That's right.

**[TAFE in schools]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** With the merger of TAFE into your department now, the larger department, will some of these issues of interaction between TAFE and schooling do you think be more easily addressed than they have been in the past?

**MR TYRER:** The establishment of the rural post-compulsory committees, there's a direct recognition of the need to do that. So we do see that that's an area where there has been some duplication and some omission of programs and that those committees will bring together the players geographically located to make sure that that issue is addressed. They are still to be established but the commitment towards it is clear and unambiguous.

There is also now within the structure of the department a separate minister who has charge of post-compulsory education and training and her name is Lynne Kosky. Lynne then will be looking at issues for students from 15 through. She will be working with the Minister for Education who also has 15 plus in terms of VCE students.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR TYRER:** But that interaction is acknowledged within the new structure and the regional committees.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you know whether there's a minimum age below which TAFE courses are not available to students in Victoria?

**MR TYRER:** There was an understanding between TAFE and the Department that the department would provide VCE for school-aged students, that is less than 18, and that TAFE would tend to concentrate on the 18 over. The new policy is that TAFE is able to provide access to students at any age to their programs, and it's anticipated in the broadening of the options in those post-compulsory years that TAFE will play a part within that provision as much as schools will.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What about pre-compulsory years? I will give you an example rather than being obtuse. One of the things that surprised me in Queensland is that there is apparently some rule there -that no-one could tell me where it came from - where TAFE courses aren't available to under 15 year olds without the explicit approval of the director-general. What that has meant is that in some small towns where there is a school that can provide limited access to courses there's a nicely equipped TAFE with metalwork, woodwork, workshops and so forth, but they're not available to 14-year-olds on a Vocational Education And Training-style program for the school.

**MR TYRER:** I've never run into that here as an issue. It's not been mentioned to me. We now have a range of Vocational Education And Training programs that are now coming down to Years 9 and 10 and implied in that is access to TAFE programs, TAFE facilities. I'm not aware of any prohibition associated with it. I would be surprised. In practice I've never seen it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I was surprised, I must say. - - -

**MR TYRER:** I would be surprised in practice if that were the case.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. It seemed to me particularly odd when you've got a town struggling with resources to have a well resourced place that's not being used.

**MR TYRER:** Indeed. I agree. How are you going, Tim? We're getting short of time.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes, I think so.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Look, we might leave it at that stage I think and come back to you with questions when we've had a chance to have a look through the submission and follow up other things. Don, thanks very much. Ken, thank you, too. Thanks for the presentation of this. It's really useful for me at least - I'm not as computer literate as Tim is - to have a chance to see exactly what you're talking about in terms of the things that are available and the directions it's going.

**MR TYRER:** Thank you very much.

**MR PEAK:** Thank you.

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**[11.41 am]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you, Ed, and welcome. I am Chris Sidoti. Tim Roberts is with us as the Co-Commissioner in this matter. Do you want to introduce yourself and then go straight into your comments?

**MR CARMODY:** Yes. My name is Ed Carmody, and I am the bussing coordinator for the country diocese of - Sale is where I'm based.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So you will have some comments to make about access to buses for the non-government schools.

**[Transport policy]**

**MR CARMODY:** I think I might, yes. I think I might have a few to say to that. That's probably one of the main issues I want to address. Probably I think a lot of other issues which relate to our diocese and which we have down there with the distance from the city and lack of technology, etcetera, I think a lot of that would have been addressed by lots of different people because I think it's common to all.

I wanted to particularly just concentrate more on just the single bussing issue because it's becoming a very very big issue in country Victoria. It's a concern to government schools and non-government schools alike. The policy which is in place has been in place for about 40 or so years. There's been a couple of reviews of the policy, but there's been nothing substantially changed.

We have a policy which consists - and the government has a policy which consists - of several, several pages and it's really quite a fat document. The policy which exists in New South Wales is half a

page and I think that all the reviews are doing is just propounding and solidifying the inequalities and the problems that the initial policy had 40 years ago, because change has just gone way past it.

It's really a policy I think which was brought together at the time where, you know, we had a White Australia Policy where Italians were called dagoes and wogs and where discrimination wasn't really an issue with people. Injustice and equality wasn't much of an issue with people, but these days young people in schools are very conscious of those things. They're taught about the shame of inequality. They're taught about the shame of what we did to our Aboriginals and the different acts which have come in which have made inequality and injustice and discrimination major issues and seen as social wrongs.

Our young people know all that now. I think the busing policy contains within it memories of the past. It's very archaic and in fact it still contains very very strongly within it wording which is discriminatory and wrong by our students and by kids who go to Catholic schools, but also non-government schools. Phrases such as - when there's new bus services there's particular notes and it's earmarked and it's tabulated and it's strongly marked in the documentation that only state school students are to be included in any proposal for a new service.

In another section on secondary service there's a minimum of 12 state school students only. Other sections - and variation of existing services, "Note only state school students are to be included in any proposal for variation of an existing service." These are earmarked right through this policy so there is a definite attitude towards the students and the young people in the country areas and in Catholic schools and it pertains very much to our country areas as such.

### **[Conveyance Allowance]**

It was referred to by the gentleman of the past who just left about conveyance allowanced, and conveyance allowances are available to students who can't get on government school buses. That's true. The Conveyance Allowance was set some time back in the early 80s and it was set at \$300. Now, one of the changes which was brought out by - there was a school bus transportation review and a report to the Minister for Education prepared by a ministerial working party and I think this was about 1989. It says about recommendation 4, for Conveyance Allowances:

*In terms of equity and fairness it is recommended that the conveyance allowance for public transport of \$300 per annum for secondary students and \$50 per annum for primary students should be increased and appropriately indexed to ensure the entire refund of the fare incurred by eligible students.*

That was in 1989 and to say that that had an impact, it did have an impact. It put the primary school students' conveyance allowance up to 300 students and it's a ridiculous figure these days. That equality and fairness to the people in the Catholic and the Christian system, that really should be put up on an equity basis with the cost of conveying a state school student to their school, which I think is about \$1,100.

I think most of the things which are in the present policy, that's what happened to them; there's been recommendations, members of parliament haven't been game to handle them because they've been frightened they're going to lose votes in country areas. It's just too hot an issue. I know that two or three, maybe five years or so ago, there were meetings I think at Nauru House. They looked at this issue and this problem of country transportation for students in country areas. They looked at conveyance allowances and I think everyone just walked out backwards because no-one was game - it was just too hot to handle.

The issue was very very relevant and it's becoming very strong. Since the government recently, in the last say - well, I think it began in 1992 having a look at the efficient running of the bus systems as they are, and some of those contracts have been in place I think for about 35 years or so in the mean time. So the government was actually paying bus contractors to do bus routes which were long past out of date.

#### **[Transport: cost of school buses]**

They were long - at that particular time, but since then bridges have been put in, roads have been widened, routes changed and I think they were in fact being badly done by the government, because they were overpaying for routes. Instead of paying for 112 kilometres they should have been paying for 50 kilometres. So I think that brought about a bit of a concentration on the policy that's in place at the moment and on what we need to do to make them more efficient.

Now, what has happened it seems to me is they're doing that. I don't know about Portland, but I mean if the government policy on busing and transportation to schools was applied according to that example down there as it is in the south Gippsland area, that bus wouldn't be running tomorrow and certainly not next year, because it wouldn't fit into the guidelines or to the policy documents as they stand.

A case in point now: I had a phone call in the car coming up this morning from a school at Lakes Entrance. Now, the eligible students to ride on government school buses exists 4.8 kilometres outside - away from the secondary school. That's fine. That 4.8 kilometres used to always make we think, now, where would such a

stupid figure come from? It came from the conversion of three miles way back, to 4.8 kilometres; a totally irrelevant distance now anyway because of factors in the country areas whereby you've got safety factors. Kids used to ride bikes, ride horses to school when I was young back in the 60s; that was in that three mile thing.

Nowadays you don't let your children in country areas ride bikes to school. There's no horses. You don't let them walk three miles. Of course you don't, which brings me to this case at Lakes Entrance. There's a government bus coming into Lakes Entrance. The Catholic school there has been running a bus of 25 students for the last few years. They can't afford to run it now. It's costing them \$20,000 to run it. The government school bus which runs is full and they've applied to get students on that bus, but it's full.

Now, it's suspected at the moment that that bus is full of students, young students, who could be prep to grade 6 who are within that three-mile or that 4.8 kilometre radius, which means they're not eligible students to get on the bus. In a small town down there where you've got 25 Catholic students who want to get on a bus, you've got 25 prep kids who may be put off a bus if you come to this eligibility of this policy, what's that going to do to a local town? I mean, a town where we're trying to knit things together.

I think basically the discrimination within the policy has the potential to do things to a town which in the eyes of the community are very harmful and very very divisive. I mean, that's why discrimination became such an issue in the past because it was divisive, it was cruel and it was immoral. I think the policy which, if it's applied - and it's being applied now and it's getting down to the nitty-gritty in the country areas, and that is we have two seats on a bus or one seat on a bus; we've got a non-government schoolchild and we get a government schoolchild. Whack, the government schoolchild gets it, the non-government schoolchild doesn't.

We get a situation in places like Leongatha or - well, all over. It's just the basic example where you could have two students in a family, and in a country area where you've got generally two schools, there's a Christian or a Catholic school - in many instances there's Catholic schools in Victoria - plus you've got your government school. The families there have one of two choices as to where they send their child; to the government school or the Catholic school, and they're both thought of well and looked at as well and valued establishments in the community.

If you have two children in a family and the parents say, "I've got twins here. We don't want them to go to the same school. One goes to the Catholic, one goes to the government school." The bus goes past



the front gate, you're 30 kilometres out, but there's only one seat on the bus. Who gets the seat on the bus; the kid going to the government school automatically. Now, that's discrimination. Very very highly discriminatory, because the elements within the policy say that that's the way it is and that's the way it stands.

I firmly believe that those people who are putting the policy into effect themselves are not happy about having to put this policy into effect. They say, "Look, simply I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. That's the way the guidelines are." Those are my basic things I wish to say. I could go on and on and it's a fairly emotive thing with me really because I've seen young people - I mean, there's young kids in country areas whose parents ring me up from Casterton, Castlemaine, I've had them from all over Victoria. They have prep children and they can't get their children to school, and that's a school of their choice.

It's just so unlike Melbourne. You see, Melbourne has the situation where if I've got a kid and live in Templestowe, I have trouble at that school, I could look at a radius of five miles - five kilometres; I can select schools all over the place. If there's a kid kicked out of this Catholic school they do a thing - I've got a problem with this child at Mulgrave, they look at a Catholic - "Look, the kid wants to go to a Catholic school, let's handpass him across." So you get this idea where a person can have choice by virtue of where they're living and the choice is very very wide.

With transportation the bus is not running today, get him a taxi. If the taxi is not running today, so-and-so down the road goes that way anyway, get them on the way to work. Get a tram. You know, there's such a variety. The country has very very few things. Rural areas suffer because of distance and because the facilities just aren't there. Education these days requires that the young people have access to things; access to the computers, but fundamentally access to the school.

The transport system which we have in place here at the moment, it is - and I say absolutely with a great deal of passion and there is no doubt about it, at the essence of it it's based on almost the old thing of throw stones at - based on the policy going back to the 60s or 50s. We as Catholics threw stones at the Protestants and might I say they threw them back at us, and it was sort of a game but that was the existence of it.

That policy has been written, I have to say, by a person who was a Protestant who threw stones at the Catholics. It's one who notes and says, "We don't want anyone other than Catholic school - government schoolkids being counted as being equal or having a right

to this particular system." Anyway, so I leave it to you if you want to ask me a few questions.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** A few questions then. I mean, to take the example you gave of the Catholic primary school at Lakes Entrance. They were paying, what did you say, \$20,000?

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Presumably that came out of school funds.

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It wasn't being paid by the government.

**MR CARMODY:** No, but the conveyance allowance would have been; \$300.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's what I was going to say. So the conveyance allowance was paid to the parents, the parents paid that to the school and that covered the cost - - -

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Well, went towards the cost of the bus.

**MR CARMODY:** It paid half the cost.. Half the cost, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MR CARMODY:** Like there's a school at Leongatha and you would have a submission from them I feel, where they had four buses which had run to get kids to the Catholic school. It was the closest Catholic school but the run is 90 Kilometres. It's costing them a quarter of a million dollars a year to run it. The conveyance allowance I think is \$60,000. So out of the funds or fees which they try to keep down at a reasonable price of - I think about \$1400 for an eldest child in a family and they reduce them substantially because of the area, it's costing them, you know, maybe two-fifths of their school fees. That's just money that you can't dish out.

The ways of raising money once in schools, like your fete, your parents and friends, those days are gone. Once upon a time mum didn't work, she worked in the household. She was at all these things. She did the canteen, she did all this. That's just not there now. So we've got to depend on their fees and they also depend on absolutely the government now.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So if that bus goes, the Lake Entrance bus, what happens?

**MR CARMODY:** Well, the parents have said that they will have to send their students to the government school, which denies them the right of choice.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It always means the government bears the greater cost of education in that school, plus it automatically has to provide bus transport.

**MR CARMODY:** Absolutely. It puts on another bus automatically, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The government school bus is currently full?

**MR CARMODY:** They say it's full, but the principal of the school rang me this morning and said, "We believe there's students there who are within the 4.8 kilometre radius," which means they're not primarily eligible but they're on the bus, but they officially could be put off the bus. These are little kids.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** You see, maybe your answer is to transfer three kids only from the Catholic school to the state school and then they'll need to have an extra bus for those three kids and then you'll be able to fill it with yours.

**MR CARMODY:** Yes, but, you see, you can't do that. There's these numbers - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** They take it in turns to transfer three kids on one day a week.

**MR CARMODY:** Well, I suggested to enrol all the kids in the government school for the first month and then withdraw the whole lot of them.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** They did that in Goulbourn once, didn't they?

**MR CARMODY:** They did a lot of things.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Can we ask you some other questions?

**MR CARMODY:** Go for it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Did you want to talk about transport, Tim?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** No, I think you've just about covered everything.

**MR CARMODY:** You understand solidly what I'm talking about here, don't you?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We've got the Yarra Bus Action Group as well later in the day, haven't we?

**MR CARMODY:** Yes, well, I don't think they'll be as passionate as me. They've got more of a cause. Mine's more for the country schools. That's government schools, because they're having it hard down the government schools also - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** No, the Yarra Bus Action Group is all Catholic school - - -

**MR CARMODY:** Have they?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The whole lot of them. So let's talk about some other things if we may before we get rid of you. Staffing packages.

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**[Teacher incentives]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Have you any incentives being offered by the diocese of Sale or elsewhere in the Catholic system in Victoria?

**MR CARMODY:** Well, very very few. If there are they - no, I don't know of any in all honesty, not at all. It's been discussed because we have lots of trouble. At Lakes Entrance school there's four teachers short for next year. That's about a third of its staff. They put ads in the paper and they can't get staff. There's a Catholic school I think with three staff. There's one gone and they can't replace the staff.

It's right through Victoria that those remote schools have huge trouble getting staff, and that's really one of the things that these information technology computers have got to be made available I feel to some of these places to start to offset the fact that there's such a shortage of teachers. We haven't got packages because it was discussed; we haven't got the money for it.

**[11.56 am]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right. So it's just purely and simply - - -

**MR CARMODY:** Just straight out; you haven't got the money. If one school does it the people at other schools would say, "Where did they get the money for that?" It's just not there.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So really it's a state-wide policy across all the Catholic Education Offices.

**MR CARMODY:** Well, it's not a policy so much as something that no-one has - I think it's been discussed but everyone just says it can't be done. I know the state schools are paying money out to teachers just getting out of school I believe; paying holidays, etcetera.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** In Victoria it's almost non-existent at the moment, but I suspect you'll find that there will be incentive packages introduced of some substance again here, which will increase the pressure on your system.

**MR CARMODY:** Well, we believe there's some there present anyway.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I think we were told \$169 a year for a remote B school and \$250 a year for a remote A school.

**MR CARMODY:** I think there's other money there.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. You have mentioned you were having difficulty attracting teachers. What happens when you can't get them?

**MR CARMODY:** Well, we've really just struck the problem now and we're going to - we've got a series of things in place, some of them which can't be done; offering from incentives to taking third and fourth year student teachers and putting them on buses, taking them down to the diocese and putting them through school for a week, to visiting universities and the teaching institutions.

Just speaking to third and fourth year students about the good things about coming to country areas, getting the fourth year students to come out to schools, getting towards teaching rounds and maybe, you know, do something, I don't know what, to try to attract them to the area. At the moment it's really just becoming a huge issue.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you have trouble getting relief teachers to fill in while you're looking for a full-time one?

**MR CARMODY:** Sometimes. In some areas certainly, but not - generally there's people around who can be relief teachers. Even maybe people who may be married or somebody who's - like there's a

guy I know who looks after his sick wife. He's a teacher full-time, but he takes a day off here, there and everywhere. You've got those people who have just been married maybe, teaching, having a child and they want to do some relief teaching while their child is getting up to primary school age. But there's generally a fair few around.

In the country areas where people - when you hit virus time, that's when it gets very hard. It's in an area, in a town, right through your Emergency Teachers, extra teachers, plus others. It can get pretty hard then.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Are your teachers employed on contract or - - -

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What length contract?

**MR CARMODY:** Well, we don't put them on 12-month contracts. They go straight onto full contracts.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Full, that is permanent contracts?

**MR CARMODY:** Permanent contracts, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay.

**MR CARMODY:** That is unless there is a - like the replacement teacher or something like that. If somebody is having 12 months off you put them on a 12-month contract.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Cooperation between systems. You saw the Information Technology package.

**MR CARMODY:** I didn't take much notice of it actually.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay. Are there kids in Catholic schools who are doing distance education subjects through the state system?

**MR CARMODY:** No, not that I know of. Some of the bigger schools may, but not that I know of.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you know whether that's possible, if you get one of your secondary schools that can't offer a particular subject?

**[Cross system collaboration]**

**MR CARMODY:** Well, look, the point is it's a bit like the busing. All things are possible if two people get together with a similar mind. I think what's happened to the busing - this is an example - in the past it's something which has been locally, internally, and they've looked after each other. A few kids off this bus, we'll put them on there, you squeeze them in. The policy now is coming in so hard in busing that it's not allowing any movement at all. They're packing buses up so there's not a spare seat so it can't be done.

Now, in relation to the question of IT, I'd say exactly it can be done as long as people locally get together and they think with a single mind and it goes - or if there's some sort of equality in schools. I know in one instance there's a Catholic school in one town in Victoria which is bigger than the state school, so there's a fair bit of cooperation there.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What town is that?

**MR CARMODY:** I think it's up towards Nathalia, up that way. I know the principal there. Brendan Cooney is the Principal. Up not far from Shepparton.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right. We were told as well about Colac, there's apparently three schools in the town, two government, one Catholic, and they're running a common VCE program.

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Basically, or at least different schools are offering different subjects and the kids can actually bus between the schools and go to the school that's offering the subject of their choice. Do you know of anywhere in Sale where such a system is being done?

**MR CARMODY:** No, I don't really, no. That school up in Colac, they're fairly local, those schools. They can move fairly quickly and easily.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CARMODY:** Some of the bigger towns it may not be as easy. Some of the bigger schools also. I think if it comes down to it I think it can be done, you know, if each school feels that there's a need for it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CARMODY:** Some places though you get this school who wants to do it and the other school thinks they're going okay, so it's the time it all touches together.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Is there any encouragement within the Catholic system for the schools to negotiate at a local level those kinds of arrangements?

**MR CARMODY:** Where need be; yes, where need be. You know, if it becomes evident that something has got to be done it certainly is. When I began at school at Leongatha in 1986, straight away then we were actually looking towards working with Leongatha Secondary College because we were only a smaller school, with A-grade facilities. Then the negotiations had to go on then and we did have students down there so it did work quite well.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So they did some subjects down at - - -

**MR CARMODY:** Some subjects down at our school. There was a little Christian school next door to Leongatha and some of the students from there came up and did VCE, and Mary McKillop - which was only, you know, 200 yards away, because they didn't have a couple of subjects of VCE. So there's certainly a willingness there. Money tends sometimes to cause a problem though because I know at Leongatha it was, "Well, if we take four of your students what can you pay us for it?" you know, and you become the one who was - they were the ones who were serving you all the time and being the dealer.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So how did it work? Were payments made?

**MR CARMODY:** Well, it got down to some of their students coming back to McKillop and it was a trial thing for 12 months. It fell apart a little bit I'd say.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So it didn't last long?

**MR CARMODY:** Didn't last long, no. In some of the TAFE units they were doing their - I think it was TAFE. Some of the students from Mary McKillop used to go up there and they paid then and the parents were charged for that. So they came through parents' funds.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right. Do you know of any example of a joint employment of a specialist teacher?

**MR CARMODY:** Not really, no. Not to say it's not happening down there. I would say it would certainly be happening in the diocese.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Most of the examples I've come across is where the teacher makes his or her own arrangements, manages to find two days a week here and two days a week there, but I don't know of any example that's come to my attention anyway where the system



has decided that, "We all together work out - because both of our schools need a half-time music teacher" - - -

**MR CARMODY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** - - -"and together we'll guarantee full-time employment and joint recruitment of somebody to come and work full-time."

**MR CARMODY:** Well, St Peters at Cranbourne could be a case I think with a Japanese teacher. He goes to the feeder schools and is also at St Peters itself. I'm not sure whether St Peters shouts in that facility or whether there's money handed across.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's the Catholic feeder school?

**MR CARMODY:** Catholic feeder school, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So it's not across systems?

**MR CARMODY:** Not across systems, no.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Tim?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** No.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, thanks, Ed. Thank you very much for coming in.

**MR CARMODY:** Good on you, thank you.

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[12.04 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks very much for coming in. I'm Chris Sidoti and Tim Roberts with me is working on our inquiries, Co-Commissioner for Victoria. We have a different Co-Commissioner in each State as we go around. I know that at least one of you I think has come across from Adelaide.

**MR JERICHO:** That's right.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's your job?

**MR JERICHO:** That's my job.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks very much for coming across from Adelaide. Would you like to introduce yourselves first for the tape and then make whatever comments you like and we can have some discussion.

**MR JERICHO:** My name is Adrienne Jericho. I am the National Director for Lutheran schools based in Adelaide. Alan Wiebusch is the Director for Lutheran schools in the South East region, Victoria, New South Wales. John Brew-Bevan has actually come down from Walla-Walla. He's the Principal of one of our rural schools. Walla is - what's that - 30, 40 Kilometres north of Albury-Wodonga.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay.

**[Lutheran schools]**

**MR JERICHO:** We appreciate the opportunity talk to our submission. Lutheran schooling has been in Australia for 160 years. Traditionally rural. In the last 30 years we've gone into the cities and that's where our growth has been. 78 schools, 25,000 students, about a quarter of those would be in the rural and remote areas. We have a history of working with Indigenous Australians, Central Australia, far North Queensland, West Coast of South Australia.

We think we are large enough to have a national perspective and small enough to have a feel for what it means and what the implications of it are. So we can look at going to large urban schools and seeing what they offer and to see what's happening in the schools with enrolments of 38, 42, 52 and the differences are very striking in terms of curriculum offering. The teachers that move around sometimes can't believe there can be such a difference in schools.

In terms of financial viability of our schools, those that we are most concerned about in terms of how long will they survive, they are all in the rural areas. We don't have any concern about any urban schools. Last year the Commonwealth government did a project of the socioeconomic status of non-government schools for the new funding arrangement.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR JERICHO:** They ranked all non-government schools. When we looked at the ranking of the 78 Lutheran schools, of the 15 most needy schools 13 were in rural and remote areas. We think we have schools in urban areas that serve the needy, and that particularly highlighted for us the differences. Actually I've just come across from Mount Gambier this morning and it really struck me. Suddenly I had to pay STD rates for my e-mail and then the time in fact to download it; I gave it away. I

said I'll wait until I get to Melbourne. That's what these people put up with all the time.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**[Cross system collaboration]**

**MR JERICHO:** For us, we would like to make the point I guess that's sort of been touched on just while we've been in this room; the importance of cross-sector cooperation in rural areas. We all have to be smarter in the use of resources. The reality is that we're not going to open more Lutheran schools in rural areas, but we have them there. We all have Catholic, Christian, government and it would be, it seems to us, important that there is sharing.

The reality is there is sharing, but what has hurt me from a national perspective is that the sharing differs from state to state, from region to region, from program to program. It's inconsistent. There are regulations that say non-government schools can access a service for their children as long as there's a space. It just opens and shuts and it's very difficult to operate educational programs with such inconsistencies.

We believe that our schools provide people with a choice, the same choice that's in an urban area. It provides it for the rural Australians and we believe that it's important, particularly that parents should have the right for freedom of religion and belief which for many is seen as sending their children to a school of their choice. We know that's not absolutely possible in the rural areas, but where it is we believe that we ought to maintain it. Alan will just say a few words on the perspective of teaching and then John from students and families.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you.

**[Professional development]**

**MR WIEBUSCH:** Well, from the perspective of teaching we see the Commonwealth target programs need to factor to cover the real costs of the professional development in the country. Staff need to know that their career won't be jeopardised and go to a standstill in professional development. The target programs particularly are developing rapidly in numeracy, literacy, Asian studies and so on. We feel that they really need to continue to develop and know that they will get that opportunity.

To give you an example, in a couple of our areas, the Wimmera and the Western District for example there's no direct plane service so first of all to get any sort of a facilitator or a consultant of any quality you have to pay for a plane fare usually, then it's a hire car. That's additional days of travel, accommodation, meals and then when they

get there, there are fewer schools, fewer students and fewer teachers to actually share the costs.

If they go to the city it's the same sort of thing, except that you have to provide teacher release. Their city counterparts, often they can do things sequentially after school hours, so the school isn't as disrupted as much, so some factor is needed to sort of cover that area for the country teachers who have to travel to do that sort of thing. The number 2 point would be incentives are required to attract and hold suitable quality staff. This is really a recurrent funding issue and we would recommend that a rural factor be included to recurrent funding.

I guess the social/financial implications of living in a rural area, travel - you've probably heard many of these things before - family, education things, the stresses, the accountability in a small community, the adaptability, the lack of peer support, these issues all make it very difficult for teachers going into the country. We need some sort of incentive. To give an example here, we often have no teacher applicants in some of our small schools and even no principal applicants, and we end up at the worst with the graduates who are really the leftovers and so they don't even have the ethos of our school, which is very important to us, and they haven't got really the quality to handle the situation. Principals, to give you an example - if a principal does develop in a country area they soon move on.

To quote one of our northern New South Wales schools, in five years we have had four principals. Two of them are now very successful in big city schools and that school has gone from 70 plus students to 34. I guess the other thing is that we need a consortium approach, a cross-sector approach, and perhaps it's the target programs that would encourage this; to encourage professional development and access and resources across the sectors. We could better use the limited resources.

### **[Cross system collaboration]**

An example of where we see this particularly being helpful is the early literacy/numeracy programs that were put out by Victorian Government; 'Keys to Life' in the literacy it was called and in Early Literacy. It was available in country areas but our schools, our private sector schools, were excluded from those. Where we did happen to get a Mallee school in more by an informal means than the formal means, my visit to that school just showed how much they stood out in front of our other schools in the development they had had. It was only later that the Independent Schools Association provided Keys to Life or Early Literacy training and it was at much more cost.

The other thing is the use of consultant psychologists, counsellors. Some years ago we used to have access to this jointly with

the state and there are a few programs I know that are still modelled that there are joint access to, but we need this much more readily. We would imagine I guess that targeted programs might fund units or teams that are more accessible to country areas.

To give you an example again there, we have a number of schools near the border of South Australia and Victoria and for them to send to get really expert help where you actually get a program that can be developed - and our schools are targeted really for people who have special needs. Our caring schools often get a lot of these sort of students. To really get not just an analysis, but actually set a program that can be run in a small school, we usually have to send them to Adelaide or Melbourne. Any follow-up, that makes it very difficult for the school to afford and probably even more so for the parents, but I'll leave that for John.

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** Thank you, Alan. As Adrienne introduced the topic, I'm looking at the impact, the reality, on students and parents. I would like to just speak about the student component first. Please be aware that my experiences come from my own school as a boarding school and students come to us from places like Cobar, Broken Hill, Bourke, as far as Lockhart which is, you know, two or three hours away from Walla.

I would like to speak more particularly about the more remote students, although many of the pressures and tensions that we indicate later equally apply to the more closely settled families as well. For many kids they have no option but to leave home, to board. Mum has been in many cases the teacher in their primary years through distance education or as it is called in New South Wales and Queensland the schools of distance education on the farm.

For us that has been a bit of a problem, so we have now instituted diagnostic testing for all of our children, because we are finding tremendous deficits in their knowledge base and their skills base. This is not indicating that they are in any way impaired. It means their experiences haven't been extended, as their peers from urban areas seem to be far more knowledgeable and streetwise. I use that reservedly, that's the context, too.

The issues for kids when they first come to us in a boarding situation where they are full boarders, meaning seven days a week or weekly boarders being, you know, weekend warriors as we call them, is exactly the fact that they are isolated from their parents. Contact with their parents and the family situation is restricted and so therefore their part in the social development and growth in their families is obvious, too. They come to an unofficial social environment. I believe that we need, as a boarding school, to supplement that with the things that we

do to integrate them into a more social benefit in the way of their own growth.

### **[Transport]**

As far as transportation to and from home is concerned, looking at the New South Wales particular scene we are indeed quite appreciative of the New South Wales government's free transport for students to and from schools, particularly through rail. However, there are some restrictions to that. We have found in our situation, being at Walla, that some of our students cannot reap the benefit of that free travel because the New South Wales railways make independent decisions about when that free rail will be available in holiday time periods. So in our case if a child leaves the school three or four days prior to the state school dismissing, in some instances the free rail passes or concessions are denied only until the time when the state schools actually dismiss for any vacation breaks.

The things that are a problem of course and the kids are constantly aware of is the costs to parents; the escalating costs for boarding, knowing what the rural scene is like, the depression and so forth, and so some of our kids do have pretty depressed states of mind basically. The point that Alan was raising about special needs programs, we believe that we had to lock into these quite clearly with counsellors and so forth.

### **[Non-government curricula and funding]**

I think the other thing that's very important for us, too, is curriculum issues. Because of our isolationism we have locked into, and will continue to lock into, Joint Senior Secondary TAFE courses, Vocational Education and Training courses, also Distance Education courses. However, the problems that we're finding now is that Joint Senior Secondary TAFE is becoming extremely costly. We are funded partly by the Association of Independent Schools (AIS) in Sydney. We apply annually for appropriate grants to cover basic costs. Distance Education, which is a means for a small school to increase its curriculum broad enough to maintain and retain senior students, we are certainly a part of that process.

However, in New South Wales - again quoting - only three weeks ago the Education Department and training in New South Wales delivered a letter to AIS indicating that costs for non-government sector schools to become involved in distance education subjects from now on and single unit delivery subjects, jumps from \$44 per student to \$800 per student. That has come at a time when all independent schools, I would believe, have budgeted for the year 2000. Staffing has been arranged for the year 2000. Now we're having to make some concession discussions about the 12 students in our school of how

we're going to sort of fund the \$9600 to pay for that particular distance education mode.

**[12.19 pm]**

The other thing that we find very clearly about our students is the students' aspirations. Because they come from many instances about what I would call a locality-locked environment they don't think broadly as we would like to see them do. So therefore the cultural experiences and the sporting experiences, we need to transport kids to places of excellence. In our submission you will see that quite clearly some of our solutions are suggesting that we have got to virtually provide additional transport, additional programs, to give kids cultural benefit.

**[Cross border issues]**

I think one thing I would like to just make as a point, being at Walla we are 45 Kilometres from the border of New South Wales and Victoria. The interesting thing is the frustration that develops - and I am sure that we're not the only example of this - of cross-border legislation, which is to me really restrictive. For kids in education we have a bus coming from Wodonga, which is part of the twin city concept of Albury-Wodonga. Twenty two students, the bus driver is not allowed to stop anywhere in Victoria, in New South Wales, to drop a kid off to go shopping because he is deemed by the New South Wales Road Traffic Authority to be a tourist coach. But in Victoria he is deemed to be a school bus. So that particular, you know, stupidity, is only a very very small example but I am sure there are more as well.

**[Boarding students]**

Could I talk briefly about parents, please, and the impact on parents. We have some 80 students as boarders at St Paul's. To quote this that says, "There are some 80 parents who do not have involvement directly into our school but are remote" - and so therefore the school actually feels quite clearly that situation. The mere fact of not being able to regularly, accept through telephone conversations, interview a parent, there are some problems inherent in that.

Parents feel helpless in the situation when they send their child away to school and they are passing over their responsibility as a parent to others whom they have to trust. Although we do have a very good relationship with our parents from the boarders, those that are close by or those that are distant, the issues are they still feel very remote in the situation. They are concerned about the costs involved with education, the allowance to their children for instance doesn't meet their boarding costs. They have to supplement that, plus the tuition costs. In some instances they are responsible for getting their child to

the college by private transport because there is no private transport around or close to them.

I suppose the escalating costs, particularly the fuel costs of recent times, gives them quite some concern. I mean, I have one parent who rang me only on Tuesday and said, "I'm sorry, I can't pick my child up until this Friday. We can't get down there." They didn't have enough money to put petrol in the car. That's about three hours away. So they are the sort of things that are being, I think, frustrating to parents all the time through because of the costs. I think I might leave it at that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you.

**MR JERICHO:** That's all. We are happy to talk.

**[Lutheran student population]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, thank you very much. Could I first just get a bit more feel from you about where your schools are distributed. You say three-quarters of the kids are now in cities.

**MR JERICHO:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** 25% are in the country. What areas? I assume you have still got them through the Barossa Valley.

**MR JERICHO:** Absolutely.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Riverina.

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, Wimmera, Western Districts of Victoria, Darling Downs of Queensland.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Toowoomba?

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, Toowoomba and up the Queensland coast, Bundaberg, Cairns.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Hermannsburg still?

**MR JERICHO:** Actually not in Hermannsburg, that shifted. No, it's not there. We have two in Alice Springs.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** In Alice itself?

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, Living Waters is a primary school and Yarrara, which is an Aboriginal - what would you call it? They're all Aboriginals.



**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, all Aboriginal students.

**MR JERICHO:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What about up north Queensland? Inland?

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, Peace College, Cairns. They come down from the communities. It's a secondary component at Cairns. I think there are 240 students and 25% are Indigenous Australians. On the west coast of South Australia at Ceduna, which is an exciting one, 55% of the enrolment of a school of 180 is Indigenous. For us it's a sort of model of reconciliation in the Indigenous Australians and the others that work and learn side by side.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** There was a Lutheran mission, was there, in Ceduna or - - -

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, at Koonibba mission.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. I wasn't sure where they were these days.

**MR JERICHO:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And how the spread actually went.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Do you have an entity, like an entire - what percentage of the student population is Aboriginal?

**MR JERICHO:** No, I don't have that figure. There are three schools where they are significant. Yarrara college, 200 are all Indigenous Australians. 180 students, about 55%, so say 100 at Ceduna and I think there's about 50 in Peace College, Cairns. Then throughout the other schools invariably you will find there's just one or two. Places like Waikerie and Loxton have half a dozen. Gilgandra, yes, 10 of the 40 are Indigenous.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Should I move on from there?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**[Indigenous students]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Moving on to - there was something about low literacy - the literacy standards in the school. What's the Aboriginal literacy level when they enter into your school system? We've heard some evidence today that it's been up to three and four

years below the national average. Is it the same in the Lutheran schools?

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, it is. At Yarrara in Alice Springs, even though it's technically a secondary school, in effect the curriculum is primary. They come in at Year 2, Year 3.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And at Yarrara then what level do they actually go through effectively?

**MR JERICHO:** It's more an age. Yes, six, seven, eight, that sort of - they may go on to TAFE or go back into communities or get a job at Woollies in Alice Springs or something like that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** But it would be unusual for the kids at Yarrara to actually achieve beyond Year 7 or 8 level?

**MR JERICHO:** That's correct. They would then go to the high school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Into the state high school, do they?

**MR JERICHO:** State high school, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What is that transfer rate? What proportion would go onto the state high school?

**MR JERICHO:** It's not very high. As I understand it the majority go back into their communities.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MR JERICHO:** It's very interesting with Yarrara in terms that the school is controlled by the elders.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR JERICHO:** They make it very clear that they want this school to prepare them for, probably in their language, white man's country. "We will teach them tradition, you teach them so they can read and write."

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** So that school actually incorporates cultural awareness or cultural diversity into the program?

**MR JERICHO:** Yes, it does.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** That's really good.

**MR JERICHO:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What are the relations like between black and white students in say Ceduna and Cairns?

**MR JERICHO:** Okay, Ceduna it's very good. Actually I was only there a couple of weeks ago and I particularly stood in the playground and looked at it and that is the situation. We're very proud that 55% of the enrolment in this school is Indigenous. In Cairns on the other hand the relationships are not as positive. In some ways the Indigenous students come down from the Northern communities and Cape York. I guess the White Australians that go to Peace have come from, you know, the wide enclaves and there's not a lot of - that's a little mixing.

In fact, unfortunately I have to say that that school has not grown as we thought it would. They have to face the fact that some people note the number of Indigenous Australians there and in Cairns they're able to find other alternatives. It's an area that we're working on all the time.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So you were saying, Adrienne, it was about 20%, was it, in Cairns?

**MR JERICHO:** In the secondary component, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** In the secondary - right, okay.

**MR JERICHO:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** John, at Walla you haven't got any Aboriginal students, or not many?

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** We have four.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** But they are - how shall I say - extremely distant in their blood lineage. They are not cultural, they are not traditional. They are by blood line birth.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And do you know why you would have so few? Is it related to economics do you think or denomination?

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** It shouldn't be by denomination because the Lutheran church has always been very strong in the area of Indigenous education, but the number of Aboriginals who actually live locally

around the Riverina are more to the West of us. We don't have a great call for Indigenous people to sort of be at Walla.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, thank you. Have you got more on distance education, Tim?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Not really. Just a contrast between the Indigenous retention rates in your schools; is there a stark contrast? Do they drop out at Year 10, do they continue on to further education?

**MR JERICHO:** Actually at Cairns there are some exciting developments in terms of vocational education partnerships. They challenge the discipline of a boarding house. They've made a commitment that it's going to be difficult for people that have lived in communities in the north coming to live in a boarding house, in a hostel, and we have to understand that and tolerate things.

I think it's a fairly standard rule. It used to be that in a boarding house if someone runs away you are out, but here there has to be - and they have really had to work through those issues with the parents. Because of that they have been able to keep them there to Year 10. I'm not sure of the percentages, but my feel is say a third are going on to apprenticeship, vocation-oriented, and that's quite successful. The rest would go back up north.

At Ceduna we go to Year 9 and then they go onto the state area school. By the way, there is a wonderful example of state school and non-state school working together. They have a rule between the schools; if you need to have someone out of your school for two weeks because of misdemeanour, the area school accepts the Lutheran students and the Lutherans accept the area school's delinquents or those that have misbehaved; give them a space out. I think that was very positive.

**[Cross system collaboration]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It is very positive. Perhaps we move into that area. Do you know of other examples amongst any of your schools where there is some cross-sectoral cooperation taking place?

**MR WIEBUSCH:** We are negotiating at the moment in the Hamilton area between Hamilton college and our Good Shepherd Lutheran college there to share staff as resource people where it's difficult to provide subjects demands.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right. What kinds of subject areas?

**MR WIEBUSCH:** I think economics was one. I think it was a science one. It's just very difficult to provide staff or have people with the right mixture come on staff because they can only employ so many, so they were looking at sharing their staff. That's an interesting step because they really are in pretty strong opposition to attract students in that area because the demographics are dropping and there's other schools starting at Warrnambool and Portland that are sort of taking some of their original drawing areas. That's a pretty surprising thing and I believe it's a very positive thing. They are starting to specialise more, too.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you know what the financial arrangements will be in terms of sharing staff? Will there be payments from one school to the other or is it just going to be a swap of basically comparable amounts of staff time?

**MR WIEBUSCH:** Yes, I'm not sure on how they're going to work it.

**[Distance education]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Distance education subjects in the schools; are there any students who are Distance Education and if so on what basis in terms of funding arrangements with the states? Walla?

**[12.34 pm]**

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** Certainly from the point of view at Walla we have about nine students who are involved in distance education who have come to us from various schools. Firstly where they may be doing French, for instance, we only have Indonesian and German, so they continue to do French. We have students who are pursuing rural based subjects like agriculture, primary industries, because there may be a line clash. They would then work independently at that line and work independently in the library; have access to the telephone; have constant telephone conversations with their teachers either in Balranald or West Wyalong.

From our point of view, yes, it's important that we maintain a distance education mode of learning because it expands the senior opportunities or the opportunities for a senior school to have a broad curriculum base.

**MR WIEBUSCH:** Our primaries - the Wimmera are doing languages by the interactive satellite dish and some of the others are looking into that, especially the science areas and so on.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And is there any payment being required by the state distance education authorities for the subjects?

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** Yes, from our point of view, as was mentioned earlier, there has been renegotiation obviously or should I say a restatement being made - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's right, you said - - -

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** \$44, now \$800.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** \$800.

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** That for us is quite catastrophic actually. What they're saying is that this is because we're using state teachers to monitor and be the markers and so forth for distance education, which I agree and find that that is happening. However, to have it sort of land on us so late in the year without being able to discuss it or find out what we can do has been rather tragic. We will not discontinue distance education because the principle is fairly entrenched in our curriculum. We have to now find I think entrepreneurial ways of sort of, you know, coping with that quite frankly.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What about in Wimmera? Are there payments having to be made there?

**MR WIEBUSCH:** I know that there are costs involved, but I don't know the details.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks.

**[Information technology]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** What is the Information Technology level at the majority of your schools?

**MR JERICHO:** In the urban areas very high. I guess that's the area you see the most difference. It just strikes you as someone who moves from urban to rural schools. Actually one of our schools at Horsham told us, "We were moving slowly as best we could and then the state school was given a suite of computers and suddenly the parents said, 'What are we going to do? What can we do?'" and there was no money and so they fundraised through cakes to buy one computer. He said, "That really struck me, the selling of cakes to buy one computer, how difficult it is."

The resource level is holding them back. You could mention the STD and the slowness of it all, but this I guess is the irony for me; that Information Technology offers the hope of bridging a lot of the gaps and yet it is expensive there. John could talk of the maintenance of

computing. Things that we take for granted. Living in Adelaide I depend so much on my laptop and I demand in two hours it's fixed up again. What's it like at Walla?

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** Depends on how fast the camel travels. It's quite a lengthy period of time, it really is, yes, although we have an Information Technology manager that we use under contract from Wodonga and he and I have an understanding that he will be there within about two or three hours or we get the unit into Wodonga that night and it might be two or three days before it's come back again. But as Adrienne was saying, in some schools there are some difficulties in maintaining levels of Information Technology in the school.

In the Riverina I'm the chairman of a principal hub group of Lutheran principals. Having spoken to those people I believe our level of IT in the Riverina is remarkably high. My own school for instance, we would have one computer to every four and a half students. We have developed and maintained mini computing centres in sectors of the school; boarding houses, science departments, libraries, resource centre rather, and your own computing suite and so forth.

As Adrienne was saying, we are becoming more and more reliant upon the use of Information Technology in our school for a whole variety of applications, but certainly at the moment if one breaks down we really feel it quite clearly.

**MR JERICHO:** In our submission I talk about - we need to revitalise what I saw at the EdNA (Education Network Australia) dream of the - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR JERICHO:** When was it, 1992 or 1993 and Hoover was the Minister for Education and talked about fibre optic cable to the gate of every school. It seems to me that really governments need to look at that, ensuring there is that basic level of infrastructure on which schools can build. It sort of reminds me of say the early 70s with the Karmel Commission. There was sort of a decision made in terms of capital grants and recurrent grants to bring all schools up to a basic level.

It seems to me that there ought to be some initiative to ensure there is a basic platform, because we still have a lot of work to do subsequent to that, but on the basis of that platform there can be a lot of self-help.

**MR WIEBUSCH:** The age of the different teachers and the experience of the principals, and as I was referring to, trying to get the right quality into the country areas makes a lot of difference. So you could go to a couple of our schools and they could be side by side and you would

see the difference of day and night. You could see one really space-age school and the other one still back 20 years ago.

**[Funding of independent schools]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Financially do the schools all work independently or do you operate them as a system?

**MR WIEBUSCH:** We in the South-East region, we have a Victorian system. We have a little bit of play there to sort of give extra help to our schools, but not a huge - - -

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** I'm the same region that I'm the director of, but I'm not part of the Victorian system. The South-East region for the Lutheran schools incorporates New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, but we're over the border. So therefore we're not eligible to be part of a system so we work independently.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MR JERICHO:** It's something we've made submissions to the government; that the rules for forming school systems at the moment state the system must be within a state boundary.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR JERICHO:** It just makes sense for us with one of the four schools in the Riverina which are served as part of this region with hub groups coming down into the Wimmera and Mallee, etcetera, if they could be administered as a system, but it just seems to be a bit hard constitutionally.

**MR BREW-BEVAN:** It's a stumbling block politically as well as educationally in this cross-border, you know, movement.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. Are you right?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much. Thanks for coming across and down as the case may be.

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**[12.45 pm]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I am Chris Sidoti. As I mentioned, I am the Human Rights commissioner. Tim Roberts with me is the



co-commissioner from Victoria. We have an assistant person in each state that we go to who is helping us with this inquiry. They come from different backgrounds right across the country. Would you like just to introduce yourselves for the record and then you can make whatever comments you want to make and then we can have a chat.

**MS PRINGLE:** Sue Pringle, coordinator of Cooinda Family Support Group.

**MS RAINE:** Robyn Raine, member of the Cooinda Family Support Group as well as a parent with a child with severe high needs.

**MS KERSCHAT:** Kerry Kerschhat, Special Needs Support Group.

**MS DENDLE:** Annette Dendle, Cooinda Support Group and a parent of a child with a disability.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I am sure I have been to Cooinda, but I can't remember where it is.

**MS PRINGLE:** It's based in Wodonga.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's just near Wodonga?

**MS PRINGLE:** It's in Wodonga.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's in Wodonga itself?

**MS PRINGLE:** Yes. New South Wales/Victorian border.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay.

**MS RAINE:** There actually is a Cooinda, a little place - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS RAINE:** This is actually just a house.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I see.

**MS RAINE:** It's like a family support - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, no, well, I thought it was the place.

**MS RAINE:** There is a place.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I am sure I've been to the place, but I still can't remember where it is. Okay, at least I know where the service is. Sue, do you want to lead off?

**MS PRINGLE:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And any of the rest of you can speak as you see fit.

**[Disability]**

**MS PRINGLE:** Cooinda Family Support Group is a support group which is funded by Human Services, Victoria. It's based in the rural city of Wodonga on the New South Wales/Victoria border. It operates in Albury-Wodonga and in outlying areas. It was established by parents in 1976 and now supports 200 families with a family member with a disability. In particular, children and young adults.

During the past 19 years I've been coordinator of the group and have supported families in the area of education, particularly with regard to information and advocacy. I see primary and secondary school students with a disability and also children who are schooled at home or in special schools. Some areas of concern that I've noted - and I've made a list of those - are the small number of students who complete their primary and/or secondary education in an integrated setting. Some of the reasons I've seen for that are sexual assault, reduced opportunity to learn and to reduce social contact with other students.

The second point I've made is the physical and equitable access to school premises. Such things as doors opening poorly, hazards for wheelchairs, just simple things like exit points from vehicles which are open to the weather, so that on a wet day if it's taking a long time to transfer to a chair then the child might be quite soaked and have to go into school with no dry clothes. I see those as simple things that can be reasonably easily remedied and I've brought along a couple of pamphlets for a scheme which Archicentre runs in this state which is about home renovation and modification where someone with some understanding goes in and comes up with plans and ideas for simple modification.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS PRINGLE:** I could see that working reasonably well in the school system and not being too costly. I see a lot of the things with education as not being so much dollar driven, but being better coordination and communication. The third point, the lack of training programs and understanding of the needs of students within the school settings that's available to school staff members.

The fourth, the lack of appropriate program and curriculum planning for students and qualified support in that area to the staff of the schools. The inequality of funding to students in schools and the lack of continuity into the home setting of school programs. For children with an intellectual disability and no physical disability, the inadequate amount of funding for those children, in particular integration aide funding, means that those children are often the ones who sit quietly in the corner and don't do their learning. On behalf of some parents I've submitted to trusts to get extra assistance so that the children can stay in the school closest to the home or the school that the parents wish.

The lack of programs to socially integrate children into the school setting. If this happen often the children are quite isolated. We have one child in our group who, because she was unable to be part of the integrated system, used to talk to the trees in the school playground. She found that was much more friendly for her. The lack of access to sport. Often on sport days children with disabilities are asked to go home. It's much easier for the school to operate without. I see a lot of that again is education and communication and helping staff to understand that this is easy and it can work.

The lack of access to appropriate music programs. The inequity of available transport. In Albury-Wodonga we have a full-size bus which delivers eight children to a school, but because of funding issues across the border then no new students are allowed to get onto that bus, so each day twice a day eight children have this full-size coach. To me it doesn't seem to make sense.

The inadequate knowledge of and use of available equipment to assist students. There are such organisations Technical Aid to the Disabled. There are booklets on local resources or they could be made; it wouldn't be too costly, but many schoolteachers I come across and many school settings aren't aware of those areas that are available for students with a disability.

The parents' concern about the inadequacy of the submission forms for integration funding so that it is impossible to give a true picture of the students' needs. The inequality of integration aid funding between private and government schools. The lack of support and training for staff members in schools where children have challenging behaviours. My last point is the missed opportunity for these students. The years of their lives wasted, which could be quite profitably a great learning experience. Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do either of you want to say something or do we work through this list in turn?

**MS PRINGLE:** We will just go in turn, yes.

**MS RAINE:** We're actually just hitting on each point as different things.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay.

**MS RAINE:** Then most of probably what we are going to say is representing of what we've had to deal with as parents, too, as well as a coordinator. That has been brought to - that's what we're dealing with anyhow.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Why don't you start at the top, Sue, and work through each issue in turn and tell us what the issues are and each person might like to say something about how they affect you.

**MS PRINGLE:** The small number of students who complete their primary and/or secondary education in integrated settings, I'm seeing children roughly around the age of 10 or 11. Where it becomes too difficult the children are no longer learning. The parents then have to make a decision about, "Where does my child go?" At times it's into the special setting.

**MS RAINE:** Danny won't complete his secondary school, I can say that straight away. There is no school for Danny to carry onto. The only reason he'll probably go on to his sixth grade is because I'll have to set - that will be my year of setting things into the process of taking him back into the home setting to do home schooling.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS RAINE:** And seeing how I will actually work that out. That's not just a statement that flips off the top of my head. We've had two years now to think about it, but because I had another child that's the only reason that I haven't gone back to home school. It's because Danny needs the time that I'd need to put in a good, you know, educational program.

The reason that I actually set out for Danny to go into the school system is because the Education Department came into my home after I asked for a bit of help because I felt that I couldn't take Danny to a higher level of education. They came into my home and told me that they knew what was best for my child, that he would gain a good education and he would get a lot out of school and that we had the capabilities of putting that in process, "You mothers only think you know what's right."

So with those big statements and also the threat of bringing in truant officers, I allowed - actually we never didn't want Danny to go to

school. Of course every mother wants their child to go to school and get an education, but because of the severity of the disability we didn't know how we were going to do that, so home schooling was the easiest for everyone concerned. But when again I didn't feel that he could go to that next step we had to actually look into funding and how I was going to teach Danny. That's when they came in.

We allowed that, we thought the first year would be a learning; we didn't expect to have all these things just filled straight away, but it wasn't filled. He's been there four years and Danny still does not receive a report card that is graded.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What is his disability, Robyn?

**MS RAINE:** Danny has got spastic quadriplegia.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS RAINE:** And verbal speech. He has got full understanding and knowledge and learning ability. He uses communication through a Quara computer and Yes/No cards. Low tech augmentative as well as high tech augmentative, but they are not used in the school setting.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Does he need a full-time aid?

**MS RAINE:** Yes, he's got it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** He's got it provided to - - -

**MS RAINE:** That's why I think it's very hard when you go into the school setting, because they don't actually - I'm not actually going against the school and the teachers and the aid. It's the fact the department keeps on taking on children with disabilities, especially in rural areas. Like I haven't heard one positive experience the school get from our region. Like actually I was questioned by the department's disability officer when I made that statement last week on the phone, but I really - you know, I'm in an organisation that houses 200 families and I have not heard one positive statement. That's all the members that are not in our organisation as well.

When the actual department listened to me as well it was solely because Danny had a fall at school and, "Oh, gosh, Mrs Raine is coming down," you know. I wanted to speak to them regarding not the fall, because the fall was an accident even though there was human error there, it was an accident. I wanted to go in to talk about, "Hey, let's set something in place with education and training of the teachers, the school." There's nothing there for them - where to go.

I go in. There sits the deputy. It was nothing to do with him. I wasn't talking about his school. That's all they talked about, was the fall. I think was I going to put in that claim - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** They probably thought you were coming - you were going to sue them.

**MS RAINE:** Yes, they were scared stiff. Still to this day - I'm positive this year because they haven't actually put the claim in yet because it's been a continuous thing and we really haven't put - only worrying about out of pocket expenses. These people have inundated me with equipment. Anything I've asked for I've been inundated, but what I actually wanted was education and training to allow a child with a severe physical disability to attend the school setting.

**[Curriculum options for children with disabilities]**

Is he going to be ready to go on to secondary school? Well, he's not because secondary school is not ready for him either as well as he's probably not prepared to go to, too. It's not a question of their ability to teach a child with a disability; it's their ability to assess that child. You know, every Program Support Group Meeting I don't think I've ever went to it that it hasn't been a positive meeting. It's all the things that Danny can't do and how am I going to fix them and what am I going to set into place.

I said, "Well, the home setting is totally different than what a school setting is going to be. You have to devise a program for your way at school. I'll help. I will train and I will spend time on the communication gear to do that, but it's something that you have to set in place at your school that's going to work for your school and for Danny." They're lost, they don't know what to do, to the point where last year I actually used Danny's dollars to actually send a young schoolteacher that I just interviewed and sent him down to train at the Mac Centre in 'Deals Communication' and all the places around here.

**[Disability training for teachers]**

He's hardly been used this year through the school. So we thought we would go to a higher step and get a learning module set out for about a 40-hour course running at the TAFE. A lot of hard work has been put in this year from two parents and two teachers in special needs to try and get something into mainstream schools.

[1 pm]

That's when I rang the department because none of the teachers from our school or aids are going to the course. That's when their big questions - "You can't state those comments," and actually

Mr Land didn't even bother ringing me. That's what I mean. I feel I'm working with the department to try and - "Let's rectify a few of these things," but they're not even meeting me halfway. When I spoke at different conferences, you know, it's about time they take accountability of this. They can't just keep accepting children with disabilities into the mainstream school if they're not going to have the capability and education and training to teach the kids.

I feel actually quite guilty because another friend's child is going to this school next year because she thinks, "Oh, wow, Robyn, at least you're getting equipment and full aid time," and I'm thinking, oh, gosh - you know, I see all Danny's work that he's supposed to have completed at the end of the year and then I ask them about the report card, "Well, how come he's not got a grade on all his journals?" and they sort of just look at me and they say, "Oh, we don't know actually how well he's doing because we can't sort of check."

I said, "But all the workilometres completed in the journals. Who's doing it, the aid or Danny?" I know Danny's got the capability to do it, but I don't understand then who's doing it if they don't believe the aid. Also to the basic is a Learning Assessment Project test. He didn't actually do the Learning Assessment Project test. It was sent home for me to do with him.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's the Year 6 one?

**MS RAINE:** Yes. It was actually sent home for me to do in the sense that we didn't have time to do it with him. You see, this must be taken into account again if children are going to go to a mainstream school. They have to work out a percentage of, "Okay, this kid does a percentage of these questions," or they allow more time for this child to finish it off. They told me it was too difficult, but then I found it was multiple choice questions. A, B, C, D could have been put on his - and the child could have answered the questions. So it's just all these things that create a really big, you know, area. I sort of sidetracked off that question, didn't I?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's all right. So you have got a full-time aid looking after him. The school is accessible?

**MS RAINE:** Except for the toilet area where he had the accident.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS RAINE:** And it's still not - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's still not - - -

**MS RAINE:** No.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** How does he cope with toilet then during the day?

**MS RAINE:** They actually get him out outside the toilet and they carry him in.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay.

**MS RAINE:** And then carry him out.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So there are still problems so far as that's concerned?

**MS RAINE:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The major problems though that you are talking about are program - - -

**MS RAINE:** Probably education and training - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Education.

**MS RAINE:** - - - of the whole feedback down.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS RAINE:** I think if we do things successfully and make it right I don't think we should be going into sending the kids into school to - for the people, the educators, to be educated about our kids; that takes eight months for them to learn about our kids and then the whole system changes next year and again we've got to go through the same motions. So really the kids are only getting a couple of months of schooling because they're learning about the disability for the eight months of the year.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you want to make any comments on this or other issues?

**MS KERSCHAT:** Well, I've actually got a full page thing I would like to hand in.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Good for you. You are well organised, Kerry, thank you.



**MS KERSCHAT:** I would like to speak - some of the things are the same as Sue's - very briefly. As a parent it can be very daunting sending a child to school. This can be all the more stressful for the child that has a disability. To parents in the city the choice of schools and doctors are far more readily available and that's a big issue. I am a co-worker with Cooinda, but we're actually down in the Lower Hem part, we're Puckapunyal. We're actually living on the army base there.

Our children have the choice of going to Pucka, Pucka or Pucka, and then at high school they have the choice of going to Seymour Tech. Now, that's the only choice our children have. Up until a few years ago Pucka didn't even recognise special needs. Our Headmaster has been there for 20 years. Our Deputy Headmaster has been there for 18 years. Our Head Teacher has been there for something like 16 or 17 years.

With our doctors, they're all visiting doctors. Our Speech Pathologist that comes to our school is only there on a Friday every fortnight and is very inflexible. This is something that is sadly overlooked by far too many people. The position to do something about it, I am writing this submission to further and in some cases raise awareness of people in the community about the plight of schooling for disabled within the education system of the rural and remote Victoria.

Coming to terms with a child's special needs, this is the subject of much concern. While it can be a harrowing experience for a parent to come to terms with their child's special needs, it becomes even more trying for a parent when a school doesn't recognise your child's special needs. Now, I am talking about Attention Deficit Disorder. Some schools don't even recognise Asperger's. Now, these are real conditions, but we are being told as parents that we have naughty children. I have been hitting people over the head for a very long time.

I am very proud to say that Pucka Primary School actually sent three teachers to an Attention Deficit Disorder meeting the other day, which is a first. So something is happening, but is it my responsibility to have this happen as a parent or is it the education's responsibility to say these are conditions and that the schools have to respect if a paediatrician has written saying a child has a disability, that it is recognised and not be telling these children, "Don't be naughty. If you're naughty we're going to send you home from a camp." That's not fair. That's putting the guilt trip on a child. No-one in a primary school should have that put on their shoulders.

While this is not fair to expect a government to foot the bill on all special needs, the criteria set down at present is being policed far too rigidly to allow a fair go at all the schools. Students in rural and remote areas don't have the choice of schools available to them as

their metropolitan cousins do. This may seem like a case of sour grapes, but the fact of the matter is that there is not always the freedom of choice in the country that our city cousins take for granted. This sometimes leads to country principals thinking they know what to do for special needs children, when in fact they are quite behind the times.

It is also impossible for schools to know everything about all disabilities. Parents do not need the added burden of having to deal with schools as well as the special needs children. When children are starting school doting parents have to believe in the schools processes. If there are any problems, yes, there is a process for children who have been placed in early intervention program, but a few families in the area who have not gone through Kinder, the education maze is difficult and slow.

### **[Children with disabilities from Defence Force families]**

For an example - this is a defence force family - a family arrives in a new area over the Christmas period. It can take until Easter before the school can get approval and find an aid for this child. Now that the family is happy and the child is getting extra help they require, it is still not clear to the family where their rights are if a problem comes up. No local school or person can know all the ins and outs of the system, as the information can be hard to find when the family usually turns first to the school, but then what after that; make STD phone calls to strangers?

Some of the things you have to talk about can be very difficult as this can be sometimes something you need to do in person. Again grieving can start in as the child is in school and he is able, or she, to socialise to a point, but the parent still has to stay home in case the school needs them. Parents have rights, too, and this is something that tends to be forgotten or overlooked by schools of the Education Department.

Now, in that case most defence families arrive either in the December/January period or in the July period and we have found, speaking to defence families, that it is taking until Easter before the child's special needs are being recognised; before the aids are being set up; before the equipment can arrive to the schools. So for the first few months these children are just floundering and the teachers are trying to cope, but are unable to.

Contrary to belief, the costs of living in rural areas is quite substantially more than the metropolitan area. Almost all your telephone calls to specialists, caregivers, especially government departments, are STD. Then there is the added cost of travel. Some larger rural areas do have access to a medical specialist. However, small rural areas usually don't have access on a regular basis.

These people have to either travel to larger rural areas or even to the metropolitan area to access services. This is not just restricted to medical specialists as government departments have also withdrawn away from smaller rural areas. These are just a couple of examples of added costs. There are many others and all add to the cost of accessing services for special needs children in rural area Victoria. I hope I'm not going off the track too much.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** No, you're okay. Just keep going.

**[Access to disability support and resources]**

**MS KERSCHAT:** Access to equipment funding and medical help, this area causes a lot of heartache for parents and children alike. There is no simple way through the maze of paperwork, bureaucracy surrounding the subject. People in remote rural areas have virtually no access to these services or if they do they have a limited access. Even when you are one of the lucky few it is hard to keep continuity of the service and good providers are poached back to the metropolitan area by departments and companies that they work for.

This is no use to the child involved as the program usually lays idle while a replacement person is found. This is no easy feat either as good operators are next to impossible to entice to rural areas. Once again the load is expected to be picked up by the parents and teachers of our children. Another downside of this is that instead of only taking a few hours off school to go to a specialist's appointment, children in rural and remote areas have to take the whole day off. This is due to the distance required for travel. This can compound the problems experienced by other special needs children at the school.

Training of teachers also falls into this category. The distance required to travel to attend training seminars restrains the teachers in these areas. Schools are forced to think twice about sending teachers to some of these seminars or just hope that the subject matter covered won't affect them. Some seminars are only half a day in duration in metropolitan based teachers, but for our country counterparts it becomes a whole day away from their students. This is because they have to travel up to three hours to attend and then get back again.

I know that due to budgeting restraints it can be hard for all requests to be met. However, if a therapist requests a piece of equipment or a certain assessment to be made, the school does not react in a timely manner. This is not being fair to the student again. This is a pathway that is not all clear for the average parent and I do believe that the Education Department can help by having a 1-800 number for certain parties to connect to the variety of concerns.

**[Need for disability guidelines]**

Schools' accountabilities: children in this area can be from families that have very busy work and family life. Duty of care is the catchcry of the 90s. What does it really mean to schools? I have heard very different points of view from many schools in my area. There does not seem to be any official guidelines set down by the government. This can be very frustrating for parents and schools alike, as different standards keep being thrown up in everyone's face.

[1.15 pm]

I know that schools can only budget for so much care. The idea that all children need the same type of care or require the same specialist help is very wrong. Who is responsible for setting these standards? Who do schools have to account to? Admittedly they have to be accountable to their students, whether they are special needs or not. Okay?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, thank you.

**[Disability and sport]**

**MS KERSCHAT:** Limited sporting access - I have only got two more, I promise. Special needs children in rural and remote areas are missing out on the social aspect of sporting activities run by the schools. Some schools tend to be too competitive and this is not conducive to building self-esteem of special needs children. Just because a child is not good at a sport or a so-called normal child, does not mean that they have to miss out all together.

Where possible these children should be included, even if it is only the water person. This makes the child feel like they are part of the team. When these children are not included they are being deprived of their right to grow emotionally and socially. If the government wants to integrate these children into mainstream schooling they need to be made aware that they have rights, too. There must be something put in place to allow these children to participate with all the other children in the school.

At the other end of the spectrum when there are special needs sporting meets organised, children from mainstream schools and rural and remote areas usually have to travel to attend. This usually falls back once again to the parents to transport their children as the school does not have enough resources to provide these children with inner transport to attend. Now, that one really hits the mark in my life. My son has Asperger's. He has floppy muscle syndrome. In grade 5 he wanted to be on the hockey team. We went and bought him a hockey stick. He went to every single practise. He would have been over the moon if he

would have just been the water boy or the orange boy; just to wear the jacket.

I even asked the school if they were going to not put him on, could they please let him know that not everyone's going to be picked. A little bit more time with the special needs child would have stopped him from having to have three months of counselling because he was just dropped off the team and the teacher didn't even think, "He's got special needs. Maybe we should treat him a little bit differently." That's what happens with a lot of our special needs kids. They attend, they go, they're full on. All they want to be is a part. This is what we are supposed to be telling them, "You are part of this community," and when they try to be a part again they're just dropped like rotten eggs.

Information for children entering higher school and beyond: I know in our area there are many children who do not get any extra information about going into higher education. The school is nearly always a lot bigger. Children find it difficult to find their way around. The pecking order of the high school can be very hard on any child, let alone one that has special needs. The child has to find a new group of friends, cope with different learning criteria and come to terms with travelling to school that is far away due to a lower number of high schools in rural areas. School in general can be a very scary thing for these children, let alone high school. It is an area where the child can get lost in the system.

This is my closure. I realise that I have only scratched the surface of some of these issues, but the fact remains that children with a disability living in rural and remote areas don't get a fair go when compared to their city counterparts. Why, because they are out of sight, therefore out of mind. These children should have the same rights as every other child, but sadly this is not always the case. All I ask is that our children be given a fair go. "Disabled" does not mean "stupid", it just means "different". Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much, Kerry. I'm sorry, I wasn't sure whether you were making separate submissions and I should have asked you to do this first. Annette, do you want to make some comments?

**MS DENDLE:** I've just got a few comments.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, go right ahead.

**[Integration aides]**

**MS DENDLE:** My first one is about integration aides. I would like to know why integration aides are not qualified. On my own behalf my son's integration aid this year has just walked off the farm and she's got

the job. She's got no training. Luckily this time she's a mum, so I guess there's a little bit of 'Tender Love and Care'.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What is your son's disability?

**MS DENDLE:** He has dyslexia.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay. So the aide that he needs in that case is with the direct education itself rather than any other support?

**MS DENDLE:** That's right, yes. This one has just walked off a farm. She got the job. We had no input into it. The principal decided that was the person for the job and that's it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Is she working with other children as well or just your son?

**MS DENDLE:** No, the only thing that she does do is if the school is short-staffed - because we're a very small school - she takes over as teacher's aide. Now, a teacher's aid has to be qualified. If she's an integrational aide how can she be in charge of a whole school? I just question why aren't integrational aides given some sort of training? I mean, integrational aides go right through all disabilities.

You can't tell me that anybody can walk off the street and have access or information without studying about a child's needs and the way best to help a child with disabilities in whatever disability they may have. I just don't think it's fair. You have to be trained to be a teacher's aide; why not - to me an integrational aide is more important than a teacher's aide. I really do question that because I've had a lot of problems with integrational aides that know nothing.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Are there courses that you know of to be an integrational aide?

**MS DENDLE:** Apparently there are some at TAFE but they're not enforced. They don't have to be done.

**MS RAINE:** When I used that word "enforced" to the department they were quite offended by it. They go, "We don't use terms like that." I said, "But you are allowing something to happen." This is like a program, just like a literacy program.

**MS DENDLE:** That's right.

**MS RAINE:** Reading recovery. That's what I said to them, "We have reading recovery, those teachers must go off and do courses to become reading recovery teachers." They do training because my other boy actually is in reading recovery and he said, "Mrs Clarke wasn't there today because she had to go off and do a training thing." It's all taught to them before they actually take on the program, too, of these children.

They are teaching for hours with integrated - as Annette said, nothing is actually done. We can actually try and push and push. As I said I'm happy enough because of the threat there that they might pop off to do a little Mac training or a little this or a little that, but it should have already been done - - -

**MS DENDLE:** Before they got the position.

**MS RAINE:** - - - before the kids attended the school. If they're going to accept kids - that's what I mean, this big thing of accepting children more and more with severe disabilities as well as different disabilities and no training. They are just popped in there.

**MS DENDLE:** There's nothing.

**[Duty of care]**

**MS RAINE:** Then they look at the parents and see nagging parents that want so much, the disabilities, and we're looked - like say, "Oh, gosh, do we speak up again?" you know. We're not asking for better. I don't believe any of us are asking for better services. We're asking for the same. My child can't use a pen to write down, he needs a computer. We can't help that. It's a fact of life. Why isn't somebody trained? The same with the learning aspect of Annette's child. You know, we can't help the fact of it, but if they're going to accept it they have to be accountable for their education, not us.

**MS KERSCHAT:** Another one is with our weather that we've got at the moment. You know how it's lovely and cool in the morning and it's very hot in the afternoon.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's freezing cold in the morning.

**MS KERSCHAT:** I wanted to be nice. It's freezing cold in the morning, it's really hot in the afternoon. We dress our children to go off on the bus at 8.30 in the morning. Now, you go up at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and there are special needs children running around with long pants on, big huge jumpers on. When you approach the school to say, "Can you please, when you think it's getting hot enough, take little Johnny's jumper off," they look at you and they go, "But your son is 10 years old."

He should know that." I feel like going, "Hello, little Johnny has special needs."

He'll run five miles with the sweater on and these track pants on. If someone doesn't tell him to take the jumper off he'll collapse with heat exhaustion before he knows. Some of the things that we're asking for are a commonsense approach to education. When you see the child and it's 25 degrees and they're still in a long jumper and long pants, how hard is it to have a little bit of compassion and go up to that child and say, "Let me take your jumper off. It's a bit hot now."

**MS RAINE:** Or just ask, to be truthful.

**MS KERSCHAT:** These children sometimes don't have the mechanism to say, "I need to take my jumper off now." They need someone to prompt them.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So does my 15-year-old.

**MS RAINE:** Exactly. That's what I mean, it is commonsense, a lot of it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** You're talking about kids as much as anything else.

**MS KERSCHAT:** But it's not happening. It's not happening in the schools. The compassion from the teachers in a lot of cases, they seem to be too busy to take the time to think that one should have their jumper off. Yes, everyone will say slip, slop, slap, put the hat on, "Everyone put your hat on before you go outside," but no-one thinks, "When you come back in take your hat and your jumper off."

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I interrupted you, Annette.

**[Teacher turnover]**

**MS DENDLE:** No, that's okay. The second point is the very turnover of teachers. We only have 24 students at our school and yet we can go through six teachers. I mean, I don't understand that. The kids are unsettled and it takes my son a long time to get confidence with a teacher, to work for them, because he's very cunning in getting out of work. Yes, I don't understand why there has to be such a big turnover all the time. I know we are a long way from any major city, but I still think that the turnover is just incredible.

**[Cost of internet access]**

Another thing I would like to thing up is with my son he needs visual - he works by visual rather than reading. Now, if he does work we have Internet, but because we are so far out we have to actually



pay STD charges which is very expensive. I would like to see some sort of support or help with parents that do have children with special needs that needed to use their services without having to pay the high cost because it does get very expensive.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What is your hourly access rate?

**MS DENDLE:** Sorry?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What does it cost to actually access the Internet rather than the STD call?

**MS DENDLE:** Well, we have to pay just a normal STD call, but the Internet - I couldn't tell you exactly what the figure is, I'm sorry. I'm not as prepared as some.

**MS RAINE:** We were just looking at her - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The cost of access varies enormously around the country and I was just interested in what it might have been.

**MS DENDLE:** It works out very expensive. I mean, we have to cut him off after about an hour because we just say we just can't afford it. You know, with five kids I find it very hard to let them all use the Internet and they all want it for different resources and studies for school, where he really needs to sit down and slowly read through things. Whereas with the others I'll say, "Print off and get off," you know, and they can do that, but with him it just takes a lot longer. Not just him, I mean, there's other students around, other kids that want to do the same thing.

**MS RAINE:** It sort of shouldn't always be a cost anyhow. Again, you know, when you sort of mentioned to me about equipment and things like that, as I said, these are just a part of what our children's lives have to be because of life. That's just it. It shouldn't be, "Well, hey, does he get equipment or does it" - you know, equipment and all those sorts of things should not come into it because the cost factors or the equipment factor is just - if they want to have these children at school. Do you know what I mean? All that is irrelevant I believe. It all stems down to education and training of the system.

#### **[Disability training and education]**

I think the first two things you actually mentioned was access and equipment and aide time and things. That's all irrelevant really. The fact is education and training where you're going to accept a child with disabilities into the school system; we have to set it up appropriate for that child to get the education as well as us to assess that education so we can prepare him for the next step of higher education and right

through. Then the higher education - that's what it really boils down to at the end of it.

We either do it, we do it successfully, we do it properly, and we have the training before the kids come in, or we don't do it and we have to set up something, whether it be special schools, I don't know. I don't want it to go back to segregation, but it's a pretty scary - look, I even know in Melbourne you've only got two schools anyhow that deal with disabilities as well as where my son is coming from, but I just think it's so unfair for the parents and it's so unfair for the children. They're dealing with disability, full stop, as it is. We've got to deal with being their carers. Now we've got to be actually the lobbyist and the promoters to get all this right for something that really should have been put in place before they accepted our children.

**MS KERSCHAT:** I mean, we went to the Independent Living Centre and we got the physiotherapists and the speech pathologists all to write reports saying what is the right thing for this child with this disability. We took it to the school. The school had a look at it and said, "We don't recognise those people," and that was the end of it.

Now, if we've taken the time, we've spent the money to have assessments done and they've come back saying, "This child's needs are a sloping desk because of his floppy muscle. He needs a special cushion on his chair because he has a curvature of the spine" - we haven't done it because we want to throw money down the toilet. We've done it because we were trying to help the Education Department because they've come back complaining to us that he's squirming all the time.

Well, the reason he's squirming all the time is his back is hurting, so naturally he's trying to get into positions that are comfortable for him. His handwriting is sloppy because he needs a sloping desk. Again we've tried to help the Education Department and the reaction to it was, "We don't recognise these people."

[1.30 pm]

**MS RAINE:** I think that's a very good cop out for them, too, actually, because as soon as that becomes a little bit too hard a task for them they more or less say, "Well, actually Danny's not doing that so, you know, how can we actually sort of help him in that area? Robyn, there's nothing down here." Actually when I went to the disability officer they actually said to me, "Oh, well, we sort of don't set up programs like that, but we have got actually a couple of things going."

That's when they said to me about using that word "enforcing"; "We don't use that 'enforcing' word." That's what suits them. Every time

that something's not going perfect it's either the child's fault, the parents want too much or there's nothing allowed to it, but there's not actually something there already in place. I think most of us are just saying why isn't it in place before all this happens, not the other way around.

I feel that we have to do too much actually when it really boils down to it. It's not that we don't mind it because we're parents and like parents are like that, we control, but when it really boils down to it it's getting just too hard. It's unfair, it's unfair to Danny as I said when I have to drag him out next year because I know he can't continue.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Let's go back to Annette, she's got a couple more points she wanted to make.

**MS RAINE:** Sorry. I will buy her a drink after this.

**[Specialists]**

**MS DENDLE:** My son has had speech therapy for eight years. We no longer have speech therapy in the whole region because our speech therapist had a baby and nobody would fulfil her position. I mean, I know she did travel hundreds of kilometres, but surely the Education Department somewhere could find another speech therapist. You're talking a major majority of schools, not just myself, but it's a big missing point.

I never got funding until the last couple of years because my son was always told that he was stupid. He didn't have any problems until we had him fully assessed. So I've sort of been left hanging off and trying to help my son. We got the funding and then the teachers at his school didn't know how to use that funding. They brought all these specialists in which cost hundreds of his funding dollars which could have been used elsewhere to teach them.

Our principal in the last two months came to a dyslexia conference here in Melbourne, who came back and said, "I know all about dyslexia." I said, "Great, he's got, what, two months of school left. I'm glad you know everything." I mean, that's pointless telling me at the end of his time of schooling. At least with a speech therapist she could get a little bit of input on what to do. Now she has nothing.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What region is covered?

**MS DENDLE:** North-east region.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So it's the entire north-east?

**MS DENDLE:** It's the whole entire north-east region.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay.

**MS DENDLE:** There is no speech therapist, yes. It's pretty sad. I mean, when we used to speak to Clare, his speech therapist, she would go miles to every school in the Wodonga region, all the way - I don't know exactly how far she came down. I'm 110 kilometres out of Wodonga and she would come to us, plus another school 70 kilometres on the way. You know, she's lucky to have spent half an hour and she would go, but that was good input to the school of his needs.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS DENDLE:** You know, and it's gone. It's lost. That's basically it.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks. I am leaving you out of this, Sue, because I assume you're just a worker there.

**MS PRINGLE:** That's fine, please do.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Have you got a child as well involved?

**MS PRINGLE:** No, I haven't.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** You're a worker at the service.

**MS PRINGLE:** I coordinate Cooinda.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, okay. You are obviously at three different schools in the region?

**MS DENDLE:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And the problems are pretty much the same with each one.

**MS RAINE:** And I'm from the larger region. That's what the scariest thing is that, you know, Annette's probably from the smallest and then I'm the largest and we're still getting great problems or very similar. We sort of go hand in hand with each other.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. So you're actually in the Wodonga town, are you, Robyn?

**MS RAINE:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What about you, Kerry?

**MS KERSCHAT:** Puckapunyal.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Of course, Puckapunyal, okay.

**MS KERSCHAT:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What is your town?

**MS DENDLE:** Mitta-Mitta.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right, okay. Straight down the highway.

**[Parents of children with disabilities]**

**MS KERSCHAT:** But what got me was I worked with children for many years, but when my youngest son went to school I said that there has to be help for someone that has a language disability. Now, the headmaster said there was absolutely nothing, so I toddled down to Melbourne, spoke to many, many people, got shovelled off from one department to another. Finally someone came up and said, "If he has this, this and this test done and he is so many points below, yes, there is a time for a child with language disorder."

I came back to the school, I gave them all that information. He had the testing done and then, wow, he could have an aide. Then all of a sudden it was, "We've got two more students in the school that have the same disability." Like I said, no one person can know everything. I realise this. I realise as a parent we have to do sometimes the groundwork and the legwork. We're more than happy to do that, but at times too it's nice to be recognised that you have done something to assist other people and that doesn't happen.

With all the parents that I've spoken to that have helped schools out, they never ever get a pat on the back and say, "Look, we really appreciate all the hard work you've done." Even though it is your child, but we've helped the school out as well.

**MS RAINE:** I find they just don't follow through on a parent's advice.

**MS KERSCHAT:** That's right, yes.

**MS RAINE:** It boils down to that.

**MS KERSCHAT:** I agree.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Don't follow through on a parent's advice?

**MS RAINE:** Follow through on parents' advice.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS RAINE:** They feel like we are the enemy, where I feel that we're the ones who are actually trying to help. We want our kids to get an education.

**MS DENDLE:** But they feel that they're the educator, they're the teacher, we know nothing. That's the attitude you get.

**MS RAINE:** It's like it's a real threat. You know, as I said, your Program Support Group is just so full of negativity and it's all directed at you. The parents have to feel they have to take an advocate in because they just say, "Oh, but he won't do this here and we can't do that. You know, you want us to do this and" - I'm there, I'm going, "Oh, right, training for a new person. I'll get that training done and I'll get this done. Oh, let's look around for a new aide before the school starts."

You're setting all this in process and because it's just say - "Hey, why should we deal with this? You want too much out of it, so if you want it you deal with it and you get it all."

**[School support for the child with disabilities]**

**MS KERSCHAT:** Then we had this at primary school, then high school comes around. The high schools don't even want to know about you. Now, I let the high school know at the beginning of the year before Kieren was going into high school, "My son has special needs. Can you help us? Where do we go?" The high school said, "It's too early. Come back in July." We went back in July where we don't know our teachers, "Come back in December." We went back in December, "Look, Mrs Kerschat, I really think it's a good thing you come back two days before school starts and we'll have everything set up for you."

So I went back two days before school started. I had all the information. I had photocopies for eight teachers so they knew what Asperger's was. They knew what floppy muscle - what he can do, what he can't do, what sends off the noises, how to stop the noises, how to earth the child. I had all this. I had it all in folders so no-one could say they wouldn't get the information.

Two days into school kids threw my son in front of a moving car. Not serious; headmaster doesn't have to know. Two weeks into school he's been kicked in the back because he's different. He's got blood in his urine. Still not enough for the headmaster to know. He gets concussion; still not enough for the headmaster to know. Before Easter

I walked into the headmaster's office and demanded that my son be allowed to leave the school. I got told off, he didn't have that right.

Now, this is high school. These children have to be able to move from one class to another. They have to be able to intermingle with these children. It's too hard. We took our son out, we put him into a private school. You know, he has not been put in front of a moving car, he has not been kicked, bashed or anything else, because the school said - the first thing they wanted, "Can we have a teacher from the Mansfield Autistic School?" The teacher spoke to his class members. They spoke to his teachers. She was there for a whole week.

The school now knows in art he needs someone, so a floating teacher pops in at art time. When Kieren starts shaking and starts making the noises she comes over. She puts his hands on his shoulders, "Kieren, what's the matter? What don't you understand?" But she's not there just for Kieren. The kids see it as she just always turns up at art time. They don't see it that Kieren is getting special attention. This is helping his peer group. This is helping his socialisation. It was too hard in a state school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What's the private school where he is now?

**MS KERSCHAT:** St Mary's.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** At?

**MS KERSCHAT:** In Seymour.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** At Seymour, right.

**MS KERSCHAT:** I have had a child go from wanting to commit suicide because I went away and with all that was happening at the high school, my husband had to deal with the suicide attempt, to a child now that has been getting merits and congratulations from the headmaster because he is a perfect student as far as they're concerned. Like they said, he wants to learn. He wants to be there with his friends. How can we allow that to keep happening in our schools?

**MS DENDLE:** I was just going to put positive advice on going to a secondary college; Tallangatta Secondary College has been overwhelmingly supportive. I mean, he's already started his integration and it's just - they're fantastic. Absolutely brilliant. So when we get to secondary school hopefully I won't have to worry any more, but it's all the kids coming up behind in primary school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS DENDLE:** No parent should have to go through what I've had to do.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So is he getting integration aide in the secondary school as well?

**MS DENDLE:** Yes, but they're all ex-teachers. They're qualified.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** They are qualified there.

**MS DENDLE:** Which is the big difference.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, it's amazing.

**MS DENDLE:** Yes. Those people actually got those positions because of the way the principal and vice principal are; they're very very selective, very good. They have actually chosen the integration aides to be ex-teachers. The schooling is just absolutely fantastic. He walks in the school and it's like, you know, positive - everything is positive.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Robyn, two of them are happier now. Are you going to be happier at the end of this year?

**MS RAINE:** I have only got West Wodonga and Technical School, and the TAFE is still - but it's only because the reason that TAFE is probably a little fraction less because a couple of parents are teachers, so they're pushing for a lot of things in the TAFE school. Plus we've got our learning module in the TAFE as well. Things are starting to happen, but if you just notice with those two comments, it was all because of education and training, and you see that's probably my big thing. St Mary's took on - they dealt with the disability before the child actually went into it and again with the high school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Before it became a problem.

**[Transition from primary to high school for a child with a disability]**

**MS RAINE:** The child is not at the high school yet, but they've taken on that. This is what I mean with the Education Department making sure that happens before the children go into the schools. I even find that - you know, Danny's been in there four years because I did home schooling to start off with - it's still not happening in such a big area. We're not a little place, Wodonga, and yet there still is no education or training or enforcement.

I know that's a horrible word and they did really hate it when I said it to them, but I said, "You would not be happy to have a teacher



sit up there smoking away while the classroom was in place, but it's nearly exactly the same to allow an integration aide and a teacher to have a child in their classroom and they don't know nothing about that child or how to communicate or how or to do things with him." But as they told me, high school is even more scarier, so all the things that I've had put in place in primary school even though there's still a long way to go there, it's look even worse off, so we just have to provide the needs.

**MS KERSCHAT:** There's really no information for when a child goes from primary school to high school. That is a scary thing. Do our children miraculously find a cure? Then again of course when they leave high school and they turn 18, is there again a cure that you haven't told me about, because there seems to be holes and we have to find the plug to put in these holes. Whether it be you or someone else, because I know I'm working for it in our area to educate the parents as well as the teachers, because a lot of times parents don't know all the right answers.

I mean, no-one can know all the right answers. There is no perfect world and realise that. I mean, we live with it every day, you know. Teachers only have the kids for eight hours. We have it for the rest of the time. We're just grateful that at least you are listening to our cries now.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What class is Danny in now?

**MS RAINE:** He's a composite five and six.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Five and six. So, what, is he two years - - -

**MS RAINE:** He's supposed to be in six, but because I actually did schooling at home until he was eight they put him down a year because they can't assess his capabilities. I would probably put him on a capability of above his peers, but I'm his mum so - yes, but I know I will definitely have to go back into home schooling. Definitely. As I said, I'll give him one more year and - see, I do home schooling anyhow every day as well as schooling now.

[1.45 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** For your other kids?

**MS RAINE:** No, for - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** For him?

**MS RAINE:** Danny as well, yes. He does a program at home as well.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And Kieren is going into high school next year?

**MS KERSCHAT:** Kieren is in high school this year.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** This year?

**MS KERSCHAT:** This year, Year 7. My youngest fellow is in grade 2 with the language disorder. I mean, the funny thing is you go and ask the teacher what sort of day he's having. The teacher tells me one thing and the aide tells me something totally different.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Have you got some questions, Tim?

**MS RAINE:** Actually I would really like to probably ring you after this because I said to Sue just coming over and having a look in his communication book it said, "Robyn, I've just sent home Danny's maths test. He didn't want to complete it in the classroom." I've told them what to do on that, the discipline, but obviously they're not going to do that, "So we've sent it home for you to do with him since he's always worked so well with you." That's again the reason he works so well for his mum is because I believe in him. They're just not trained, you know, so you can't constantly keep going on about it with them.

**[Disability and excursions]**

They said to me, "Oh, we just want to know if you're going to Melbourne on 29 November, because our class is going to the Science Works and we just want to know if Danny will be staying at school." No intention to take Danny off to the Science Works with them. I sort of didn't lie but I sort of said, "Oh, look, I might be going on the 29th but it might be early December, so will you be going with Danny or would you like me to organise another person to go with him?"

I could see their faces really, "Oh, God," just to go with him for the whole day to Melbourne because he's only there for three and a half hours anyhow at school.

**MS DENDLE:** The Science Works must be scary because they tried the same thing with me - - -

**MS RAINE:** And I can see that they're trying to think of something to write down to me, "What are we going to write to her?" you know, this scary thought of, "Oh, no, we have to take this child."

**MS DENDLE:** Yes, I just said, "No, go. There you go." He had a ball.

**MS RAINE:** I dare say Danny won't be going. There's no question. The last excursion actually was the first year that he was there. They actually worked it out with me for him to go, but he's actually never gone again, the poor kid.

**MS DENDLE:** No, put him on the bus.

**MS RAINE:** I think they were in shock horror when I said yes. The same with the camp; I said yes, but they didn't actually send me home the forms to fill out.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I just have one other question back with you, Sue.

**MS PRINGLE:** Yes.

**[Cross border transport]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** In your list you talked about a bus that only had a few people on it.

**MS PRINGLE:** Yes, it transports 8 children.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** This is a cross-border issue, is it?

**MS PRINGLE:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** They're not allowed to pick it up, that one?

**MS PRINGLE:** It is a cross-border issue. Some time ago those children were able to access the school in Albury. They're Victorian children.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Right.

**MS PRINGLE:** I believe it was last year the Victorian system said, "No, we're not going to provide support for any further children to cross the border. We can't stop these children because they're already doing it." So from now on any new students can't get onto this bus and so if parents wish their children to go across the border to a school that suits them, they have to find the transport themselves.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We heard about another cross-border bus issue this morning but this is a different one. The other one was about not picking up after you had crossed the border. This one is not even picking up in Victoria.

**MS PRINGLE:** That's right.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much for coming in. If you can leave your written scripts with us, like yours, Kerry, that will be great, and your list, Sue. Yes, thanks, it was great to hear from you. If you want to add more stuff to it, as you indicated, well, you can just drop us a line. That would be fine.

(Luncheon adjournment)

**[2.15 pm]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Would you like to introduce yourselves first and then go straight into any comments that you want to make, David or others, and we can have a talk about them.

**MR CURTIS:** I have got an opening statement here but I'll introduce myself. I'm David Curtis, ATSIC Commissioner for the Central Zone, Northern Territory. I have the portfolio responsibility of Education and Training with the commission, and that's a portfolio responsibility that's a national responsibility, and I'll go into my opening statement.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Don't you want to mention the other names first?

**MR CURTIS:** Sorry.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** If that's all right.

**MR CURTIS:** I'd better let them mention their names, yes.

**MR HAWKE:** I'm Lewis Hawke. I'm the Assistant General Manager of Commercial Branch in ATSIC.

**MR SADLEIR:** I'm Chris Sadleir and I work in the Economic Policy Section in ATSIC.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks. Over to you, David.

**MR CURTIS:** Okay. I'll go into my opening statement and any questions that may be asked of us I'll probably call on my colleagues as well to support me.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks.

**MR CURTIS:** Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission on this important topic. In keeping with my custom I'd like to begin by

acknowledging the traditional owners of this region, the Kulin nation. I thank them for permission to speak on their land. I am the ATSIC Commissioner for the Central Zone of the Northern Territory. The Central Zone covers three ATSIC regions, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Aputula. My portfolio in ATSIC is Education and Training and Local Government issues, and I am a member of the Economic Portfolio Commissioner's Committee, which is responsible for economic and business development issues for Indigenous Australians.

As ATSIC commissioner for education I have considerable experience with issues faced by fathers, mothers, sons and daughters who become or are teachers, students, administrators and officials in government and non-governmental organisations working in education. One of ATSIC's key aims is the economic empowerment of our people. ATSIC has worked hard and invested heavily to increase the level of appropriate skills in Indigenous communities as a crucial part of economic empowerment.

### **[Indigenous demographics]**

Education underpins economic development. Research shows the strong link between education attainment and employment prospects. Research has revealed that completing Year 10 or 11 increases an Indigenous person's chance of employment by 40%. Completing Year 12 increases employment prospects by a further 13% and having a post-secondary qualification increases employment prospects again by between 13 and 23%. It confirms that relatively low levels of education is one of the major labour market disadvantages faced by Indigenous people.

As the ATSIC submission points out, there is continuing disparity in education outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This does not say that the news is all bleak. The last 20 years have seen improvements in education and education outcomes for Indigenous people. This has been the result of a strong commitment by Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples to advance their educational outcomes. Indigenous communities recognise that education can improve their economic and social wellbeing. And improvements have also been achieved because governments have shown greater commitment towards Indigenous education.

However, there is still a lot to be done to bring the level of education of Indigenous Australians to a satisfactory standard. As I said, the disparity continues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. There are significant differences in participation and retention rates and the levels of literacy and numeracy and the involvement by parents and communities in the education of their children. ATSIC has presented some statistics about the disparity in the

submission which you have received and I will not repeat all of them here.

Some important facts with particular relevance to this inquiry are: Half of the Indigenous population is now under 25 years of age. According to 1996 census figures, 35% of Indigenous people lived in rural and remote areas compared with only 14% of non-Indigenous Australians, and a third of the Indigenous who live in rural and remote areas speak an Indigenous language as their first language. So ours is a young population with a large percentage living in rural and remote Australia.

### **[Indigenous education and employment]**

Recent research has shown that the number of our people of working age is growing at a much faster rate than the job market. The need for effective Indigenous education programs is greater than ever. ATSIC believes that there is a deep and systematic problem in Indigenous education which requires a concerted approach by governments, communities and education providers. ATSIC urges that unless the problems are addressed collectively and underpinned by Indigenous self-determination, efforts to achieve sustainable improvement in education will be ineffective, and it believes that a holistic approach is needed because the barriers that Indigenous people face in education span across other fundamental areas of their lives.

Let's quickly look at some of those barriers which are dealt with in more detail in the submission. A major factor is significant shortcomings within the education system which has failed Indigenous people in a number of ways. These include, for example, the lack of relevance to Indigenous needs, culture, knowledge and experience; failure to engage Indigenous children in the learning process, particularly beyond the compulsory years; failure to effectively address the issues of racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous students, both in the school environment and in the job market; failure to effectively involve parents and communities in their children's education and the inadequate number of teachers with appropriate skills and cultural knowledge and the lack of facilities available to students in rural and remote areas.

Apart from the problems created by a flawed education system, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also are greatly disadvantaged in other fundamental areas of their lives. Factors such as poverty, substandard housing and overcrowding, poor health, domestic violence, contact with the law and unemployment all adversely affect educational outcomes. The barriers and socioeconomic disadvantages are faced by Indigenous people in both rural and urban areas.

### **[Indigenous children and remoteness]**

However, in the rural areas they are compounded as a result of geographic isolation. For example, the lack of secondary schools in rural and remote areas means that significant numbers of children generally either have to leave their communities to pursue secondary schooling, pursue secondary schooling through distance education or not pursue such education at all. These options are far from satisfactory.

Leaving home to attend school in a capital city or regional centre can be a traumatic experience for Indigenous children from both rural and remote locations and their absence can have a detrimental effect on the communities they leave behind. For a number of reasons, Aboriginal people have not participated to any meaningful extent in distance education and School of the Air programs. One reason - and this impacts on the delivery of Indigenous education in general - is that many parents perceive their lack of resources and literacy and numeracy skills as barriers to their children's participation in such programs, nor have advances in technology proved the solution they promised to be.

### **[Indigenous non-completion rates in schooling]**

While education departments have strategies to support the development and implementation of IT throughout rural and remote areas, basic problems in terms of costs, capability and accessibility have hindered their effectiveness. The greater disadvantages faced by Indigenous people in rural and remote areas are reflected in education outcomes. For example, our submission shows that the percentage of Indigenous youth who did not complete Year 10 in 1994 was 36.3% for all of Australia, but the non-completion rate can be far greater for rural and remote locations, for example, 63.4 for Bourke and 84.2% for Aputula.

I've just outlined some of the barriers that obstruct the progress of our young people in education and which have consequences for their employment prospects when they leave school. But the continuing disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians goes deeper than even the severe economic consequences. It becomes an issue about Indigenous students' basic human rights not being met, their right to receive a culturally appropriate education, one in which cultural identity, languages and values are not disregarded, and an education free from discrimination.

As I stated earlier, to achieve long-term improvements in education outcomes for Indigenous Australians, the problems need to be addressed in a holistic manner and collectively, which involves the

governments, Indigenous communities and education providers, otherwise the efforts will continue to fall short of the mark.

**[Three steps to progress in Indigenous education]**

ATSIC proposes in its submission three basic principles which should form the basis for progress for Indigenous people in education. These principles are: Community self-determination within the education system is integral to realising education outcomes for indigenous children. This is necessary to ensure acceptance and involvement of Indigenous people in the education system. Respect for Indigenous knowledge and a recognition of the need for cultural maintenance should be apparent in education provided to Indigenous children.

**[2.30 pm]**

This would provide a foundation and make the education system relevant and appropriate, and education needs should be seen in relation to and integrated with other requirements of the community such as health, housing, general community infrastructure. This will ensure the effectiveness of education strategies by taking into consideration the range of other factors impinging on educational participation and achievement. The acceptance of these principles is important to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people own the education system and its processes for the achievement of better education outcomes for Indigenous people. The development of any policies and strategies aimed at achieving better educational outcomes for Indigenous children must be seen within this context.

**[ATSIC recommendations for education]**

I would like to finish by outlining briefly the key recommendations that ATSIC has made in its submission. These are placed within the context of accepting the need for a holistic and integrated approach to providing better education outcomes for Indigenous peoples. Recommendations: (1) adoption of the three key guiding principles for Indigenous education, planning and services; (2) a national forum funded by DETYA to consider options for a national Indigenous education organisation; (3) establishment of human rights benchmarks as a basis for monitoring and assessing the achievements of Indigenous education; (4) increase research effort, in particular on the relationship between education outcomes and the various sectors including housing, health, infrastructure, good practice in Indigenous rural and remote education; (5) an inventory ordered of all primary and secondary school resources and facilities available to Indigenous people in rural and remote Australia to be undertaken by federal and state education departments. Thank you.



**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks very much, David. Lewis and Chris, do you want to add anything to what David had to say by way of introduction?

**MR HAWKE:** No, I think, Commissioner, David has covered most of the issues that we're concerned about.

**[Secondary schooling for Indigenous children]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. If I can move into some of the question areas, if that's okay. Starting with secondary education, I think that one of the things that surprised me most during the course of the inquiry - I mean, there have been lots of surprises for me - is the almost total lack of effective secondary education right across the top for Indigenous kids. I expected to find that there was no or inadequate access to Years 11 and 12, but there are even in many communities virtually no kids doing what is the equivalent of a Year 7 or 8 secondary education.

**MR CURTIS:** That's

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I agree, David, with your comments about distance education and boarding just not working. I was surprised that Bob Collins' review didn't place greater emphasis on the decentralisation of secondary education so that it actually can be done in the communities themselves. Have you got a view, particularly since you're from the territory, on what is the best way of ensuring effective access to secondary education for

**MR CURTIS:** Well, I don't know if you on your trip through the Territory - I don't know if you went to

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** No, I didn't get to Yulara. I haven't been for a

**MR CURTIS:** They have set up a school there and they specially want that to become a high school, and they're having a lot of problems getting that off the ground. There was very little support from the government on that, both the Federal Government and the Territory Government. Nevertheless they've gone ahead and established a school there and it consists of a couple of demountables. I think they have had support from the resort itself - this was a couple of years ago.

I think the resort put up \$300,000, and even at that time I was trying to support that community in their approach to DETYA, and yet I don't see - I think there have been meetings out there recently, that DETYA has been out there talking about that particular school, and where it has progressed from there I don't know. But that is one

community that wanted to set up a secondary school in their own area because of their concerns mentioned in this speech here. You know, there are a number of problems, but it's been difficult in getting that established. As you say, that didn't appear to be mentioned or put in a position of importance by the Collins review and yet it is.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I know it's the only community that produced a proposal for a Warlpiri area secondary school and decentralised through them, that too. I mean they were funded by the NT Government to produce that in about 1996 or 97. The last I heard, there hadn't even been a response to their report from the NT Government, but I think that provided an alternative model for secondary schooling that would actually be trying to provide it on site rather than having to take kids away.

**MR CURTIS:** This is going back many years ago. I think actually our Chairman, Gatjil Djerrkura, would have been one of the students, and Galarrwuy the chairman of the Northern Land Council, but they had what they call Dhupuma College just out of Nhulunbuy but that used to be part of the old rocket testing facilities. When Woomera used to fire their rockets they had a facility set up there and once that was all disbanded it was turned into a school, and I think it was quite a success and that was way back in those days, back in the 60s, and yet it was disbanded but it provided that sort of access for those people up in that area. It was a secondary style of school, I believe, but things have gone backwards since then. Rather than establishing more of those in those areas of need, it's gone backwards but it's obvious that that's what is required.

In the Territory, in a lot of those remote areas - and it's mentioned in the submission as well, I think someone from Lajamanu mentioned this but this is the case in most of the schools - some teachers in some places they have up to 26 students in one class and those teachers only train up to primary level education but then you start moving into secondary level education and they've got some of those students in there as well, and they just can't cater for that sort of arrangement. A lot of the teachers are not prepared for overcrowding of classes, so they are real issues, and I think we do cover a lot of that in the submission.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CURTIS:** I'll ask Chris and Lewis whether they want to comment on some things.

**MR HAWKE:** Yes, well, certainly, one of our complaints has been, particularly in the Territory, the lack of secondary education, and it just makes things a lot more difficult for anybody trying to get beyond

primary education. I think one of the things we would like to see is an innovative way that secondary education is actually provided because a lot of the constraints that governments talk about in terms of providing education in remote areas relate to a conventional model of delivery, and I think they really need to start looking at innovative ways of providing education to relatively small numbers in a diverse group.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I think that was the strength of the proposal that Papunya prepared, in that it was looking at some education being provided out on the smaller communities, bringing the kids in. It's almost like a local version of the Batchelor model for teacher training. It had a lot to commend it but it just seems to have been ignored by the government from what I can tell. Some of the schools - I think Lajamanu is one and Yirrkala and a few others are almost doing a pre-secondary program which is not really the equivalent of Year 7 and 8. I think they're starting to push the boundaries but not really being permitted by the NT Government to run a proper secondary course.

The issue of simple attendance of Indigenous kids is an issue that has been raised right across the country, and I don't know if there is even a single answer - let alone whether anyone's got it - to the problem but your submission addresses some of these issues too. But from your experience what do you see as being some of the best ways to approach the attendance problem?

**[School attendance of Indigenous children]**

**MR CURTIS:** I think we certainly need to have the parents involved in the process. There's a number of reasons I think why you have these poor attendance rates by Aboriginal kids, but one of the approaches I think certainly needs to involve the parents. In some places it's not seen by some of the parents as important but there are a number of factors; there are health matters as well. You have got cultural reasons, cultural obligations as well. I think also the fact that in some urban areas you have got parents who are not employed, and I think because of that, that has some sort of effect on the attendance rate as well. But I think the real important thing is to speak to the parents of those kids and try to find out what the problem is. As I was saying, it could be a number of reasons. I couldn't really say what the problems are for this lack of attendance at school but they are some of the things that I know but it really needs to be looked into.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The cultural obligations question has come up a number of times, and one of the things that I've raised with some of the education authorities is to give individual schools more flexibility in organising the school year. Often the school year doesn't coincide with when the kids are in town so there's no point in pretending to run a school if the kids aren't going to be in town.

**MR CURTIS:** I think there has to be a flexible approach, if there can be, to education regarding Indigenous people, but I think there has got to be - well, if I can put it this way. There has got to be more lateral thinking on it because we keep going down a sort of too narrow path or a view, but to accommodate cultural obligations and other concerns that affect attendance rates I think that's an issue in itself that really needs to be looked into. I think the reasons for that would be - you know, there would be varying reasons for that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** One approach that I've had views for and against on is the question about whether schools should be providing breakfast or lunch or those kinds of food programs. Some people say they want to provide the programs because you've got to get the kids fed so that they can actually concentrate on their studies. Others say that this is just taking responsibility away from parents and that the schools shouldn't be doing it; that it's a parental responsibility and you disempower the parents more if you're providing that. Do you have a view whether - I mean, is either of those views right, or is it a matter again of thinking - - -

**MR CURTIS:** I think it depends on where it is, I suppose, and what the situation is. Both views are probably right. But I was General Manager of the Julalikari Council organisation in Tennant Creek for six years, and the organisation did run such a program, and that program was in there before I took over the management. But it became a situation where - well, the responsibility was put back on parents to pay up \$2 a week, a very minimal amount to contribute to school lunches.

[2.45 pm]

But that wasn't supported very much by the parents and it does, I think, take away the responsibility from parents, and the council of the organisation decided to disband that and try to put more of the responsibility back on parents and the school, the high school up there - and I think maybe the primary school - they're doing that, the provision of lunches for kids.

But I don't know if it's really improved much at all, and that's why I think - you know, there might be different views around the place, but that's why I think there needs to be somebody - the Education Department or whoever - to meet with parents and talk about - find out what the problems are, and especially with the lunch issue as well, because some communities and some people in those communities, they are in a position to provide lunches for their kids or pay \$2 a week or whatever is required.

But, again, their priorities lie elsewhere, but they need to consider the priority of their children's education. So really it's

something that needs to be looked into. It is a positive thing in some places and in some places it hasn't really worked, and speaking from experience, the council up there decided not to support that and try to put the responsibility back on parents, as I said. That's something that each community decides on themselves, I think, but I don't know if it's really the solution.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. Chris and Lewis, do you want to say something about the attendance issue?

**MR HAWKE:** Just on the school food program, I want to endorse what the commissioner is saying. I think if the parents and the community are actually supporting what's happening in the school and they feel that's something that's part of their wishes, then it will improve the engagement of families with the school and raise the likely involvement of the children because they feel that it's something that the parents, that the families want and it's within what they're trying to do.

I suppose on the attendance issue, that's really where we see one of the major keys, is getting that family involvement, that community control, so that people actually feel that the school is serving their ends and it's actually producing something productive for the children. So that encourages them to make sure that the kids are involved a lot more. But, again, the other thing the Commissioner mentioned - the health problems that keep people away and cultural obligations - they all have an impact, and I think we would support the suggestion you made about having more flexibility in the school year to adapt to the communities that are actually being educated.

**MR SADLEIR:** Can I just go a little bit further and say that's probably the thin edge of the wedge, if you like, in the sense that it's about getting schools or getting education systems to be responsive at that local level because it's a diversity of views and a diversity of communities and a diversity of circumstances that education systems are trying to deal with, and the one size fits all approach which seems to be the common denominator in many of these cases just doesn't work. It does fail. It doesn't assist communities to develop their economic and community and cultural potential that is very much there.

In fact, the systems are acting as a barrier to being able to have the leaders of the future, the children who are the leaders of the future, skilled up with the very basic skills that they'll need. So it's really a question of having systems that are responsive at that local level.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I certainly think that your comment there - the one size fits all approach - doesn't work, but that's at last entered into federal rhetoric at least, and it's one of the clear messages from

the rural summit, but getting that reflected in policy is going to be a bit harder than actually getting it expressed as a rhetorical - - -

**MR SADLEIR:** Absolutely.

**[Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** - - - philosophical approach. You were saying in your opening comments, David, about some of the positive things that are happening. I felt going around that amongst the most positive I've seen are the efforts now being made for the training of Aboriginal Education Workers and teachers. Some of the work that's being done for training within their own communities, with block periods - whether it's the Batchelor programs or James Cook Uni or Notre Dame in Broome - I think are really starting to generate significant numbers of Indigenous people for the first time who can actually go back into the schools, either trained as education workers or fully qualified as teachers. It filled me with a great deal of optimism, I must say, that there were so many people involved in that now. Still a long way to go down south, but it's happening in the northern part much more, I think, than it is in the south.

**MR CURTIS:** Yes, it is happening up there. It is a positive thing, and it's a good thing that it's happening up there, but in some cases, though, people come out of Batchelor - particularly in the territory - they come out and they do qualify as teachers and some of them have gone away even. I know some people have gone to Deakin University and have come back with educational qualifications, but some of them on larger communities in schools there, they've still been relegated to assistant in that school, and yet they can take on that responsibility of being the teacher in that school. In some cases that's happened. They're still not given the full responsibility; still assistant to the teacher or something like that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CURTIS:** But that's something I think will probably change because things are moving ahead. In some cases it can happen right now, but I think it's moving in the right direction though.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** An issue raised by them a lot was just different employment conditions, particularly housing, from non-Aboriginal, non-Indigenous staff who were brought in. You know the situation yourself, that the non-Indigenous staff get housing provided, the Indigenous staff don't, because they're considered to be locally recruited. But I think the difference between local recruitment and non-local recruitment essentially is the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It means that they don't get housing, basically. Has ATSIC got a view about what terms and conditions

should be accorded to Aboriginal and Islander teachers and education workers?

**MR CURTIS:** They should be provided the same sorts of accommodation as external teachers, I suppose, or teachers that come from outside. The people on those communities should be treated the same. It's a different area, but I can still give an example. In the Northern Territory you've got community police officers who live on communities, but the community is expected to provide a vehicle for that person, expected to provide a house, expected to also provide a gaol cell, and they of course all come to ATSIC for the funding to do it. But really it's a government responsibility, the Northern Territory government responsibility, and where people are employed by the government, particularly in this case teachers, I think the government ought to provide housing for them.

I think it would not only provide accommodation for those locally recruited teachers, but it might go a long way in recognising their position as teachers and their position in the community be recognised as teachers. I think a lot of times where people get frustrated and disillusioned is because probably they're not recognised in that way in their own community. Some of them feel that they're not seen as having achieved something - you know, they're still in the same house and everything, and sometimes they may be living with their families or their extended families up there. You've got an overcrowded situation. But because of that they haven't got a house of their own, but I think the Education Department, if they can provide that for external teachers, they ought to provide that for locally recruited teachers as well.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks. Moving a little bit further to the south, the situation that Indigenous people face in the more built-up areas of New South Wales and Victoria seems to me to be quite different from some of the issues in the remote areas. Attendance rates are still a problem in those, but I don't know whether you see any particular differences in some of the factors, or do you reckon the factors are pretty much the same, extending north and south?

**MR CURTIS:** In some situations the factors might be the same, but that's why I was suggesting that particular concern really needs to be looked into. The bottom line is, the attendance rate is very poor, but in some cases the factors would be the same, but right across the country there'd be one reason or other that contributes to it and that to be able to resolve that concern in the different parts of the country, they need to find out what it is in each of those areas. In the northern area there might be more cultural practices, but here there might be other issues that cause that lack of attendance at school and, as I was saying, that's

an issue itself that needs to be looked into. There'd be a number of reasons for it.

**[Racism in schools]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We've been told in many parts of the country that there is a lot of racial tension within the schools themselves between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, particularly looking at this part - Victoria and New South Wales - where Indigenous students are in a minority in the schools. I think the impact of that kind of racism, discrimination, tension that exists there is certainly having an effect on both the attendance and the performance of Indigenous kids. Has ATSIC looked at some of these questions about how to address amongst young people questions of racial discrimination or plain racism?

**MR CURTIS:** I don't think we have, have we? We haven't looked into anything like that, no. But we don't know whether that's an ATSIC responsibility to do that or - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Or a white fellow's responsibility? Exactly.

**MR CURTIS:** Yes. It certainly needs to be looked into, certainly needs to be addressed, but I think ATSIC would be prepared to support something like that. I don't know.

**MR HAWKE:** There has been some work in DETYA. I don't think we've actually done anything specifically in that area because it's not been one of our portfolio - not one of ATSIC's responsibilities, program responsibilities. But use of peer group support arrangements and trying to increase the involvement of Indigenous adults in the school as support people or teachers aides or just being around for specific things seems to be one approach that's been taken that's having some impact. But certainly from ATSIC's point of view it's not something that we've been directly involved in.

**[3 pm]**

**MR SADLEIR:** I'm sort of noticing the 'Tracking your Rights' exercise or process development through HREOC and through the Federation of Independent Schools in Central Australia. We're aware of the efforts being taken on there as a way of looking at trying to develop an understanding of what rights are for specific individuals. Because there is no general program available, looking towards that as a way of seeing where that might lead in terms of developing people's understanding as to what their rights are and how might they respond in situations where they are faced with being a minority in a school system or in a particular school or in a particular location.



**MR HAWKE:** I think there's a big responsibility on principals and teachers in schools, too, to recognise the problems in education systems and training people how to deal with racism and similar things like bullying.

**MR CURTIS:** I think sometimes it's just a lack of knowledge of Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal culture, for that matter. That's why some of that occurs as well. There's lots of other reasons, too. That would be one of the things.

**[Aboriginal language programs]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** DETYA, the Commonwealth department, have referred to an ATSIC community languages program; said it came out of the Australian languages policy. We don't know about this program in any detail, other than it's been mentioned to us. Could you tell us a little bit about that.

**MR HAWKE:** Yes. ATSIC has two language programs at the moment. They're both fairly small. There's the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Initiatives Program, which provides approximately 3.4 million towards recurrent costs of Aboriginal language centres, and the focus of those centres is really to encourage the spoken use of language. We have another program that the ATSIC board recently agreed to provide \$3 million a year for over the next three years, called the Language Access Initiatives Program, and the aim of that is really to provide supplementary support for language resources type things - things like books, tapes, dictionaries - to try and encourage the maintenance of Indigenous languages.

These are really very small programs and they're not intended to be a general resource for everyone because we just can't really afford that much for it, but they're intended to supplement what state governments do in terms of Indigenous languages. Is there anything you want to add on that?

**[Self-determination and language learning]**

**MR SADLEIR:** Only that the general view is that ATSIC has, in terms of languages in general, again stated that issue of community choice at the community level, and it's really ensuring there are adequate resources available at that level for a response that's measured to that community, rather than having a reliance or the potential reliance on a body such as ATSIC to provide further funding in an area where it has very little funding at the moment.

**MR HAWKE:** The issue of bilingual education is one that has a lot of significance and importance for ATSIC, and we see that as an area that states really should be providing much more leadership in allowing

communities to make a decision about how they integrate languages into the education process.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So you feel this is a matter that should be put back to the community rather than - you've got no view on what form of language teaching is the most effective? I think that was in part the basis of what the NT government was arguing about. Bilingual education was the way in which languages, community languages, are taught.

**MR HAWKE:** Our view, ATSIC's view, has been that it is a community's decision on how they want to do it because different communities want to approach education in different ways. Some want to focus on bilingual - being taught in their own language first as a vehicle into learning English, and others would rather go straight into English.

**MR CURTIS:** I think that's where the flexibility would come in, you know, where you're talking about flexibility. I think some communities, as Chris has said or as Lewis has said, want to go that way and some don't.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So work with them and let them decide it?

**MR CURTIS:** Yes, I think so.

**MR SADLEIR:** Yes. It's again based on making sure that the community supports the education system. If education is being provided in a way that they don't think is right for them, then they're less likely to participate and the results are less likely to be very constructive, and so the ultimate outcome is that education achievement is not very good.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Tim, you came in a bit later, but are there particular questions you wanted to ask?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** No. I think what I've heard has been really good.

**[De facto segregation in schools]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** One of the issues that concerned me in many parts of the country is the development of almost a de facto segregated education system. It became obvious to us in a number of towns that, where there were government and non-government schools, one would become the white school and the other would become the black school, which often changed. I don't think it was people indicating a preference for either particular system, but rather just - and I suspect it was the white parents deciding that if one school

was predominantly a black school, they'd take their kids to the other school.

One of the arguments I guess in favour of permitting that kind of de facto segregation is that it gives the school with predominantly Aboriginal students the opportunity to develop programs explicitly appropriate to them, and have a very strong cultural identity. But it is, as I say, de facto segregation. Do you have a view on whether, in spite of the philosophical difficulties, the idea of having opportunities for schools to become predominantly black should be permitted and we just turn a blind eye to it, or does it need to be addressed in some other way? How can we address it most appropriately within the context of some of these towns, particularly in - I was going to say particularly Western New South Wales, but it's not just there. I've seen it elsewhere as well.

**MR CURTIS:** I don't know. If the ultimate aim or objective is an education for those young people and it's not something that's deliberate, I think those sorts of situations ought to continue and remain, if it's not an obvious move to segregate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal kids, and if it's a school where anyone of any ethnic background or race could go and they choose to, well, they can. But if they choose to go somewhere else and it's not affecting their education, well, personally I don't see any problem with that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Certainly it's not a result of a policy, either stated or implied, of the education providers. But I think that it is a result of clear choice by particularly the non-Aboriginal parents as to where they're going to send their kids.

**MR CURTIS:** I suppose that's their choice - as long as you say it's not implied or stated or whatever. I don't know whether Chris or Lewis might have a comment on it.

**MR HAWKE:** I suppose that the issue really in those sorts of circumstances would go beyond the school. You have to really look at the circumstances of - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Of the town.

**MR HAWKE:** - - - the town, yes, and I think from our point of view it's important for children to have a nurturing and a comfortable environment to learning, one that they're keen to be involved in, and if they're put in an environment where racial tensions or other problems associated with the town are affecting the way that they're learning at school, then that's not good, and if by concentrating in one particular school where the environment's more comfortable or where it's a better

learning system, depending on what the problems are, then that may be a good thing.

But certainly where those issues arise and where they relate to things outside the school, then maybe what needs to be done is to look outside the school at trying to address some of the problems elsewhere, and I suppose that comes back to our point about looking at education as part of a holistic framework, where there are a whole range of other factors that impinge on people's achievement, and you can't just look at the school itself or the child or the parents but the whole environment to decide how best to improve outcomes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks. That's all the questions that I had. Are there any further comments you wanted to make?

**MR CURTIS:** I remember when I went to school I think, as somebody said, it was one size fits all sort of thing, so we were in with everybody else. But I think we just learned to grow up tough and we managed to get through.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Probably the reason why you became an ATSIC commissioner.

**MR CURTIS:** Yes, and as I say I got on the town council as well. I was one of the elected representatives from the Northern Territory on our failed Republic Constitution Convention. That's all I've got to say anyway.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you, David. If you could leave us with a copy of your opening comments, it would be good, and I think we've sent on to ATSIC - I don't know whether it got to you, David, or to one of your colleagues - some questions that we had arising from the submission.

**MR SADLEIR:** Yes, we've received those.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. If you want to put in any particular written answers to those, feel free to do so.

**MR SADLEIR:** Okay.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It just helps to clarify some of the issues that were raised in the submission.

**MR SADLEIR:** Okay. What's today? Friday. Yes, we'll put something in next week. Is that okay?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, that's fine. Thank you very much for coming.

**MR CURTIS:** All right. Thank you for listening to us and accepting our submission and giving us the opportunity of coming here.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The submission was very good and very welcome, so thanks, David. Thanks Chris. Thank you, Lewis.

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[3.15 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Good afternoon, I'm Chris Sidoti. Tim Roberts is the Co-Commissioner for Victoria. We have a person helping us in each jurisdiction. Tim is a Year 11 student in north-west Victoria and is Co-Commissioner for Victoria. Would you like to introduce yourselves and we'll go straight into comments.

**MS ROLLEY:** Thanks very much, Chris. My name is Lynne Rolley. I'm the Federal Secretary of the Independent Education Union.

**MR KEENAN:** My name is Tony Keenan. I'm the Assistant Secretary of the Victorian branch.

**MS RENEHAN:** I'm Frances Renehan. I'm a teacher at Catholic Regional College, Traralgon.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay. Thank you. Off you go.

**MS ROLLEY:** Thank you, Chris. What we've got today is two extra documents. One is a set of recommendations based on the submission that we put in perhaps about two weeks ago. That submission was pretty descriptive, and perhaps analytical, but descriptive and didn't really go to a range of recommendations because I ran out of time and thought I would get this in and then do something else. So that's the point of the broken thing.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** No, that's good.

**MS ROLLEY:** The recommendations don't necessarily go to every point that I've made in the submission. I've read a number of the submissions that have been made to the commission around the country and it seemed to me there was - there's such a vast amount of information, it's quite overwhelming. So I thought what I'd do is just go to some particular things that we think are really important, which doesn't mean to say we don't either have views about the remainder of areas that

we've covered in the submission and couldn't talk to you about those if we had particular questions, but I just thought that this was perhaps the best way to do it. So if it suited you I thought what we might do is just go through the recommendations and speak to those.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, I think that would be a great idea, particularly at this stage. I mean, this is the last day of our formal sittings.

**MS ROLLEY:** Is that right?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** My mind is very much focused on recommendations. I'm glad you've taken this approach.

**MS ROLLEY:** Okay. What I do want to say is that Fran as a practising teacher and a member - we're very grateful that she has given the day, and that the school has given her the day, allowing her to come today, and we'd like her to address the issues particularly around attraction and retention of teachers and professional development issues, issues that particularly relate to her own work and her colleagues' work as it happens in schools today. Tony, I think, would like to particularly address issues around discrimination legislation and issues related to discrimination as they occur in schools, particularly for students but for teachers as well. So I think we might just cut in and of course people will say what they like when they want to as well, but we thought we might approach it that way.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay, thanks.

**MS ROLLEY:** In the submission I referred to a number of other inquiries which in essence complement the work that has been done by this inquiry. They've looked particularly at issues of the nature of teachers, the Senate inquiry into the status of teaching, but there's a range of others as well. What we're aware of, I think, when I wrote the submission to that is that there is just a vast amount of material that has been written over years, inquiries, and research that has been funded by government and a very large number of recommendations that have come from those.

### **[Recommendations to HREOC]**

Certainly there has been action on some of them but there has been, on a very large number, inaction. We believe that it would be very helpful if out of this HREOC actually documented in a very comprehensive way the evidence that has come out of, or the findings that have come out of this particular inquiry that you've done, and developed a database, if you like, of similar kinds of inquiries that integrate into the work that you've done. I have to say that there will be some new ground but I suspect that there's a very large amount of

information that has come out of things like the Stolen Children's Report, for example, in terms of the Indigenous situation, the Deaths in Prisons, that inquiry that was done, and I think that in a lot of cases there is stuff that remains untouched and with no action, and it would be good to draw all that stuff together.

So we've said that we'd like that to happen. The most recent of course is the Bob Collins report out of the Northern Territory which is very comprehensive, and that in particular we think is worth looking at. So without necessarily having the most prime thing, it's there as item number 1 as our research base for that. We also think it's worth looking at what goes on in other countries, and the countries that we've named in particular are New Zealand and Canada, where they have certainly - in terms of their Indigenous populations - done some work and there may be some learnings from those. So there's been a fair amount of work done there. There has been stuff done on self-determination. They seem to have advanced to those agendas of reconciliation further than we have at this point, at least in terms of government action, and perhaps there are things we could learn from that.

The second thing we've gone to is a whole-of-government approach. The issue of education has a history of being fraught between State and Federal areas of responsibility; that in the constitution it's a state responsibility although the Federal Government has, in terms of non-government education, a high responsibility in terms of funding. And very often what happens is things fall through the cracks because of the tensions that arise between those two levels of funding. So there is that aspect of it.

The second aspect is that if we're to say there are real problems in the delivery of education services to rural and remote communities, it's our view that you just can't separate that off and say, "Well, what we're now going to deal with is education," that education is in smaller communities absolutely integral to the life of the community and there is a very strong interrelationship between other services. And at a time when all of those services are being stripped out of rural communities, the thing to do is to look at it in a holistic way and see the interrelated ways that they work together, the interrelationships between them. So we really support a whole-of-government approach across the levels of government - local, state and federal - and involving a range of portfolios.

I'm uncertain when I recommend things as to whether you've got the authority - or what your area of - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We can recommend anything.

**MS ROLLEY:** Anything you like?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Whether anybody listens is another matter, but we can certainly recommend.

**MS ROLLEY:** I'll operate on that basis then. We've said there that we'd like you to recommend the establishment of an intergovernmental task force comprising the range of key portfolios around things like industry development, regional development, transport, education and training, health, finance, etcetera. That would be involved in developing integrated policies towards rebuilding rural and remote communities, particularly of course from the point of view of the brief of this inquiry in terms of education.

We think though that what's important is that it's not as if there's some kind of expert group out there who comes in and says, "Right, we're going to fix this up," unconnected or not involving the community itself. The community itself will have ideas about what they like, what they want, how it should be organised, what could be different, and that will be of primary importance. So it's not about an imposition or about other people having answers; it's about the community talking to those who have the policy responsibility for implementing such things. So they hear what the community has and sees how that can be put into government policy or enacted; how it might be organised. So that last sentence in the recommendation is really pretty important, I think.

The third area around funding: I've listed there a number of principles which we think are pretty important, and critically they do go to our view that there has to be a very strong viable government school system. So while we're from the non-government system, we strongly support the proper resourcing and funding of public schools, and we think that in every community, no matter how big or small, every kid in the country is entitled to have good quality education, and that's the role of a government sector system of education. We think that is pretty important.

We think though as well that historically there has been the establishment of a non-government sector system of education and that students who attend them are entitled to have the best quality of education that's possible and there should be funding arrangements to provide for that. I know that in a separate set of questions you've sent you've talked about fees, and we might come back to that, if you like.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, please.

**MS ROLLEY:** In a Class Act, which is the report that's come out of the Senate inquiry into the status of teaching, there was a recommendation there which called for the Commonwealth, State and Territory



Governments to jointly establish a school education costs committee to undertake consultation and research with the aim of determining the cost of delivering at various stages of schooling - what it costs to actually deliver education across the range of curriculum offerings. On the basis of that kind of investigation there would be overall resource levels, allocation mechanisms and funding shares to be determined. That has not occurred.

In discussions we've had with, at this point, the Labor Party, we have advocated that very strongly as a policy that we thought ought to be implemented should they ever get government, and we'd say the same, and have said the same, in the inquiry to that effect. We think it's very important that there be such an investigation.

The current funding arrangements, although they're about to change from the year 2001 - essentially the basis of those is still on average government school costs - have been in place for a long time now and it's whether or not they're still appropriate and relevant given the changing nature of education and training and the shift, I guess - I think there has been a shift in terms of population and in terms of service between rural and remote and urban centres. So we think there should be some investigation of that and we've asked the commission to support that or something similar to that, some kind of research and review into the funding arrangements.

The issues under item 4 go to the nature and changing role of education, and under here we talk about the way there has been huge pressure on schools because of the changing structure of families, the plurality of school populations, unemployment arrangements and labour market pressures; retention rates in schools have shifted - so all of those kinds of things. Schools have been forced to often pick up the fall-out from those major social changes, as students struggled to deal with the fact that on the whole - many of them would come from one-parent families, many of them come from families where there's neither parent employed.

So there's a range of quite serious social dislocation that can occur, and it exhibits itself in difficult situations at school, and schools and teachers are required to pick up some of the support that's necessary for those students. It is reflected, I think, in the increasing rates of youth suicide, and that happens in the country more than it seems to be happening in the city. The statistics for depression and increased crime and anti-social behaviour are quite alarming at the moment, and the fact that there is high unemployment amongst youth. In rural and remote that will even be further exacerbated.

We're also of course really concerned about the legal protection against discrimination towards students in non-government

schools because of the nature of the current legislation in relation to non-government schools. Tony has actually done some research around particular schools in the Wangaratta area - no, what area?

**MR KEENAN:** Myrtleford.

**MS ROLLEY:** Myrtleford area. It might be good if you can talk about that, Tony.

**[Blanket exemptions from anti-discrimination legislation in non-government schools]**

**MR KEENAN:** Okay. That goes more to - not so much the discrimination - do you want me to cover that now? The stuff on Myrtleford doesn't really relate to the discrimination clauses. I guess our particular concern is the jurisdictions that have blanket exemptions for religious schools, and that means essentially the students as well as the teachers are not protected in any way by the anti-discrimination legislation. We obviously as an industrial organisation have concerns about the protection of the staff members, but in this context in this particular inquiry our concerns relate to students.

Victoria and New South Wales pretty much have blanket exemptions: New South Wales is for private schools, Victoria is pretty much a blanket exemption for religious schools. Therefore students have limited or no protection in terms of students with disabilities, gay and lesbian students, questions as to whether or not they're covered in relation to sexual harassment laws and so on, and that's a concern. Other jurisdictions have a limited exemption so that a school would need to show discrimination was necessary in order to uphold the teaching of the religion. I guess we want to draw the commission's attention to that.

**[3.30 pm]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you have views on it?

**MR KEENAN:** Yes, we have very strong views and we have a strong policy that certainly we're completely opposed to a blanket exemption. We can see that there's no justification for it, and particularly matters that have no bearing on religious teaching. I don't know of any religious teaching that says it's necessary to discriminate against a student with disability, for example, but the way the legislation is couched in those particular jurisdictions it could be read that way.

Having said that, there have been decisions in other jurisdictions and so on which mean that non-government schools are required to take students with disabilities, and we support that. A lot of our members have developed a whole pedagogy around working with

kids with disabilities, but we do have some concerns about the lack of resourcing and this can be particularly problematic in rural areas where there aren't other services. So often the services that those students rely on are delivered at the school and completely by the school.

By way of example, in Victoria the funding for integration for students with disability comes from the Commonwealth. In the government sector it's funded by the State. Now, there's a disparity. In government schools students with disabilities receive about \$11,960 per student. Of the 2800 pupils with disability in Catholic schools for example they receive \$2477 per pupil. It's not unheard of for a teacher to have up to six integration kids in a class and that's pretty trying on the teacher but it's also pretty concerning in terms of the level of education that can be delivered to those kids and, as I say, it's exacerbated in rural areas because often the other support services that might be available in the city aren't available there.

**MS ROLLEY:** So the recommendation we've got there is that we hope that the Commission would recommend better provision of specialist and crisis services for schools and families in remote and rural areas. We draw your attention to the support arrangements for students with disabilities and the funding arrangements for those which make it very difficult, as Tony has just pointed out, so the fact that they're considerably under-funded compared to those students in government schools - and also a recommendation there about inquiring further into the appropriateness of exemptions, particularly blanket exemptions from anti-discrim laws for religious schools. So those we think are very important.

**[Need for partnerships between schools, TAFE and universities]**

The other area in relation to the changing nature of education goes to the increasingly diverse nature of the curriculum. Probably in the last 10 years or so the Vocational Education And Training agenda has expanded considerably and there's also been a requirement to teach more kids, because retention levels have risen, but as well to maintain a proper focus on the early years, middle years, special needs students, students with disability, for example, and reform and changes that have occurred over time in relation to an outcomes approach to teaching and learning as opposed to inputs, which was I suppose up until the early 1990s, and, as well, a much more active and assertive parent community and a strong desire on the part of parents to know and understand what their students are doing and learning, etcetera. And all of those of course have impacts on the way schools are organised, on the role of teachers, on actually how students' work is delivered and how teaching is delivered to students, etcetera.

We actually think that there needs to be a much stronger interrelationship between schools, TAFE and universities across the

systems so that goes between government and non-government education authorities in the way they deliver education to students. We think there ought to be attempts to strengthen partnership arrangements. We think there ought to be more resource sharing and utilisation and a stronger emphasis on access and equity for people who are disadvantaged as a result of socioeconomic disadvantage or circumstance or their geographic isolation, and there ought to be some sharing of staff resources and more flexible arrangements.

I have to say that's a principal position that we have and it works in a range of places. We could give you examples - the Myrtleford example - we could give you examples of where that works, but it's ad hoc and it's not necessarily either systematised or institutionalised or got any kind of - it does rely on the local personnel and the local community. You should talk about Myrtleford. I'll come back to this.

**[Partnerships between government and non-government schools]**

**MR KEENAN:** Yes. Myrtleford has operated for a number of years. The local Catholic school is Marian College which is a school that has about 230 kids, and then there's a government high school or secondary college, which I think has about 500 kids. Myrtleford is a town of 3,000. The only way they can feasibly offer VCE, which in Victoria is Year 11 and 12, is to do it jointly, and they've done that for a number of years, and students attend VCE classes. They attend their English class at their own school, and all other subjects are offered between the two schools, and that's worked for a number of years and worked successfully.

That's probably the best example in Victoria. There are starting to be other examples in the area of Vocational Education And Training but the problem is it is ad hoc and it depends largely on the relationship between usually the two principals to get it going. In other places the relationships can be bordering on hostile because there's competition for kids through the door. Our concern is it's a completely irrational use of resources and this will become a bigger problem.

One of the problems is that capital funding and capital works in the non-government sector are funded through the Commonwealth. Capital development in the government schools is through the state governments, so it's not unthinkable that you can be having two libraries built in the one town, which is a large whack of government money and it might be more sensible for there to be other cooperative arrangements.

The area that's really pushing it is Vocational Education and Training. In order for schools to be able to operate Vocational Education and Training programs, the capital spending is huge. For

example, if a school was to operate hospitality programs, they need to establish a full commercial kitchen. Now, it just makes no sense for two schools in the one town to be doing that, and we would actively encourage cooperative arrangements. We would urge the commission to recommend that there be something in place that formally, if you like, pushes this agenda along. At the moment, as I say, it's ad hoc and it depends largely on relationships that are established town by town.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I can reasonably confidently foreshadow that we will be. But if you can give us examples, Myrtleford or anywhere else - - -

**MR KEENAN:** I'll give you an example of the problems in Myrtleford. I don't know if you know the area but it's had a lot of changes over the last 20 years. A large industry there was tobacco.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's now mainly tourism, I think, isn't it?

**MR KEENAN:** It's now mainly tourism, and this is the exact problem. They're not able to offer any VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING programs in tourism or hospitality and the major source of employment in the town. The nearest regional centre is Wangaratta. TAFE there does offer hospitality and tourism, but there are no bus services provided by government now. So the only VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING course that any kid in Myrtleford is doing - either government or non-government - is in electronics, and how that works - there happens to be a teacher at Marian who lives in Wangaratta. The teacher drives the students to Wangaratta TAFE at the end of the day and then the parents roster to pick the students up and bring them back to Myrtleford.

Now, that could be simply resolved with a funded or even partially funded bus service between the two towns. The other option, perhaps the better option long term, would be for the two schools to establish a facility where they can do - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** In Myrtleford?

**MR KEENAN:** Yes. But at the moment they can't even access the Vocational Education and Training programs in the nearest major town, which is Wangaratta, which is about 45 minutes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. It would be good to get some more information on that.

**MR KEENAN:** Okay.

**MS ROLLEY:** There are I note, as well, in other states - in New South Wales for instance and I think probably Queensland - campuses which have government and non-government schools on them and TAFE facilities too - 'Greenfield Sites' I think they're called - and we could actually look at that. Now, there have been problems that have arisen - I'm not saying that that doesn't occur - as to some of the practical arrangements on the ground that arise between staff and - it's largely territorial because it's new and because perhaps some of it is not assisted into place perhaps by enough time to bring the parties to agreement, but I actually think there are learnings that can be had from these experiences and we should perhaps document some of those so that they form part of the commission's database.

**MR KEENAN:** The biggest problem in Myrtleford is that the parents of the kids at the Catholic school start to object to paying fees or then take them out of the school and enrol them at the high school, and that's been quite problematic working around that. I'm not sure what arrangement they've come to but they've solved that problem.

**[Criteria for the establishment of non-government schools]**

**MS ROLLEY:** So it probably leads on to the provision of education services, which is the next bit. You're probably aware that there used to be in legislation arrangements for the establishment of non-government schools, and that was in federal legislation, so that if a community wanted to establish a non-government school there were criteria that they had to meet, etcetera. That's been removed and was removed in 1996, and now any school that meets the criteria at a state level will be funded by the federal government - any non-government school that meets those criteria.

The union doesn't support that and didn't support it at the time and believes that there ought to be proper planned provision of education, that resources are too precious to not have some kind of federal oversight of where schools are built and that the federal government excludes itself from any kind of planning arrangements around the provision of schooling and the development of both government and non-government schools.

Our view is that any school, whether it be a government or non-government school, shouldn't impact negatively upon already established schools in a particular community. We have examples of where new schools built - that it causes great anguish for non-government schools in that area where there might be a declining population or a quite fragile balance of population, if you like, in a particular community, so that a new non-government school not only impacts negatively upon the government school but also on non-government schools in that area, and there just needs to be some real commitment to a proper oversight of those arrangements.

So under 5 the recommendation is that HREOC's report should support an examination of models of education provision and their funding arrangements so there can be a reorganisation of resource sharing and curriculum offerings and that there should be public policy strengthening the role of the school community as the locus of rebuilding rural and regional Australia around libraries and around sporting facilities, education and training and technology, etcetera.

Schools have got to actually provide facilities for kids to run around a playground or to have access to information technology or to have a library. In a sense they should be built for the community generally, and that ought to be the centre, if you like, of the community. There's two schools, two libraries, two playing fields - I think it could be organised in a better way if the community itself was involved in the thinking around that.

[3.45 pm]

#### **[Local community education planning bodies]**

We have suggested there that an inexpensive way of implementing such a proposal might be the establishment of local community education planning bodies which would involve school communities, parents, staff and other town agencies, so not just the school but other town agencies, and they could look at cooperative uses of resources and access to services. There are some trial programs, which no doubt you've been advised of, in other parts of the country about full service schooling, and there may be things in there that, you know, we can learn from that would help integrate or provide an integrated approach to the effective use of community services. So we would support that very strongly.

The next under 6 goes to the National Schools Network. I don't know if you've heard about that particular work but, together with a range of others, the National Schools Network, the National Professional Development Program and Innovative Links were sets of approaches funded by the Commonwealth government probably from around about 1993, or 92, to 1996. They were very powerful models of involving school communities across the nation. So there could be schools, for example, in the Northern Territory, in Queensland, in New South Wales, that were examining a particular pedagogical approach to some kind of school organisation.

#### **[National Schools Network]**

National Schools Network is actually - its brief is to look at what kinds of things act to impede good teaching and learning outcomes, the way schools are organised. What stops kids learning? Are there things we do in schools that prevent good outcomes? It remains the only truly

national cooperative endeavour at the moment, and I suspect not for much longer really. It involves the employers and the unions, parents, teacher educators, professional associations, from across both sectors. They have done quite a bit of work in the full service schooling. We think that there are certainly things there that could inform the way we rethink schooling in rural and remote communities.

The quality of teachers, recruitment and retention is a really difficult area and caused the most concern from amongst our members when we sought their advice, and when we sought advice from branches. I should say probably, before Fran speaks, that Fran was part of a reference group organised by the Victorian branch which involved teachers from across the East Gippsland area. That involved a number of teachers from different schools.

**MS RENEHAN:** Primarily principals of primary schools in Catholic East Gippsland schools, so it looked at a group of people who were from as remote as Orbost down to where I live in Traralgon. Mostly what they talked about was the fact that they're a long way from anywhere to offer their students anything in the way of cultural or social programs, and that cost and time is the biggest factor with enhancing their students experiences, like the fact that in places like Orbost and Lakes Entrance a child can be born and never come to Melbourne in their entire life. There are people who have never ventured outside their area, so the school is not able to offer them a broader range of experiences particularly in their primary years.

**MS ROLLEY:** Do you want to talk a bit more or will I say a bit more about what sorts of things people said about retention and - - -

**MS RENEHAN:** About retention of teachers?

**MS ROLLEY:** And attraction, yes.

**[Teacher recruitment and retention]**

**MS RENEHAN:** The main problem with - like, I only live 160 kilometres from Melbourne, Traralgon is only 160 kilometres away, but I had to have some leave because of an injury last term and my English classes didn't have permanent teachers all term. That's English, that's humanities, it's not even maths. But they didn't actually have a replacement - they just had fill-in teachers. In fact one class didn't even have a teacher for about five weeks, so I'm just getting them back on track now.

We actually had a number of emergency teachers and they've all been employed. When you run out of emergency teachers, what happens is you haven't got anyone. So what ended up happening was that we're still actually two teachers down in the technology area at the



moment, so teachers are just taking extra classes. But what actually happened was that the principal advertised and he actually went to Melbourne to interview people to talk them into coming down to work.

The biggest problem is that we can't attract teachers during the course of the year. Like for me, it was a situation where I had to take an amount of time off work. So during the year is hardest, but also actually getting a number of applicants for positions so that you can select the best applicant. We've had a number of teachers in the maths area that haven't been suitable, but because there's no-one else we've had to employ them. It has then caused a whole lot of problems in terms of curriculum delivery and then having to convince that person that they're not the best, but if you haven't got anyone else you have to hang onto them.

In the primary schools, the principals at the meeting actually talked about the fact that they would spend quite a bit of money, a few thousand dollars, advertising for teachers to come and they wouldn't even get any applicants, nobody would apply. So they've spent all this money and the primary schools are fairly strapped for resources. They've spent all this money and haven't even got one applicant. So then what you do is you look around the community and to a certain extent, although not so much now, we have a number of people who aren't even qualified as teachers who have permission to teach in our schools because that's the only way we can fill some of the positions. You know, they're engineers or something else and they come and do some teaching and try and play catch-up.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What would it require to get them to apply and come in the first place?

**MS RENEHAN:** I'm not sure. A number of teachers actually travel, like up to an hour or an hour and a half a day. We had a teacher who lived in Noble Park who drove to Traralgon - that's an hour and three-quarters every day - for two years. I'm not sure what it is. I live in a highly industrialised area, so maybe it doesn't seem that attractive. Maybe it's not far enough away for people, I don't know. It seems that there's a reluctance on people's parts to come down. What we have happening is we get a lot of young teachers, fresh out of college, who come and they're terrific. But they only stay one, two, maybe three years at the most and then it's back to Melbourne because that's where their family ties are, that's where all their friends are.

I mean the exodus down the highway on Friday afternoon, I reckon you could count probably that most of the people are teachers going back to Melbourne for the weekend. Then Sunday night and Monday morning they're all coming back again. So we tend to find that you get a reasonable turnover. Sometimes it can be a high turnover.

I've taught at the school for 19 years and you can actually have quite a high turnover of staff. It's primarily young people who come down, they do a stint and then they go back. That would be the same with the government sector schools as well.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Are there some combinations of incentives though that you think would make it more attractive? Is the union negotiating, or trying to negotiate, incentive packages? What attitude are you getting?

**MR KEENAN:** It's such a problem in the country areas now that we've actually been approached by the employers to negotiate incentives which is, in the time I've worked in industrial relations, the first time it has ever worked like that. One thing they're looking at is the emergency teaching rates of pay which have fallen behind, and there's now no financial incentive to do emergency teaching; there used to be. One idea we've flagged is the notion of schools taking over the Higher Education Contribution Scheme debt of graduates in exchange for an agreement to stay for a fixed period, which would not be overly expensive. It would obviously require some resourcing.

Because we're a union we probably should say that remote allowances need to be investigated, although personally I'm not sure how big an incentive they are in the scheme of things. In the states they operate in they don't necessarily seem to provide that. I met with a group of young teachers in Mildura. Interestingly, Mildura is not having problems staffing their school; it seems to be okay in Mildura. All the other schools - like Myrtleford, the example I gave before, has no science teacher at the moment. They've been running without a science teacher for two terms.

The teachers in Mildura said things like return airfares, two return air fares a year, would be an incentive. The other thing, which I don't know how you address, for young people in country towns, particularly if they're from the city, is that they find the closeness of teaching and working in the community a problem, and a problem adjusting to - I did my first two years in the country and I guess the level of parental scrutiny and gossip and that, particularly if you're not used to that, can take some getting used to.

Most of the lifestyle cases that we've had to run, which is where a religious school has - we've had a dispute with a school over the fact that someone might be living in a de facto relationship or gay or lesbian. It usually occurs in a country town and it's less to do with the desire of the employer to uphold the school, it's more to do with what parents see and say. They're some problems that exist in country areas, and I don't know how you address that. I've got no solution. But

that's one of the big feedbacks we get, particularly from young women who go to the country.

We had one parish priest where there were three beginning teachers sharing a house, one woman and two men, and he directed the woman to move out of the house. She didn't and we intervened and so on. I don't know how you deal with those problems.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do you provide alternative accommodation?

**MR KEENAN:** No. I don't know how you - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Perhaps the presbytery.

**MR KEENAN:** Yes, I've got no suggestions for that.

**MS ROLLEY:** I think the issue of accommodation - I know you've heard from our unions in New South Wales and Queensland and that they've addressed, in particular, those issues of accommodation. So I haven't really gone into that except to touch on it. But I think it's a really big issue. It's expensive. In these small towns it's not often of a particularly good standard and it's hard to get, it is hard to get, there's not much of it. So I actually think it's a package of things. There's the question of attracting people. What is it? What kinds of incentives might attract teachers to go to country towns? It's also then the, "Look, if I want to leave, can I then leave and move out?"

I think in the main submission we made I included correspondence, and I think our New South Wales branch referred to it as well, from a teacher in Bourke who felt trapped and that in fact to get out of Bourke and go and apply for other positions, or have an interview, was very difficult. Apart from the distance from where it might be from an urban centre there was a reluctance on the part of the school to provide time off to do such things. You know, it really is quite a difficult thing.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** There are some arrangements in some states, between attractive and less attractive diocese, for guaranteed return of staff. Has that been examined in Victoria, for example, Tony?

**MR KEENAN:** No.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Well, Wilcannia, Forbes - no, Armidale, I think. Armidale and Lismore diocese in New South Wales, Lismore will release teachers to go and guarantee them a place back. There's also an arrangement between, I think, Adelaide and Broome, so that

teachers can go off and spend a couple of years in a more remote area knowing that they'll have the guarantee to come back.

**MS ROLLEY:** I think that's really quite important. It's a kind of a set of redeployment arrangements that says, "We acknowledge that you don't want to spend the rest of your life in Broome," but you do something - there ought to be some compensation for things like transport, return flights, allowances. You know, just living there in these places is more expensive. I think in the main submission we refer to a young teacher who is in Port Keats in the Northern Territory and the cost of living there, the cost of housing, the cost of food, the arrangements around getting food - you know, getting into town just to do ordinary business and things like that - have to be accommodated, so it's a package of things that I think needs to be organised.

[4 pm]

I know, for example, in New South Wales in relation to Wilcannia, Forbes, there is a great discrepancy between the kinds of industrial conditions that prevail for teachers in government schools in the same area and teachers in our sector, in our Catholic schools, in that area, so there are some really quite inadequate arrangements and I think there has to be some funding arrangements in place that allow these problems to be overcome, that allow employers to negotiate reasonable industrial conditions with the union around what they might look like. I think that's very important. It will only get worse in the end.

**MR KEENAN:** One of the problems in Victoria - because Victoria is a smaller state, geographically, these issues have been viewed as issues of the big states like South Australia, Western Australia and New South and so on, when they have always existed here - there are large pockets where these problems are and it's probably really only in the last three to four years that people are starting to talk about this, so a lot of the arrangements that have been in place in other states haven't existed here and what is really driving it now is the teacher shortage.

**MS ROLLEY:** The teacher shortage - that's the context of it, yes.

**MR KEENAN:** We have major concerns that in two years' time the situation in some areas will be at crisis. If you look at Barbara Preston's report and if you look at what we're seeing already - - -

**MS ROLLEY:** We'll have more engineers teaching things rather than teachers, which is a worry.

**MR KEENAN:** Yes. Also in the Catholic sector we are currently engaged in a campaign to improve workloads and one of the things we're hoping to achieve is reduced class sizes. If we achieve that -

which we're hoping to - in some country towns it will be very hard to find the staff to deliver that.

**MS ROLLEY:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We are running out of time so maybe if you would just flick through the last couple of - - -

**[Indigenous education]**

**MS ROLLEY:** Out of time, okay. Indigenous education: it's extraordinarily distressing to read the submissions that are on the Web site and we certainly would support a range of recommendations in relation to Indigenous education - those that have come out of Bringing Them Home, The Royal Commission Into Black Deaths, the work that is being done by the Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation. We would hope that the Commission might be able to do some work supporting the recommendations of the Council.

It's absolutely urgent for that to be done. In the main submission we put in I talked about that young teacher who is in Port Keats and the real frustration and alienation that she feels as a result of her work there. Pretty isolated and absolutely no induction into what it would be like. Only one Professional Development session to assist her to understand some issues around language and literacy. The outcomes from the literacy survey that was done about two years ago demonstrate that the literacy achievement of Aboriginal students is very low compared to non-Indigenous students in Australia and of course it's linked to their economic depression, the fact that they don't attend school in large numbers, that it seems irrelevant.

I have read and heard just before we came on the questions around the bilingual education issue, which is quite difficult. I have to say that we're in East Timor at the moment about to provide a large amount of support to a program there, which is to provide the Tetum language to grades 1 to 3, which is the Indigenous language for East Timorese, which they certainly want and base it on the fact that you can't really divide language and culture, and that if you want to build other language onto or into a student's knowledge and understanding, then you need to do it in the Indigenous language in the first instance. I know there is a big debate but it seems to us that the necessity for that bilingual education to be available is pretty important.

**[Technology and infrastructure]**

Information technology issues: clearly these are very big issues and expensive ones and clearly it has got the effect of changing education quite dramatically. What we think though is that there needs still to be teachers. They are the primary resource for all student learning and so you have to do multiple work not just with students but

with teachers to assist them to use technology as a part of their pedagogical approach.

The fact that there isn't good infrastructure to rural and remote communities - a number of people we spoke to talked about a real lack of resources in their schools. Just even telephones at times were pretty - having a telephone wouldn't be a bad thing; one that worked. So having computer lines that actually were efficient would be fantastic, but they're not there and so - you know, the actual infrastructure is very important. We certainly urge the commission to report the failure to provide that represents a real disadvantage when you compare what is becoming available to schools in urban areas. That's as far as we've got. We could go on forever but I had to stop.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you for that. I have asked my questions all the way through. Do you want to raise anything, Tim?

**[Permanency and contracts]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** I just have one quick one. Is the Independent Education Union in favour of using contracts to employ teachers or in a permanent position?

**MS ROLLEY:** Permanent positions, yes.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** That is just something which has come up regularly and it has also come up as one of the reasons why there's a lack of staff in rural areas because short-term contracts - for example, 10 months or 12 months - aren't viable and they don't offer people security.

**MS ROLLEY:** That's right, yes.

**MR KEENAN:** We have fortunately been able to maintain permanency in the non-government sector as the main mode of employment, so contracts haven't been a specific problem to us as it has in the government sector, so we have managed to keep most people on permanent. The only contracts are people who are replacing someone on leave.

**MS ROLLEY:** We think it's just very bad for actual quality education. What education is about is the relationship. You have to develop a relationship with kids over time to know and understand what their learning needs are and so, quite apart from the personal dislocation it causes if you don't know if you have a job next year after the holidays - I mean, that is pretty awful - it just doesn't deliver quality education in the long term and that is a real problem in Indigenous communities.

**[Employment opportunities for Indigenous Educators]**

I talked to an Indigenous adviser in New South Wales yesterday and I do want to actually put on the record that at the moment in New South Wales there are 60 Aboriginal teachers, Indigenous teachers, at the Catholic University in Sydney and they will graduate - 60 across five years of five levels - over the next five years into schools. There are no guarantees of employment coming to them from the system.

When the Indigenous adviser began work, prior to having a position with us in the union in 1994 she worked for the Catholic Education Office and, at the time she started there, there were 12 Indigenous students who graduated from the Catholic University and every one of them went into the state sector, which is not meant to sound sectarian. What it is meant to illustrate is that what we support is the fact that there are Indigenous teachers and Aboriginal education workers, so support staff who are training and who are - you know, this is a fantastic thing and a real role model but when it comes to our sector the sector is not actually putting in place any affirmative action around employment of those teachers, which we think is a real loss and that's what I want to actually say - that I think there needs to be some real work done there to ensure there are better employment possibilities for them. Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much. Thank you particularly for all the recommendations you have made.

**MS ROLLEY:** I appreciate the opportunity to do this. Thanks very much.

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**[4.15 pm]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Good afternoon. Sorry to keep you waiting. Do you want to introduce yourself and then straight into any comments you want to make.

**MR DYER:** I'm David Dyer and I think you are aware of the fact that I am here as a member of the panel who carried out the interviews which were part of the People Together inquiry.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We are indeed.

**MR DYER:** I will leave with you the final draft of that report entitled 'Voices from Our Schools'. I just make the observation that there is an

embargo on the report until 28 November, when it will be officially released.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Okay.

**MR DYER:** Much of what I was intending to say - and if that's where you want to go, I'm happy to continue this - gives you a flavour of the report, though there are some of my own observations intermingled with it. It may be that you want to interrupt and ask questions at any given point; I'm relaxed about that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks very much.

**[People Together Inquiry]**

**MR DYER:** Because of a shoestring budget, the panel met for only two days in Melbourne and three half-days in regional Victoria - Gippsland, Bendigo and Horsham - and it is an inquiry into Victorian public education. At the same time we received some 160 written submissions, and these were of high quality, from all over the state. This in itself, I think, indicates the high level of public interest. That was not altogether surprising. The 1998 People Together community summit in Melbourne on the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots included a workshop on the state of the Victorian system of education, which happened to be packed to overflowing.

Contributor after contributor at that particular workshop pointed to the growing gap between the then government's accounts of its achievements in schooling and the anecdotal evidence that the system was under terrible strain. When it came to the inquiry some 10 months later, all members of the panel appreciated that much good is achieved by those working in the public system all over Victoria. There are many best practice outcomes. Nevertheless, the quality of outcomes is very uneven and several important matters relating to equitable treatment need to be addressed as a matter of urgency by any government genuinely concerned about the high unemployment level of young people.

It is on these that I shall focus, to the exclusion of much further reference to the positive outcomes that came to our notice. There is no doubt at all that although smaller numbers of young people are affected, the problems often appear to be more acute in regional Victoria than in the metropolitan area. The quality of educational services, including technological support services, very much depends on the level of resources available to schools. Predictably, in their submission the Victoria Association of Secondary Principals claimed that the removal of resources from the state education system by both the Howard and the Kennett governments is the single biggest issue facing government schools today.



### **[Resource provision to schools]**

Our panel unanimously agreed that there are real disparities in resource provision between schools. Consequently, children living in poorer socioeconomic areas often miss out, even though they are the ones with the greatest need. The panel found the previous State Government's claim that supplementary funding in the global budgets more than compensates for differentials in schools' capacities to raise private revenue on their own account - we found those to be quite unconvincing. An example of this disparity could be in the Bendigo region, when one matches the high level of resources available in the Bendigo Senior Secondary College, a school that for a long time has enjoyed a deservedly high reputation, with a far lower level of resources available to smaller secondary schools in the same region.

It seems that one profitable stream of additional income at a senior secondary college comes from outsourcing experienced staff to act as professional consultants in smaller government schools in the region. They pay, these smaller schools, the senior secondary college for the services. The previous advantage of being part of a system, whether it be public or private, was the free sharing of rare resources and in education this usually means skilled and experienced practitioners. It seems that even in regional Victoria, the current competitive culture within public education is undermining and replacing a sense of cooperation and partnership that previously existed between schools.

Schools reported that there was very little sharing of resources and they feel compelled to match or better the offerings of neighbouring schools. A parent of children attending a rural school makes this comment:

*The potential for local schools to be a key part of increasing community cohesion, through both a vibrant school community itself and linking with other local schools and organisations, is enormous. However, the reality is that with overstretched resources - people as well as dollars - and with the prevailing focus on getting in the dollars, this whole area receives too little attention.*

More detailed research into resource discrepancies is certainly needed, but our inquiry panel was satisfied that there is clear evidence that the high unemployment level in much of regional Victoria presents schools with particular challenges and gives substance to the many claims that were made of unmet need. The English Faculty Coordinator in a rural secondary college is concerned that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of students leaving at VCE level - he

talks about 14 this year - most of whom are weaker students who missed out on extra help they needed due to inadequate resources. He adds that this is a matter of serious concern to teachers.

### **[Self-governing schools]**

The Victorian Council of Social Services makes the very pertinent observation that the reliance on and need for computers is also an area which is widening the gap between the affluent and low-income groups. Computer funding has been provided on the basis of one public dollar for every three raised privately. Schools with little fundraising capacity - and this would mean a large number of rural schools - are being left behind. Those who advocate private sponsorship as a means of providing at least some of the schools' essential resources should recognise that for many schools this simply is not feasible.

The parent of a student attending a rural Preparatory to Year 12 college made the point that although that school is reasonably large, it's not near any town, therefore it would be extremely difficult to attract sponsors. He goes on and points out that commodity prices are extremely low and the vast majority of students come from families on the land and so the school's fundraising potential would be reduced. Finally, he points out that the expertise attracted to a school council and other key positions are not usually associated with professional vocations which would help in that particular job. The matter of increased autonomy was one that obviously was discussed in our hearings.

There appeared to be no enthusiasm for a return to a situation where all decisions were made from the very top. However, the real consequences of self-government appear to be very different from those described in the official propaganda at the time of our inquiry. To no small extent, increasing autonomy was seen as a device to shift responsibility from the central to the local level. This is especially true when budget and staffing allocations do not permit crucial programs to operate effectively. In many schools, mandatory curriculum areas such as Languages Other Than English, Physical Education and Information Technology are not fully resourced and parents are required to pay for the teaching of subjects such as art, music, drama and library.

Whether a school can provide such programs usually depends on its capacity to fundraise and/or willingness to collect so-called "voluntary fees". The Country Women's Association confirmed that in the country, the smaller number of parents who support school fundraising find it difficult to maintain adequate levels of funds. In a recent open letter to state school parents, Dr Kemp, the Federal Minister, makes much of parents being entitled to the best possible choice in educating their children. To facilitate this choice, he has

increased the federal funding of non-government schools at the expense of the public system and has ignored the needs of children whose parents will never be in a position to make a choice.

In the same letter, he says the Federal Government's agenda is to improve the standard of education for every student in the country, regardless of where they are educated. Certainly, these are noble aims, but unattainable within current budget restraints. My own professional experience was solely in the non-government sector, in which I strongly believe, but never should government aid for the non-government sector be at the expense of the public sector. There can be no real educational choice for many children until a new schools policy relating to planned educational provision is restored and until the benchmark adjustment scheme, which is weighted against federal funding for government schools, is abandoned.

Equality does not mean uniformity. Policies promoting positive discrimination for the disadvantaged need to be restored. The principal of a rural secondary college made these valid points:

*The concept of self-governing schools has the potential to be a good one, but much work needs to be done to ensure that all schools are not funded as if they are equal. Clearly, rural and provincial areas are disadvantaged, as are schools and communities with high unemployment or significant migrant backgrounds. In our case, our large Koori population adds to our needs for greater resources.*

#### **[Absenteeism and non-enrolment]**

The shift in funding at the federal level, from the public system to the private, has added to the difficulties in the state system, especially in adequately resourcing special needs and in country areas most of all because of travel costs and more limited human resources. For the panel a most surprising revelation - I suppose it's an indication of my own ignorance, but one that needs urgent attention - is the very high level of absenteeism and non-enrolment. Anecdotal evidence - the only evidence available - suggests that on any given day, 20% of children may be absent from most secondary and some primary schools.

As statistics are not available, the real scale of the problem is unknown, but it is certainly a problem in regional centres of Victoria. Nothing appears to be done to identify the reasons for this problem, though it would seem sensible to assume that the reasons have everything to do with low self-esteem stemming from a lack of basic skills that need to be mastered in primary school, alienation and inappropriate curriculum. Sadly, the panel was given the message that

often there is no follow-up if an enrolled student drops out, but does not enrol in another school. It's usually because of a complex family situation.

Perhaps the family would like the child to attend school, but because of behavioural difficulties cannot force her/him. The Department of Human Services doesn't see this as a protective issue, so no-one feels they have grounds to intervene. Children come in contact with the welfare system only when there are serious protective issues. Truancy is encouraged by some parents and ignored by many schools, because often the truant student is seen as better away as he - usually, but sometimes she - is seen as disruptive and difficult; life is easier without them at school, particularly after census day.

It became very obvious that among educators and welfare agencies there is widespread concern about children and young people being excluded from school. This may happen formally through expulsion or informally as a result of the reluctance of schools with inadequate counselling services to maintain students seen as having a harmful effect in the classroom. As one teacher in a rural secondary college put it:

*Teachers are under pressure to deliver VCE and CSF curriculum and to achieve high outcome levels. They do not have the time or resources to provide for students who have difficulties coping or who have personal or family problems.*

### **[Students with special needs]**

Perhaps it is hardly surprising that there is a youth suicide rate in country Victoria. Today the classroom teacher is expected to meet the needs of more students and cope with a more diverse range of students with much reduced specialist support. To achieve acceptable class sizes many schools do without enough specialist teachers. Many schools do without enough specialist teachers for areas such as student welfare, library, drama, art and music. As a teacher in a rural secondary college explained to us, the expectation placed on schools to add welfare support and counselling to the core business of teaching means that classroom teachers are undertaking roles for which they are not trained.

**[4.30 pm]**

It was made clear to us that the diverse needs of students with physical or psychological difficulties and particular social or emotional barriers to learning are being neglected or under-resourced. The programs provided for students with disabilities are often inadequate or

unavailable and especially for children in Victorian country areas attending small or remote schools.

The principal of a large regional secondary college has noticed an increasing number of Year 7 students presenting with serious learning and behavioural problems. At no stage in primary school had they been assessed by appropriate specialists. Many had long histories of interrupted schooling, most had serious learning difficulties, many came from dysfunctional families and some by any criteria should have received integration funding. The criteria for integration funding has been very severely tightened and it is extremely difficult to qualify.

These children fell through the safety net. This secondary college principal attributed the sad situation to the fact that primary schools in rural areas had been hard-pressed because of large class sizes and poor access to specialist support staff, and I can't emphasise strongly enough the importance of looking at the problems in primary schools.

Another principal from a rural secondary college underlined the truth of this situation by saying, and I quote:

*Schools face the ludicrous situation where they might have to buy in the services of specialists.*

And this was happening in self-governing schools, and he asked the question:

*Is it feasible or practical for small rural schools to buy in the services of a private speech therapist at \$80 to \$100 an hour? How many families in the country can afford this on an ongoing basis? How can specialist services to children in remote schools be provided in that context with any certainty?*

Some comments to our inquiry from visiting teaching staff illustrate how serious the situation has become. Under the funding arrangement for self-governing schools a per student amount of \$125 will go directly to schools. Students with disabilities cannot be guaranteed the services of visiting teachers, as schools realistically will not be able to purchase regular visiting teacher service visits from the \$125. For example, a small country school of 27 pupils currently receives visiting teacher services weekly from both hearing and physical disability streams for two of its students. The issue is compounded by the cost of travel for one and a quarter hours to and from that location. On a user-pays system that would not be sustainable on behalf of two students.

### **[The importance of education]**

From the time I first became involved in the People Together inquiry I have continually been recalling - almost haunted by - some words I found in an Oxfam publication about Third World countries:

*Education deprivation is transforming large parts of the developing world into increasingly marginalised enclaves of despair. Cut off from opportunities in an increasingly knowledge-intensive globe, the citizens of these countries are being consigned to a future of poverty and deprivation in an increasingly unequal world.*

I mustn't be melodramatic, but unless high quality and relevant education is available to all Victorian children wherever they live, this really could happen here, and I dare to suggest it's because in the last decade a good school education has all the time tended to become far more exclusive. Perhaps there may be some changes for the better under the new government.

I trust, sir, that my comments have been of some help and are relevant to the very important task you are undertaking. This document, Voices from Our Schools, sets out our evidence in greater detail. You will note that the final recommendation on page 81 is that the Victorian Premier seeks the cooperation of other States and Territories in persuading the Commonwealth government to establish a national inquiry into the funding of the nation's schools, because it all comes back to that particular issue and the difficulties, I suggest, of the game that is played between what is State funding, what is Federal funding and what falls in between.

The last independent and expert national inquiry was in 1973 under the direction of Prof Peter Karmel. Some 25 years later there would be some differences in the issues but for the health and wellbeing of our nation they would be no less significant.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** David, thank you very much for that comprehensive statement. It would be good if you could leave us with that as well as the report, if you don't mind.

**MR DYER:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Tim?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** I just had one question about your absentee - that part of your speech. Were there any particular groups that came across as being higher than the 20% or incorporating more to the 20%?

**[Absenteeism]**

**MR DYER:** No, I don't think so. We first picked this up in Melbourne - the first two days of sittings were in Melbourne - and it seemed to sort of start from grades 5 or 6 onwards. I in a previous job I'd done had picked it up in Bendigo, that there were a number of children coming in from the country and they changed buses in Bendigo, and they were supposed to get on the second bus to take them to school but they didn't actually do that, so they spent the day rattling round the streets.

In retirement I live near Ballarat and having been the head of a school once I look at them and I know damn well they should be at school and they're rattling round the streets there. But it kept on coming up and up again, and these are kids who really are not achieving and they're dropping out, and my own gut feeling tells me that it's because they were in two large classes in their very early years of primary education and they were not identified as having learning difficulties, and as it goes on it becomes totally hopeless. It's just such an awful experience going to school because they don't get any rewards from it, and their own lack of self-esteem is apparent.

The other thing that I heard from the previous thing about the contract teaching - this was a worry in the country certainly. It's a difficult issue because there are some virtues in it because there are particular times when you need an extra member so that it does give greater flexibility, but it clearly in some places is completely out of control.

**[Class sizes]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Okay. Just one other thing about class size. There's been two conflicting views on that. There was an interesting point of view I haven't heard for a long time actually from a Parents Club member, and that was that if the class sizes are too small there's a lack of interaction, and in subjects where there's a need for interaction, as in English or Literature or Psychology, you're losing that part of academia. And then there's the other side where you need the teacher one on one, seven minutes per student per lesson or whatever it works out as. So I was just wondering what was your opinion on that.

**MR DYER:** I think you're absolutely right. Having taught a long time ago in Year 12 - in the senior class - if you don't have a large enough class it's a pretty lonely experience for the teacher apart from anything else, because you've got not enough interaction, and that is in the senior classes, and ideally you'd have - it depends I suppose on what the mix is, but I suppose ideally you'd have at least eight and possibly 16, and that's great.

But in the early stages - and we have got people who say, "Well, I've done very well in life. I've become a judge. When I went to primary school there were 52 people in my class." Well, that's absolute rubbish. It just doesn't work like that. You've got to remember that there is a vast range of backgrounds, some kids from non-English-speaking homes, some kids from homes where mum reads to them every night and they have a marvellous educational experience at home, others where things are just at sixes and sevens, totally dysfunctional. And to have a class of 30 in prep or grade 1, 2 or 3 just doesn't work at all. You should be getting down to about 24.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I can beat your judge. When I was at school in my primary school, kindergarten, first class and second class had 100 kids in them.

**MR DYER:** Yes, and you've done very well.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Well, like your judge, one person does well and the other 99 are hopeless.

**MR DYER:** That's right.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Thank you very much.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I only had one question, David. I don't think in the course of your statement you made any mention of race relations. This became a matter of some concern to me from what we were hearing over the last couple of days, quite surprisingly so in Victoria where I had anticipated the situation to be better than many other parts of Australia. Did this come up at all in your consultations?

**MR DYER:** No, it wasn't raised. The consultations of course, as you realise, are pretty limited.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, that's right.

**MR DYER:** And that wasn't an issue.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And we probably went to places where you didn't.

**MR DYER:** No. But what you say does not surprise me. I worked in Melbourne and I've retired to Ballarat, and if you go further west from Ballarat and in the - I know a bit about the Anglican Diocese of Ballarat which goes to the South Australian border. There is a high level - a high level of racial intolerance, and my wife and I have picked this up



on a number of occasions, so that doesn't surprise me, but in actual fact in our inquiry we didn't pick any of that up.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you. Thank you for those documents as well, and for coming in.

**MR DYER:** Right.

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[4.42 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Would you like to introduce yourselves and the organisation and enter into whatever comments you want to make.

**MR MURDOCH:** Certainly. My name is George Murdoch. I work as a volunteer for Volunteers for Isolated Students Education. With me is Bob Howey; he's also a volunteer with the same group. We are incidentally a couple of retired Victorian school principals, so we're sort of back in harness almost, if you will, today. However, I do know that one person from our group has spoken to you in Canberra.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**[Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education]**

**MR MURDOCH:** However, what I would like to do is to give a broader brush approach to it maybe rather than the direct one. Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (VISE) was started about 10 years ago by a person by the name of Mike Stock who worked for TAFE and was sent to Darwin to develop a program of literacy and numeracy for apprentices, and struck on the idea of who better to help these people than retired tradesmen. He put an advertisement in the Northern Territory News and was actually just flooded with people who were interested in assisting and helping out.

This was about the time of lots and lots of redundancy packages floating around and so on. The Isolated Children's Parents Association in the Northern Territory approached him and said, "Well, if you can do this with apprentices, what about doing it with apprentice teachers, if you will, in terms of mums who are looking after kids and so on? So he took that on and the upshot of that is the Volunteers for Isolated Student's Education. There are across Australia two other groups; there's a group in Western Australia and another separate group in South Australia who are called REVISE. The RE at the start simply means retired educators. So they are separate groups but kindred groups in the sense that we're all on about the same sort of thing.

It has grown and at the moment there are two types of activities that we carry out, three probably if we can split them up. The first group is what we call tutors and those tutors would react to needs expressed out in the bush somewhere, and they would put in a request to us for assistance and we would send out somebody to assist the parent in terms of teaching the child, to helping mum do it all. It's a fairly standard thing in the bush where mum sort of does the cooking, does the cleaning, does the bore run, generates the electricity, keeps the accounts, does all those sorts of things, and then somebody else says, "By the way you've got three children and you might as well teach them as well" - just as a little side issue.

So we usually go out and spend upwards of six weeks with the family. It's one of those things whereby travel out and travel home is costed at usually either a bus fare or cost of fuel to get there. The family accommodates the teachers while they're there and back they come again. That's one aspect.

A second aspect to it is what we term angels and they are people who would go out and help a family who has had a recent death or they've just had triplets born, and all those sorts of issues would be serviced. The third one, which is what I coordinate - and I coordinate this right across Australia - is a group called Internet to the Outback. And Internet to the Outback is a group which trains and assists families across Australia to access the Internet, to use electronic mail and to search properly, and usually how to clean up their computer as well; sort of viruses and games is usually the first job that's done when we come in.

So what I would like to do today, having given that brief overview of what we do, is that Bob would like to speak first about what he does. Then I'll finish up with the Internet bit. Okay?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Sure. Good, thanks, George. Yes, Bob.

**MR HOWEY:** On that other submission you got from Canberra there is a fair amount of detail. I won't go into that although this is an information sheet that is sent to potential tutors, if that's of use.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks, Bob. That will be good.

**MR HOWEY:** As the placement officer I receive much feedback concerning the nature of schooling in the outback. My opinions of it are reinforced by the placements that I've had with my wife with families in New South Wales and Queensland, although we also send people to the Northern Territory and Victoria where occasionally there is some need to find a tutor placement which is on a more ad hoc basis. I also had a working life in Victorian schools and in curriculum research, so I

am interested in quite a lot of the fundamental curriculum issues. When you look at the tyranny of distance and how it relates to equal opportunity regarding the availability and accessibility of schooling, particularly primary schooling, there's ample evidence of inequities and severely restricted opportunities for some students.

If you look at the arrangements to provide schooling to isolated students, the main players are the student himself, or herself, the parent who is in effect the actual teacher, being the one who conducts the majority of the schooling dialogue, hence being the actual teacher. There's a District Education Teacher who has contact with the student as well but in fact their role is more like that of being a curriculum adviser. Then there's the schooling system which supports and directs the process. This is fundamentally the same in all states. When a parent cannot find the time to have adequate schooling background and when the Distance Education Teachers have limited access or availability to the student, I regard that as a deprivation of opportunity.

In focusing on the relationship between the participants there are areas where a school system has inequities in delivery to students due to problems of distance and provision, and in these cases students have severely restricted opportunities. In this area of disadvantage I believe that solutions are not to be found in trying to duplicate the standards, the methods, the curriculum content, the curriculum material and so on that prevail in a centralised system. I believe it's more appropriate to be flexible in order to provide a climate supportive of educational growth in the local context. Curriculum activities should become definitely more local because there's a great difficulty in developing an educational dialogue between participants in the schooling process.

The central schooling system is very important as an evaluative body, as a provider of resources, with appropriate flexibility, and to provide suitably qualified personnel sympathetic to the needs and goals of that location and to market schooling opportunities. An example of these relationships at work can be given by describing our experience at Kajabbi in Queensland, and it's possibly that similar occurrences and experiences could occur in any state in Australia.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Could you spell that for us?

**MR HOWEY:** K-a-j-a-double-b-i.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you.

**MR HOWEY:** At Kajabbi four families have got together to ask VISE for support. The students consisted of four families: one a mother of four

with another one on the way and only the eldest being at school; a family of three including two adopted problem children; the two children of the hotel proprietors and a child whose parental contact was limited to two hours a day since both parents worked 12-hour shifts at a nearby mine. Most of the boys were repeating a year of the set curriculum and got by by working out strategies to gain access to the answers they needed for their work books.

A house in the township was hired to act as a school and my wife and I were accommodated in the VISE van which was an A-frame you couldn't stand up in, and that was housed at the back of the hotel not very far from the men's toilet. The parents, the actual teachers, obviously had little time available for the schooling process and also had limited schooling knowledge. Some had left school at Year 4. They were the actual teachers who were supposed to be in contact with the students. The other participants were the District Education teachers, Curriculum Advisers and Field Officers who were very supportive. When they arrived for a visit, they took the children for sporting games, provided us with art materials and advised us to ignore approximately one-third of the set curriculum. But they had little access in getting the parents, the actual teachers, to a level which would facilitate the general schooling system's goals.

#### **[Local education goals]**

The school system had obviously failed in this area. It had a rigid curriculum with rigid expectations. In fact it was trying to impose or duplicate its centralised values on an isolated outpost, and it was failing. What these children needed, and what the parents needed, was an input at the parent or the actual teacher level. What they needed was a real teacher of their own to identify, to clarify their local educational goals and adapt the schooling system to meet them. In fact the purpose behind our invitation to Kajabbi, other than a cry for help, was an attempt to establish a school at Kajabbi. This project failed because of bureaucratic rules, limited finance and so on, I think, but the project persisted because the families clubbed together to hire a teacher or a tutor to fill that real teacher role.

I give that example to illustrate my belief that education and schooling opportunities exist within a local or cultural milieu, and it is that the local schooling goals need to be identified before we can define what the inequalities are that need to be tackled, and that where inequalities do exist, the school system must provide the support to assist in achieving what is possible locally, not on a broad canvas. That's fundamentally where our VISE volunteers move to fill that sort of need of trying to assist in that local parenting contact with the child.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks, Bob. George.

### **[Internet to the Outback]**

**MR MURDOCH:** My job is Internet to the Outback which is across Australia. It actually grew out of an observation that some schools of distance education across Australia were starting to deliver curriculum to their kids via the Internet, so they'd gone that step beyond the printed word and the radio and were actually starting to consider that. The thought then was that maybe what we really needed to do was to in fact support the family as much as the child in this because it's all very well to be sitting there with the child receiving their messages and mail and doing all sorts of wonderful things with the computers, but if mum and dad didn't know what was going on as well, it was a bit of a dead loss.

Surprisingly most - that's probably the wrong word to use, but most properties that we come across have a computer of some description there. Most of them are for games and expensive accounting systems that somebody has flown through the district and sold to everybody without any follow-up whatsoever, and so that's where we step in. What we did was, we brought four or five principals from schools of Distance Education to the University of Ballarat who co-hosted this thing with us, and asked them what it is they thought they would like us to do with their parents. As a result of that, we were actually funded through a submission to Networking the Nation, which is the sale of Telstra stuff. The University of Ballarat provided support as did the Hyundai Country Music Muster out of Gympie; they run a thing called the Outback Kids Appeal and provided upwards of something like \$50,000 to go towards this support.

From there we then advertised for and got basically retired people, once again, who had computing skills, and asked them if they were interested in doing this sort of stuff. We have since then trained upwards of 150 people. Each of those people has passed a federal police check. So because I'm the person who sends these people into somebody else's house, I don't like doing it unless there's something that says, "This is a reasonably good sort of a person to do that" and of those 150 people at the moment we have assisted about a thousand families onto the Net in 18 months basically to two years. So in a nutshell that is the statistics of it all.

**[4.57 pm]**

What we do in terms of schooling is, for example, I have just organised at the moment a group to go to Charters Towers, where because computers are fairly big in the Schools of the Air - the Schools of the Air actually provide the family with a computer and their organisational method is that they bring, we'll say, the Years 7s and 8s and their families into the school for a week and there might be 50 of those. I am sending five of our people up there.

They spend a week in the school with the families and get to know the families and so on and, at the end of that week, the families go home and take one person with them and then they just rotate through, so three days with you, three days with you, round about, and back again after - and then five weeks later we jump them on a plane and send them home with square eyes and total exhaustion usually, but it is a great way to get sort of 60 or 70 families on. It's the sort of support that schools just can't provide and, indeed, whilst they can provide a little bit for the children they can't provide it for the families but we are quite able to do that.

That happens in Schools of the Air a lot. We've trained a Good Samaritan nun who gets out and does it in some fairly remote and inhospitable country. She gets across I think to the Palm Islands and right up in through there and she comes out at Charters Towers, as well, so she really gets in to do those sorts of support works. Right through we've done all of this. New South Wales, for argument's sake, we've supported a whole host of little one-teacher schools basically from Wagga up through to Bourke.

In Alice Springs and Katherine - we've worked all around those sort of things. In South Australia we have been up the Birdsville Track and done all of those sorts of places. In Victoria we have actually been up to our remote spot called Tubbutt, which is T-u-double-b-u-double-t. It is sort of go to Orbost and turn left and when you come to the river, stop. It's about as remote as we can get in Victoria. In Western Australia there is a person who should be on the road pretty soon, as long as the road is still there, to go to Mount Barnett to actually work with Wanami Remote Area Community School, so there are about five Indigenous families up there plus the families who attend plus the school, who are actually getting this sort of support, so that's really quite interesting and exciting.

This has all occurred with basically about \$200,000 worth of money. One of the interesting developments which are growing in terms of isolating and seeing what the needs are is an observation which was made out of Alice Springs, which is that with the growth of the land rights movement and the movement of Indigenous communities back to their own lands the requests and pressure is now on for them to be serviced in their homelands rather than in the urban areas, and so that is an area of a growing need as far as we see it and one which maybe we should be able to support.

In terms of the disabilities and so on there are some wonderful things happening, too. I really feel for you sitting there listening to some negatives all day long. Maningrida up in Arnhem Land, for argument's sake, has an absolutely glorious program, an IT program. There was a

young fellow up there who has probably the best laptop computer you would ever wish to see. It's an Apple Mac which is sitting on a luggage carrier held on by bicycle tubes and run by a generator in the back of his Toyota. It has got touch screens. It has got kids writing in their native language and in English and doing some absolutely superb stuff that really is something that could be picked up and used - the sort of stuff that everybody should see. It just brings a lump to your throat to see him in action.

In fact we have him on video and he uses computers the right way. He uses them as a tool. They're nothing absolutely brilliant or anything else, but on his video he is talking about how he uses his digital camera to take photos and then puts them onto his screen and the kids write about them like we always did in schools, and he said, "That's the computer over there." The kids actually had dropped it in the water, in a waterhole, and they just brought it back, opened it up, dried it out and put it back together again and it worked. I mean, most of us would be panicking at this stage but it is just the difference of that - so that is really good.

We are working in the Kimberley through. We have actually trained as a trainer a young lady by the name of Daphne Cooper, who is from Kununurra; works with the Wyndham Business Education Centre as a trainee. She is prepared to actually grab any flight that leaves Wyndham-Kununurra and heads into the Kimberley where only aeroplanes can lead and go in there and work with her communities around there, so she is just a delightful person to work with. She is a delightful person to see in action and a person who is a really great role model for anybody who wanted to look at her. She is just absolutely wonderful and it is something which really makes us all feel good.

We have also worked with groups technically for - I was trying to remember their name before I came in. It's technology for the disabled, I think. TAD, I think, is the - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, Technical Aid for the Disabled.

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes, that's right - one out of Brisbane and one out of Perth, so we're able to offer them assistance as well. So as funding for this whole program draws to a close at the end of this year my ambition and aim has been to leave a pool of about 20 trainers in each state of Australia who are there to be able to be used. That is there. Those people will then be - are there, but their trouble in terms of getting out and accommodation and costs is a big issue. However, I am also starting to work with other bodies to try and use our people in terms of, you know, "If you need somebody to assist you let us know and maybe we can do this for just the cost," because we work the same way as via students.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** A couple of other things, too. The Victorian Department of Education actually provides us with two teachers for six weeks of the year, so that is actually 12 weeks, who would go out and work for Bob in terms of doing some cheap teaching. They have just come back, I think, from Richmond way or somewhere in Northern Queensland. Another observation just to finish my statement, is Ian Bellenberg who is the principal at Longreach School of Distance Education left me with a wonderful thought.

He was just saying that things were so bad on the land he thought that properties these days were not very keen on - what they wanted to leave their children as a legacy was a good education as distinct from a property because they thought that was the direction that they would go and Ian was certainly doing things that were really quite exciting. Probably the best lesson I've ever seen going in my life was a young lady sitting in her radio studio with her computer beside her and they were on the Yuk site - which could only come out of the States, of course - but it was on some horrible little insect and, anyway, she had six kids out there and they were communicating with one another via the radio and they were all connected on the same Web site and it was really just wonderful. These kids were talking and chatting and swapping around and so on. It was a marriage of all of those things that distant education has to offer and it was really good stuff.

So that's basically what we do. As I said, 150 people, a thousand families. I think Bob sends out something like 350 people and has about 600 lots of six-week placements, so in terms of busyness and in the International Year of the Older Person, it all sort of ties together fairly well, I think. We're probably a group who are basically trying to, you know, obviate the needs, get rid of the needs. That is basically what we do.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** You're not bored, are you?

**MR MURDOCH:** No. I left Melbourne on 15 March and got home a fortnight ago, actually. I have been all around Australia doing the Internet stuff and did a five-week placement in the Northern Territory on my way through, so that was really good.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** It is one of those - in management jargon it is the classic win-win, you know.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Absolutely.



**MR MURDOCH:** We go out there and have a wonderful time. The families we work with - I always say the first time I ever went out - it was midway through second term and the young lady I was to tutor was in Year 9 and she was six weeks behind when I got there - an extremely intelligent young lady - and when I left six weeks later she was up to date and mum and dad thought I was the greatest thing since sliced bread and the daughter thought I was the greatest arguer that ever drew breath, but it was really just - the interesting observation was that it was in fact mum's problem, not the daughter. The daughter was extremely intelligent and clever but mum was so lonely that she just needed someone to talk to and of course she took over the child's study time and of course that's just - does everything wrong. All the wrong messages were coming out.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks. Tim?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Just one quick question. I am guessing the properties are extremely isolated. Are they connected by phone lines?

**[Information technology and infrastructure]**

**MR MURDOCH:** Some people would use that term, yes. They are, yes. One of the things our trainers will teach them is how to use the Net as cheaply and as effectively as possible, so they turn off the graphics on their browser and do all those sorts of things. We are working - I will rephrase that. We are trying to work with the National Farmers Federation and the farm-wide trialing of the satellite - competing satellite systems - and we work very closely actually with them in terms of their 15 points of presence that they put into remote areas, as well, with Total Peripherals group in Canberra and so on. We work closely with them. At 7200 BPS we can get on, yes, so that - - -

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** What K modem are they going with?

**MR MURDOCH:** Most of them are using 56ers, of course, but the biggest problem with that of course is that you have to slow them down to make them work and talk but otherwise it works, yes. I mean, we've had - you're probably pushed for time but, I mean, there are a million stories but the one that really sticks in my mind is the person who was way out - way, way out - who read in her local paper that she could get a second line to her property for half price, so she rang the given number and the person - it cascaded - you know how it just rolls through until somebody finally answers it.

This person was not far out of Broken Hill and it cascaded through to Grafton in northern New South Wales and the person said, "Yes, madam, we'll debit your account with \$78. Ring our service

number," so she rang the service number and that cascaded through to Launceston and the person said, "Yes, madam. We'll have somebody out at quarter past 2 on Tuesday afternoon to install your new line," and then the local person said, "Excuse me, madam. I have to put in 27 kilometres of trench to get your second line from the exchange to your house," so - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** They quoted her \$78.

**MR MURDOCH:** That's right, yes. I said to her, "Stick with your guns."

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Absolutely.

**MR MURDOCH:** She got a satellite telephone out of it, strange as it may seem.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** If they're going to be privatised they have to follow the Trade Practices Act.

**MR MURDOCH:** That's right, yes. They bought her off with a satellite phone in the end, I think.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** She did well.

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes, she did. I mean, it just happens all the time and people out there are really becoming aware of the fact that they need it. They can see the advantages of being able to - especially anybody who has got children who are living away from home.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** E-mail becomes a nightmare exercise.

**[Internet costs]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What is the range of prices you're finding for Internet access accounts?

**MR MURDOCH:** In the bush invariably they have to go Big Pond.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** Whilst that gives them a local call access, it then charges them \$7 to \$8 an hour and maybe up to \$11 and \$12 in places. We try and point out to them you can go to the likes of - well, to PGs, the group that has been very supportive of us now. They are anywhere in Australia \$1 an hour, so our recommendation always is, if you can work your life around it use the \$3 maximum - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Standard STD rate.

**MR MURDOCH:** - - - phone call of an evening and use your dollar an hour and that way it's a cheaper proposition than - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's \$4 an hour.

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes, well, it can be - if you could stay on for three hours it's quite cheap then, \$6 for the three hours.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I know nothing about how all this works, let me say to start off with.

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes, well, I must admit, I still get excited.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I can't understand why once you're connected to the Internet there should be any price differentials. I mean, once you're in why should it be different in Cunnamulla than what it is in Sydney?

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And yet I've got Big Pond in Sydney for \$10 a week unlimited access. Why should somebody in the bush be paying \$7 an hour?

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes, and of course - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I mean, is there something I don't understand?

**MR MURDOCH:** No. I mean, other than - - -

**MR HOWEY:** Market forces.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's right, but I think the bush is subsidising the highly competitive markets in Sydney and Melbourne.

**MR MURDOCH:** Exactly, yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And they link Telstra to compete against all the other smaller operators that are only marketing in the Sydney-Melbourne market.

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes.

**MR HOWEY:** And more is beautiful.

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes. I mean, it is coming up with telephone systems, in a sense, isn't it, with all the little sellers around the place at the moment?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** The other thing, too, is of course the \$3 all night is really good so long as your line doesn't drop out.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, then you have to add another \$3.

**MR MURDOCH:** That's right, or you can go on all night and never get your \$3 worth, but always be up to, say, 10 - you can do \$2.50 worth 10 times. The other bigger problem is to actually get in, because in many cases there are only six lines available off one little exchange. Between Wyndham and Derby in Western Australia, up the Gibb River road, there are 12 telephones. That's all there are. That's all there can be until they put in new cabling. So I mean whilst we've got people up there it's going to be exciting to see what can come of it.

[5.12 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** We've had some really good and exciting things happen, you know, with families really getting quite excited about it all. The preferences are electronic mail, the weather, prices, commodity prices. Spare parts for properties, spare parts for machinery and all that sort of stuff is a really great thing. My last big issue was that I was trying to convince the town of Katherine to go on in total so it would become an interlinked town, but they had had that much assistance offered to them as a result of the floods that they didn't want to know about us.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR MURDOCH:** But there's a growing interest in the provision of service provider-hosted Web sites too, so that they can actually put some product up that they've got to sell and get that out as well. So it's all getting out there. I'm also a consumer rep on one of the Telstra bodies and I can also see Telstra's problem, which is that very soon people are just going to be wandering around with a little hand-held thing operating through satellites, and the provision of so much underground stuff must scare the living daylights out of them. Of course, everybody out there wants it now and that's fair enough too. So

I mean, as Bob says, that's where the market prices put the pressure on.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Thank you, very much. It has been really good to hear some positive stuff for once.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes, it's one of the best stories I reckon we've heard. I mean I've heard advice all over the place of course, it's not the first time, but I always get quite excited each time I - - -

**MR MURDOCH:** Yes, actually I'm off next week trying to recruit some more teachers. So we have a wonderful life.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks, George. Thanks, Bob.

**MR MURDOCH:** Thanks, Chris.

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[5.17 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Would you like to introduce yourselves and make whatever comments you'd like to start.

**[Victorian Council of School Organisations]**

**MS WILSON:** Thank you. I'm Jeanette Wilson, the Executive Secretary of the Victorian Council of School Organisations which is an independent association of school councils of government schools in Victoria, and affiliated to us we have primary, secondary and specialist schools right across Victoria. We do not receive government funding and operate on the affiliation fees paid to us by schools. I grew up on a farm in North-Eastern Victoria, went to Chiltern Primary School and Rutherglen Secondary School and have a great love of the rural areas.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thanks, Jeanette.

**MR CAROLANE:** Rob Carolane. I am, I suppose, a farm manager, vineyard manager from north-east Victoria. I live at a place called Whitlands which is south of Wangaratta, between Wangaratta and Mansfield. VCSO is a state-wide organisation and I'm a member on their state management committee which meets twice a year in Melbourne. I'm also on the management committee of the Country Education Project which had a submission to you first thing this morning.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** That's right. They were many hours ago.

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes. I've been at their annual meeting since then and am here now. I've got two boys and primary school access for them is - the primary school is 23 kilometres away from where we live, so they've got a bus trip of about 20 minutes to get to primary school, and then to move on to secondary school - my eldest boy is in secondary school and he travels into Wangaratta for the high school, and he leaves home at about 5 past 7 in the morning and gets home about 5 o'clock. It's a good education at both places. We consider ourselves very fortunate.

I became involved with VCSO in 1993 when the issue of school closures was very rampant in Victoria, when the quality provision process - have you had that quality provision process described to you or do you have an understanding of what went on at that stage?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Not in detail so if you want to make some comments on it, that would be fine. I know what occurred but I haven't heard about the process itself.

**MR CAROLANE:** Okay.

**[Closure of schools]**

**MS WILSON:** Let's just preface that by saying that at the end of 1992 over 80 government schools in Victoria were just closed. The announcement was made in the last week of October that those schools would close. There was huge unrest as a result of those closures and in 1993 the process of quality provision was put in place. Back to you.

**MR CAROLANE:** Which was meant to be a community participation in facilitating school closures so that the government hadn't actually made the decisions but the school had made the decisions. Without going into the details of the process which was - well, I don't think anybody describes it now - even I think Don Hayward, who was the Minister at the time, would describe it in a moment of honesty as an incredibly brutal, harsh, divisive, unjust and crazy process which delivered warped outcomes of circumstances.

I could go into more details about that but the reason for mentioning it - and we hope that the past is the past - is it raised the issue of the importance of local schools and the importance to community of their schools, and we believe it has had a profound impact on the sense of security that rural communities have had about the provision of government services and their sense of value to society where they were portrayed as basically being an expense to society which is unjust in many cases.

I don't really want to go into economic justifications for why primary production is a valid and necessary part of our society. The vineyard I work in produces about - it's a small vineyard, it produces about \$170,000 worth of production at the farm gate. When that's sold as a retail product - and I'm only using wine as an example because it's essentially just grapes into bottles - it's retail value is about \$2.4 million. So the rural community has gained access to \$170,000.

**MS WILSON:** Except costs have got to come out of that.

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes, but most of those costs go into the rural community as well, except for the chemical expenses. Labour and what have you is into the school. But essentially the bigger businesses have got access out of our efforts to another \$2.2 million worth of resource. That's the importance of rural industry. That story can be explained for most rural activities quite apart from the issue of management of the landscape which happens pretty well for free.

### **[Community based education]**

We also believe that there's a fundamental reason why a sense of belonging to a local community is really important to people, and if government doesn't support those local communities, the ability for children to develop a sense of place and a sense of belonging to somewhere is severely compromised. I believe there are many examples of why development of a sense of place and a sense of identity and a sense of belonging is a very important factor in children developing resilience, and their ability to deal with life in general, and many kids fail to be able to deal with life in general, particularly in rural communities, and I know not only in rural communities.

I also believe that by secondary school that sense of place has been developed essentially and there's a much greater capacity to have secondary schooling in larger schools and further travelling and what have you, but for primary schools it's really an important thing. We believe there is a clear need for governments, both state and federal, to publicly proclaim their support for community based education, and that is something that would not cost governments anything but there is still a very deep sense of fear in communities after the harsh treatment they received at the hands of the Kennett Government. That issue of support for schools is part of the wider rural community's distrust in government, I believe. It was a manifestation of it and it is real.

As an example of how it actually is affecting my school community, we need - our school, the small primary school of 36 children - new playground equipment because the stuff we've got is no longer regarded as adequate. It's basically the sort of stuff I had when I was at primary school with monkey bars and things like that which are not considered kosher any more. For us to buy a new

playground costs us the same amount of money as a school of 200 kids - to buy playground equipment. You can't buy a smaller one because the kids are the same size. It just gets used less, so the relative expense for things like that is usually high.

Our community has access to other funds from a bequest to the community but the community is reluctant to spend the money on the school because what happens if the school closes? The money then becomes the department's money and leaves the school. So that's actually preventing people at the moment from making decisions in support of their own community. They're hedging their bets, which is a very dangerous thing.

Education is a right, regardless of the economic input of the community. However, those who argue against the subsidy of small schools for purely economic reasons - and this was the argument at the time of quality provision - miss the point of the importance of the economic equation, of the value of rural production and the simple value of rural communities to society. We believe that that support for schools and communities is easy for government to achieve, very easy for government to achieve. It's just by making a statement and living by that statement, perhaps.

#### **[School fees and costs]**

The other issue we wanted to cover was the issue of fees and charges in schools. You've probably heard today, and a lot of late on this issue about the cost of travel, the time and financial cost of travel. Fees and charges in government schools are increasing all the time to provide kids with what they require, what the community believes schools require, and because rural incomes are generally much lower than city incomes and communities have the added costs of travel in both time and money, those fees and charges are of much greater impact in rural schools. We know of cases of children who are making subject choices because of the costs that will end up being levied to them, and kids are being denied access to classes that might be highly appropriate for them because of costs. Jeanette, did you want to talk some more on that?

**MS WILSON:** Yes. The situation is so bad that for example a Year 9 coordinator of a reasonably large Gippsland school told the students that they should go home and discuss their subject selection with their parents to ensure that the family would be able to pay the charges arising from those subjects. Now, VCSO's position is that government school education - not instruction, education - should be fully funded by the government, and that it is part of the privatisation of government schooling to be passing quite considerable costs. At another secondary school the fees associated with the post-compulsory year level were around \$1,000. That's outrageous, \$1,000 for a student.



**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It's more than many Catholic schools charge.

**MS WILSON:** We have an example of a family living on a government pension because of a variety of reasons where the mother encouraged one child to do outdoor education because the child had to do a sport subject and the other subject wasn't suited. The mother knew that the child would use every tactic to avoid it but she would be able to do outdoor education, and that's a subject where the costs are often quite high. When her son the following year wanted to do that subject she had to say no, he couldn't, because they couldn't meet the costs.

[5.32 pm]

The daughter is in Year 10 and is now starting to want to go to university because she is - yes, she believes that that's where her future lies. The mother is faced with real difficulties in providing access for that child to Victorian Certificate of Education, and of course frightened about how they would support the child if the child did get into university. So there are huge additional costs of university education for rural students and there are barriers to access being put up by the fees and charges issue.

Now, the Victorian government changed its guidelines for voluntary contributions and school charges at the end of last year. This is a detailed analysis of those guidelines which includes our recommendations for changing them again, on the grounds that we know students are being excluded from education because of the situation which exists in schools and the situation that is allowed under these guidelines.

It's not an issue that's going to go away just by changing guidelines. It partly relates to the way schools are funded, the global budgeting situation, and the fact that there is no longer clear allocation of funds for curriculum materials and services. And so, associated with the recommendation for change to the guidelines, is a recommendation for additional targeted funding for curriculum materials and services.

**MR CAROLANE:** The importance of the issue for rural and remote education is of course because the parents or the families already have far greater costs associated with provision of schooling anyway, and their ability to access it because of those distance issues, and generally lower incomes. Another impact that is important is, in a general sense, local participation in schooling is encouraged - school councils, parents clubs, parental input into schools is sought after in the government system and in - well, not so much in the Catholic system and - anyway, I will confine myself to the government system - to give

local content to curriculum and to deal with local fundraising and cultural issues and guidelines for student welfare and all of those issues that school councils have a valued input into.

It's much harder in rural areas to be part of that system. I'm on my son's primary school school council and I'm also on the high school school council. Primary school councils are much easier to deal with because they tend to deal with most things at council meetings. High school school councils have a much stronger subcommittee structure, much more regulated subcommittee structure, and you've got to fit in with their system more often. But it's an hour there and an hour back for a subcommittee meeting, which I can - I do afford to do once a month, but I can't afford to do more than that, so there's only one subcommittee I can be part of.

And the input of people - in my case - is not nearly as harsh as what a lot of people deal with. Those people are denied access to participating in their kids' education because of distance. The solution to that I don't know but, you know, the need for people to be volunteers in those roles is very important. They have to be volunteer roles. You have to have people who want to do it. But I don't know how the system could be modified to make that easier. But they are the realities of rural and remote education.

#### **[Professional development]**

The funding available to the professional development and for professional development of school councillors is not enough. For school council professional development in Goulburn in north-east Victoria, the - for school councils there's something offered at Shepparton and at Wodonga. Shepparton is about an hour and three-quarter drive for me and Wodonga is about an hour and three-quarter drive for me, and that's not as far away as you can get from either Shepparton or Wodonga. And who can go for a night-time meeting of dubious value? So the provision of professional development for community needs to be delivered at a much closer to local level.

**MS WILSON:** Yes, and supporting participation in decision-making takes a lot of time from the school administration and often from classroom teachers, and prior to 1992 there were projects across Victoria in which funding was put to support participation. There was also or there were also more staff - eight and a half teaching positions were cut, all told, from Victorian schools, and quite a high proportion of them from rural schools, because of changes to the formulae for staffing schools. We believe that there was a drop in participation as a result in the reduction in staffing and resourcing of schools. Teachers are less willing to discuss curriculum issues with the parent community when they are harder-pressed for time.

We believe that that parental participation in curriculum decision-making - whilst it's important for all communities it's important for rural communities, particularly where you have teachers coming in who don't know the communities - and can I call it the culture. There's a farming culture. There's a culture in regional towns. We know that students build their learning on their prior knowledge and understanding, and for teachers to facilitate the building of that learning they have to know what the prior knowledge and understanding of the students is. So there's a need for professional development for teachers in rural and remote communities around those cultural issues. I'm sure you've been told that many times.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I've heard a lot about that. That's it?

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes. You've just been talked to about technology and you've probably been told a lot about technology - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CAROLANE:** - - - but the current government system in Victoria of assisting schools to fund technology - have you heard about the three-to-one grant system?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CAROLANE:** Schools are going a long way for that carrot of the one-quarter of the costs, and other things are being set aside because of that. The problem being, of course, that if it were just accessing the one-quarter for something that was going to last a long time it might be of value, but you're only accessing something that's going to be of value for a very few years before you've got to roll on to the next system. So it's just a treadmill you're stepping onto of keeping up with that technological system. But I'm sure you've dealt with that many times before.

**[Cost of internet access]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** The other big issue, just on the IT - have you got a computer at home, Rob?

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** And Internet access? What are the costs of your access?

**MR CAROLANE:** \$240 a year for 20 hours a month, local call - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** \$20 a month for 20 hours a month? A dollar an hour?

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes, 20 hours a month, and it's the local call access, through a group called the North-East Telecentre, which is a community based Internet provider – non-profit Internet provider - based in Wangaratta.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What's the cost if you go over the 20 hours? Or do you police it carefully and make sure you don't?

**MR CAROLANE:** No, I don't police it carefully. It hasn't been a problem. I'm not sure. I couldn't tell you off the top of my head, but the key thing with that group is that they have set up - the provider is in Wangaratta but they have set out - because they're a community based organisation - to provide reasonable cost Internet access for the community so they have input points to their system in Bright, Glenrowan, and I think a couple of others - in Benalla, I think it might be - so that you can actually log in to a local phone call from a far greater area. So they've been quite creative in doing that.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MR CAROLANE:** And we get line access at about 24 K - is what we get. So for me I don't have big trouble with Internet access.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes.

**MS WILSON:** But when they started the cases system some of the small rural schools had real trouble establishing linkages because the lines were inadequate to - - -

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes. Just before the privatisation of Telstra they actually replaced the line up from our exchange. Before then, you couldn't run a fax machine on the line. So we've had a recent upgrade. Thank you to the government-owned Telstra at the time. The other issue which needs reinforcing is the difficulty of smaller communities to provide breadth of curriculum, particularly in the upper years of secondary schooling, because of size. The system is hugely - it's a great advantage to the system if you're big to provide flexibility of curriculum.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What's the answer to that?

**MS WILSON:** Increase the isolation - the rurality and isolation component.

**MR CAROLANE:** Yes.

**MS WILSON:** Increase the Country Area Program.

**MR CAROLANE:** And also teachers are bloody good workers who are doing a fantastic job for little reward, and would do even more and would do it better if they had some recognition from government of the value of the work they're doing in society. So, again, I think it was a few years ago now that I heard someone ask - berating the current school system and they said, "Okay" - someone asked a question and said, "Okay, if you were boss of the education system tomorrow morning what would you do?" and he said, "Address teacher morale straightaway and say 'You are valued. You are good. Thank you'," because teachers have come up with very creative solutions. Ian Rogerson, who spoke to you this morning from Hopetoun Secondary College, has got - you know, they do deliver a very broad curriculum there with teachers just working harder.

**MS WILSON:** An example of how teachers are not recognised goes for the head teacher of a small rural school who has virtually a full-time teaching allocation and is not principal class because the school is too small, so she's paid the same salary as a teacher of the same experience in any school plus \$500. Many of them work till late at night and work at least one day of the weekend to cope with the additional administrative load that's placed on them, but that work is not recognised or remunerated. So that needs to be revisited.

Can we just reinforce - Rob talked quite a lot about costs of schooling for rural schools, and there's costs of access because of - just access to the school because of distance, but we'd like to reinforce that the cost of everything, of every excursion out of the school, of bringing people into the school, and particularly of going on camps, are usually increased for schools and students from rural areas. One example is Dartmoor over near the South Australian border where, to take their children to swimming lessons in a swimming pool, they have to travel 60 kilometres each way for those swimming lessons.

Students from Oxley go to Benalla for their swimming lessons. And so these are very high costs that are borne by schools, and that you can take money from the COUNTRY AREA PROGRAM allocation to subsidise those costs, but there really isn't enough funding to offset those additional costs. Of course the access to the range of cultural activities that's available to metropolitan students is far greater than to the rural students.

**[5.47 pm]**

**MR CAROLANE:** The management model being applied to schools at the moment is hugely encouraging individualism in schools, and for schools to be standing on their own two feet and doing it by themselves. An encouragement for people to do a lot more sharing of resources, and pooling of resources, would go a long way to addressing a lot of rural issues. Sharing individuals resources around, schools around and pooling some small financial buckets into a bigger financial bucket for a much greater outcome would also be a very helpful thing for the government to do I believe.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Tim? Questions?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** No.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you both very much.

**MS WILSON:** Sorry, can we just say something on students with disabilities?

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** As long as you're fast, or if you'd like to put it in writing you can put it in writing.

**[Transport and disability]**

**MS WILSON:** It's just that the current guidelines allow students for two hours bus travel each way, which can mean four hours bus travel a day for students with severe disabilities. Our special members from special schools in rural areas are particularly concerned about these hours of travel.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I thought the guidelines were an hour and a half each way. It's two hours each way, is it?

**MS WILSON:** Yes, in Victoria.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Sorry. Okay, I might be getting confused with another state.

**MR CAROLANE:** Thank you.

**MS WILSON:** Thank you.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you both very much.

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**[5.53 pm]**

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Would you like to introduce yourselves first and then go straight into any comments that you wish to make.

**MR PREST:** I'm Mark Prest. I'm the deputy principal of Mount Lilydale College.

**MR AMORE:** I'm John Amore. I'm a member of the Yarra Valley Bus Action Group of concerned parents. We have two daughters at the school and to my right, we have Maggie.

**MS WESTLAKE:** Maggie Westlake, and I'm just a mum.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Not just - a very important mum.

**MS WESTLAKE:** Just a mum.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Off you go.

**[Transport for non-government school students]**

**MR PREST:** First of all, I thought I should say a little bit about Mount Lilydale College. Obviously situated in Lilydale, it was founded in 1896 by the Sisters of Mercy and since 1975 it's been a coeducational college, now with approximately 1,500 students. We look after families in the outer Eastern suburbs, but we're in a unique position because probably more than half of our students come from the Yarra Valley, so we have a mixture of outer suburban kids and rural kids. Since 1944 the school has been served by the free contract government bus system, so kids from the Yarra Valley - that's how they've got to school and that's gone on, basically, unhindered in the time since.

The government has a system which you're probably familiar with, the free contract buses set up through executive memorandum 392 in 1990, to look after situations where kids can't get to school via other forms of public transport and that policy was, I guess, reinforced by the Brideson report in 1993. Nearly 500 of our kids use that system. Last year, during the middle of the year, I became responsible for the buses at our school and we were told that there was going to be an enforcement of the existing guidelines and that there might be some changes to that ready accessibility to the buses; little more was said.

I received a letter dated 9 December last year, informing me that all new Year 7 enrolments at the school - none of those students could be guaranteed places on the school buses, which of course, given the timing, absolute pandemonium ensued. So I had to write to families and very quickly look for solutions. In February and March of this year the situation remained unresolved. Families were taking their

new Year 7s to the bus stop and we basically had very good cooperation from the bus companies, who were willing to help us and make sure kids weren't left on the side of the road. However, there were incidents where kids were left - kids from Warburton, kids from Emerald - and it was fairly chaotic, especially when you consider that most of our incoming Year 7s come from small primary schools of less than 200, and transition is already enormously difficult for kids coming into a big school.

We had a public meeting in February and we formed the Yarra Valley School Bus Action Group and began a very steep learning curve to lobby all sorts of people to find out what we could do about this. Obviously some things, we hope, have shifted since the election, but I guess the most recent thing that's happened is I went to the local bus meeting on Wednesday, where with other schools in the area, we talk about how we're going to get the policy working. After we'd had promises for most of the year that next year looked okay and that our kids would get on - non-government school kids get places on these buses if there are some left and that had never been enforced before, but on Wednesday I found out that next year, once again, none of our new kids or any of the other non-government school kids in the region can be offered places on the buses.

After there had been quite some optimism for a few months. Obviously that was a terrible situation, so we thought it might be good to approach you about this. Our situation is made very difficult because there is very little public transport in the Yarra Valley and hence our need to rely on the contract bus services. Most public transport ends, if you go out one way on the highway, at Yarra Glen or Healesville and our families, lots of them, live a long way past that, and on the Warburton Highway, the met ticket, the Zone 3 on the MET ticket ends at Woori Yallock and, of course, it's a long way out further to Warburton. There are met services that come into Lilydale, to the station, which is a considerable distance from the school, but after contacting the companies those services are at full capacity now, so if our kids are taken off the contract buses there are no spots on the very few services that run for public transport.

The other thing about those public transport services is that they actually don't work very well with school times, so they actually don't get kids to school when school starts. Lilydale station also is probably not the most savoury area for kids to be getting out of buses and I think parents would have a big concern about that. We've explored all sorts of options. We've tried to approach the government about shifting routes or putting on more services for the met as an alternative. We haven't got very far with that and we've had real difficulty explaining to people when I've been dealing with the Department of Infrastructure.



Their line is that they're enforcing these guidelines all over Melbourne and, as I've tried to explain to them, I worked in Burwood at a suburban school for 8 years and for kids at a suburban school, obviously they don't need these services. There are trams and trains and buses and all of those sorts of things. Obviously, kids at our school are considerably disadvantaged in comparison with kids at suburban schools. The issue is really about non-availability of public transport and that will be exacerbated if our kids can't get access to the free contract services. Maggie might just explain a bit from a parent's perspective.

**MS WESTLAKE:** The access for non-government students has been limited or removed, which means that the students that are coming to Mount Lilydale or even to government schools in the Lilydale area that pass by a local government school, will not be given access to the school bus down to Lilydale any more. They will be made to either transfer to one of the closer government schools - that basically means that their freedom of choice is taken from them. A lot of these kids suit the schools that the parents send them to. A lot of thought goes into educating your children, and I've got three daughters that go to three different schools because I've been given that freedom of choice.

The zoning of the government schools is going to limit the school buses considerably. In that regard, there will be large areas that aren't served by school bus services any more because of that policy. Large areas up to what - 20 kilometres, I would say, in the Yarra Valley alone that won't have any service at all: no met service; no school bus service. That is unbelievable for 11 and 12-year-old children. You just can't imagine how hard it is. The kids already have, I think, an excessive time on the school bus service anyway. My kids leave home at half past 7 in the morning to get to school at 9 o'clock and at 9 o'clock school has already started and, I mean, this is a government school and two different independent schools.

Nobody wants their kids travelling longer than an hour and a half each way. It's 3 hours a day for these little kids and that's just an enormous ask for them with their homework and all their other activities. Most people don't realise that the majority of people that send their kids to independent schools send them there because they think they're getting the best education, not because they're wealthy. I work at two jobs so I can keep my kids at the schools that I'm happy with. With me working at two jobs, it means that I'm not at home to run them hither and thither to school, so the school bus is of vital importance for me. The options that we have are rather limited.

Basically, we'd have to charter buses, which is a very costly business. We've been told that it's about a thousand dollars per child

per year and many of the parents and families in our area in particular - I suppose all over the state. It's not just the Yarra Valley, it's completely all over the state. A lot of these people are just not going to be able to afford the school bus service for their kids. The New South Wales policy, which is what we'd really like to get for Victoria, allows the school bus service - I think for 2.9 kilometres - for every child, beginning at preschool, I think, isn't it? And it goes right through to late secondary. I think it goes to Year 12, doesn't it?

**MR PREST:** It does, yes.

**MS WESTLAKE:** That's basically what we'd really like to get.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Even that's contested by New South Wales parents, on the basis that the minimum kilometreage is too long.

**MS WESTLAKE:** That's greedy. But it's very very difficult. As I said, if you're working at two jobs to get enough money to send your kids to the schools of your choice, I would imagine that the government would be rather pleased to think that they're getting that extra tax. Your turn; I've given up.

**MR AMORE:** Thank you. It is my belief that in our democratic system, it's our fundamental right to choose educationally where the needs of our kids are going to be served best, so I think it's a question of basically that. It's our democratic right, no ifs, no buts. We live in a democratic society, let's exercise our options to pursue that to the furthest degree. The areas that we're talking of are perhaps a 45-degree arc from Lilydale, which is about 38 kilometres to my right, of Melbourne. Areas like, say, Toolangi, that's about 30 kilometres from Lilydale, leading up the Melba Highway; Warburton, up the Warburton Highway, is about 25 kilometres, give or take a kilometre or two; Healesville is about 25 kilometres due east from Lilydale.

That's basically the arc of the area that we are actually talking of and when it comes to the crunch, there are no educational choices within the Catholic system that we can pick and choose from. That's it; that's where the buck stops. Mount Lilydale College is the only school that services that area. The nearest schools to Lilydale - which are probably out of the question, to my understanding - you've got Aquinas College, which is into the suburbs, where there's multiple choices of other coeducational colleges, perhaps in those areas. There is Mater Christi at Belgrave, that is an all-girls' school; also St Josephs at Ferntree Gully, that's an all-boys' school, so Lilydale, in that area, is it.

The others are all serviced by trains and buses and we don't have that choice. Our choice is basically that or nothing and I don't think that is fair in our democratic system. The inconvenience on

families has already been stated quite clearly to us, that in the event of no transport being made available to Mount Lilydale, other schools in the private system - you've got St Marys, which is a primary school, and St Pats in Lilydale - are already saying that if there's no transport, there are no enrolments. What's the scenario after that? No school. That's why we're here, because we care enough to fight tooth and nail to prove a point. All we have to offer is ourselves and we're going to challenge the system as far as it will allow us to go.

**MR PREST:** We have no students bypassing another Catholic school to get to ours - well, we might have one or two in the whole school, so as John said, Mount Lilydale is the local Catholic provider and the bus network which works for the local government schools is not working for the local Catholic school. Families can't get their kids to the nearest Catholic school under the current regulations and we've talked many times - the whole argument about state aid to non-government schools has been going for a very long time and you would hope that it could be or should be resolved by now.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I think part of the issue here is not so much the right to choose, but to what extent should the state finance that right. I think, Mark, you're implicitly saying that not bypassing a Catholic school would be one part of it. You know, if you're bypassing a Catholic school, that gives a reason why not to fund it.

**MR PREST:** Yes. that's right.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** We saw the Lutheran schools national body this morning. Would you be saying that the government should fund somebody who wanted to go from Lilydale to the nearest Lutheran school, which might be in Western Victoria?

**MS WESTLAKE:** I don't see it as funding. I disagree with you there. I don't see it as the government funding anything in particular, other than the buses. I mean, these kids are being denied the right to go to school.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** What I'm trying to ask, though, is what are your views on how far that right goes.

**MS WESTLAKE:** Surely, they have the right to get to school and I don't think - Mount Lilydale College is in Lilydale and there are 2 other high schools in Lilydale and I don't see that it's fair to say to one group of children, "You are not allowed on the bus," and yet two other groups of children, "Go for your life, hop on." That's where the discrimination is.

**MR AMORE:** That's a demarcation of where you're saying to one yes and to one no. We have two daughters going to Mount Lilydale at this stage. Our younger daughter was told, "Just because your older sister has the right to be on the bus doesn't mean to say that you can." How does that affect you on day one of school? Big time. That's basically a lead bullet and you don't need that. The matter is fundamentally wrong.

**MR PREST:** I see your point. You're asking an extreme case. If the nearest Lutheran school is in Geelong and you live in Healesville, is the government expected to pay for that? I think that's an extreme case. In our situation, it's not anywhere near that extreme. I just think there must be some way to cover the vast bulk of ordinary circumstances and I think that there would be options, either by reworking the met system or injecting a relatively small amount of funds into the existing bus system to make it work.

[6.08 pm]

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It seems to me that the answer to my hypothetical question is to say do you impose the same test on both, and that is, the state schools are funded for up to 2 hours' travel and so fund everybody for up to two hours' travel. That would get rid of those extreme cases of - - -

**MR PREST:** Yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** - - - the enormous travel claims the states have now.

**MR PREST:** We are aware that the new government prior to the election had promised a full-scale review of the regulations and that's what we were seeking from the previous government, but in the interim we are still stuck with a pretty awful scenario at the beginning of next year.

**MR AMORE:** Have you made reference to the developments of the last couple of days?

**MR PREST:** Yes, I can. In the last couple of days we're told that the situation is looking absolutely dire for next year.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Yes. The departmental people this morning told us that the government has commenced a review of bus policy. They had no indication of what time that will take to undertake, but they mentioned it this morning, and I can assure you you're not the first or the only mob to raise the issue of funding.

**MR PREST:** No, we're really aware - we have found out all sorts of people are now trying together, so - yes.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** So we know about it.

**MR AMORE:** We're aware of the fact that we are the wedge in the door, because we may only be three or two parents and the representative of the college, Mark, has been with us, but there are others in the background that for whatever reason couldn't be here to represent their own problems, which are not isolated. They're identical to ours but just different parts of Victoria, so there is more out there than what meets the eye at this present moment.

**MR PREST:** It's just an interesting situation for Mount Lilydale. It's not a suburban school and it's not in one sense a country school either.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** You're on the border.

**MR PREST:** Well, the families who live on the city side of our school, because we are actually deemed a country school they receive the conveyancing allowance.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Do they?

**MR PREST:** Yes, so the ironic situation is that families who live in Mooroolbark/Chirnside Park can access the met systems and don't pay a cent and in lots of ways in a socioeconomic sense they're - and this is a generalisation, but they're probably mostly the wealthier families, where the families who really need the help are the very ones who can't get it. So the ones who live on the Yarra Valley side of the school can't get the transport, can't get the assistance, so it's sort of this really inequitable situation.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** How many families would get the conveyancing allowance?

**MR PREST:** If they live more than 4.8 Kilometres from the school, they're all eligible, so it's this really quite ridiculous situation in some ways. And Billanook down the road, they're not deemed a country school, so they're a few kilometres down the road but we just happen to be on the right side of the demarcation point.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Have you suggested to the government that they cash out the conveyancing allowance from one side of the school and put the bus on the other side of the school?

**MR PREST:** I'm not quite sure how the Mooroolbark families would feel about that. They enjoy their conveyancing allowance I think.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** I'm sure they do.

**MR PREST:** Yes, they do.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** It would be the kind of solution though the school could come up with that may well - I mean, there are some schools, for example, that we heard about - another Catholic school this morning, Lakes Entrance Primary School - where the conveyancing allowance - I don't know whether it's by arrangement with the government or by the parents - is all paid into the school and the school charters a bus, except it only meets half the cost at the moment, which is one of the issues for them. They raised it quite strongly as an issue this morning. But obviously there are ways in which the conveyancing allowance can be put into school funds one way or another.

**MR PREST:** It's certainly an option. Another option is to review where the MET Zone 3 finishes in light of urban expansion, so there's a lot of people who live beyond Woori Yallock now, so that's another option but - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** All right. Tim, have you some questions?

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Not particularly, no. Yes, I think you've just covered it for me, but I just commend you on your action. It's really good to see people actually get up and - - -

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Make a noise.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Yes - and make a noise without just complaining.

**MR PREST:** Well, we've had a very interesting year. We've all got to know each other. It's brought a whole lot of parents and teachers together and we've met all sorts of people, I have to say, in government and otherwise.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** A wonderful community development experience for you.

**MR AMORE:** Absolutely.

**MR PREST:** We've spent a lot of hours in meetings.

**MR AMORE:** We've had two public meetings this year, and the two halls that we used were about three-quarters capacity, so there are obviously a lot of irate parents out there that would be interested to know what the outcome of all this is going to be. We sent out a circular of information to the schools that are affected and - "Oh yeah, keep me informed" - but unfortunately you can't have 300 people making a representation to yourselves here today.

**MR PREST:** The interesting thing for me as a teacher is that you worry about all sorts of educational issues, and learning and bullying and - you name it, you worry about it - but you don't sort of think about - that education can't even take place unless the kids can get to school. I never thought that I would spend all this time on a bus issue, but you just realise how fundamental it is. Anyway, thank you for hearing us today.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you, Maggie, John, Mark, and thanks particularly for coming in but also for waiting around.

**MR PREST:** Well, that wasn't your fault.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Well, we were running late in any event, but I'm afraid your lateness was then exacerbated by your 'lostness'!

**MR AMORE:** Yes, you bet.

**COMMISSIONER SIDOTI:** Thank you very much.

**MR PREST:** Thank you.

**MR AMORE:** Thanks very much for your time.

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**DENISE DONNAN:** My name is Denise Donnan and I'm from the Victorian Federation of State School Parents' Clubs Inc. I'm glad to have the opportunity to be here to represent the organisation.

The Victorian Federation of State School Parents' Clubs Incorporated is a voluntary, democratic organisation which represents parents in Victorian Government primary and secondary schools. It has been working for almost 75 years for a fully funded public education system, which is accessible to all children. The vision of the organisation is that:

- Education be free, compulsory, secular and available to all.
- Education be directed to the development of the whole child and to strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

- All children have equal opportunity within the state education system, according to their capabilities.
- The mental and physical health of the child be safeguarded.

The Federation has networks across the state called District Councils. Most of these networks are located in rural centres with a number being classed as remote. The information provided has been gathered from parents from these areas as well as individual Parents' Clubs from other areas and, although largely anecdotal, is representative of issues faced by parents and students in these remote areas of Victoria.

The availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling. The following issues are raised considering a number of aspects including student welfare issues, cost and opportunities.

### **[Transport]**

Transport. Student welfare: bussing is a major issue for students attending rural and remote schools. Bussing routes have recently been amalgamated in the Southern Mallee area due to cost cutting. This means students as young as five are spending over an hour on buses both morning and night in all seasons with no air conditioning or heating facilities. With daylight saving hours extending next year, some children may be leaving home in the dark.

School closures in East Gippsland have also meant up to an hour and a half travel each way for some students. The safety issues around road conditions and lack of communication equipment have meant that some school parents' clubs have been forced to raise money specifically to provide two way radios in the buses to ensure emergency communication. Since local government amalgamations road conditions have deteriorated, creating increased safety hazards with the added concern of no seat belts on the buses for students.

Cost: Cost of excursions are often excessive as busses must be paid for to travel from regional centres to the remote area before they even begin the excursion. Parents are being expected to meet these costs having the effect of severely limiting students' opportunities. Opportunities: lost opportunities for extra curricular as well as home based activities are also evident. Students spending long periods travelling have reduced leisure and study time and so are disadvantaged socially and academically.

### **[Specialist support services]**

Specialist services. Student welfare: with specialist services either totally unavailable in remote schools or with significant delays between visits, parents who need to access such services regularly or urgently



must do so privately. This can mean delays in accessing these services purely because of the limited service provision. With students requiring psychologist or counselling support, this delay could have dire consequences. Cost: parents are required to travel for several hours weekly, or their students may miss out on vital support. This support includes speech therapists, psychologists and counsellors whose costs also must be absorbed by the parents. Parents must therefore not only incur the costs of travel, but may mean limited employment opportunities due to the time commitment required. Opportunities: specialist teachers are difficult to attract to remote areas; eg LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH, music, etc. Lack of available housing and no incentives to teach in these areas also impact on this issue. Students therefore are reliant on technology to teach subjects such as Languages Other Than English and music. Increased introduction of teaching contracts has also resulted in fewer teachers moving to remote areas because of the insecurity of the positions.

### **[Curriculum]**

Curriculum. Student welfare: The integration criteria is also inappropriate in rural and remote areas where specialist teachers are not available. A number of teachers have highlighted the need for an amalgamated 'score'. This would allow the provision of integration aides for a number of children with learning difficulties who do not necessarily meet the criteria but require a great deal of extra support. Teachers teaching in rural and remote schools who are also often Principals undertaking an administration role are significantly under-resourced in this area of integration support. Costs: Students who wish to undertake distance education incur significant extra costs. According to the criteria and guidelines from the Distance Education Centre, these costs - \$130 per subject at VCE level – are expected to be paid by the school attended by the student. This cost, however, is almost always passed on to the student. These increased costs must have an impact on subject choices for students. Cultural experiences for students in remote areas are considerably less. School. Councils are increasingly subsidising the cost of these performances. Cultural groups have recently raised the minimum numbers of students for whom they will perform and so costs have also risen as a result. When schools are being expected to absorb these costs, the parents are the ones ultimately raising funds to maintain these programs and experiences for their children.

Opportunities: Vocational Education and Training is almost always unavailable to students in their local areas. Parents, again, are expected to transport students fortnightly to the nearest centre, which could be up to several hours away. Most students would therefore choose not to follow this option, therefore reducing their opportunities for further study or employment. The lack of interaction due to small class sizes, especially in the senior years, has a considerable impact

on the depth of discussion needed for subjects such as English literature and psychology. The use of technology has improved this opportunity but is certainly not nearly as effective as face to face interaction.

#### **[Income support]**

Assistance for parents: The Education Maintenance Allowance which recipients of the Health Care Card receive is totally inadequate throughout the state. Half of the payment is currently retained by the school for the payment of a range of materials and excursions. The parents retain the remaining half to offset the costs of uniform and general costs of schooling. Recent cost of schooling surveys undertaken by this organisation revealed that parents are being expected to pay more and more for their children's education. The Education Maintenance Allowance is totally inadequate to support parents, especially those in remote areas incurring extra costs of travel etc. For primary school parents the allowance is \$63.50 per half year. For secondary students it is \$127. Only half of this amount stays with the parents.

#### **[Education funding]**

The quality of educational services. Funding: The quality of educational services in rural and remote areas has largely been maintained despite inadequate government funding, but only through the efforts of parents and school communities raising local funds. These funds, however, are far more difficult to generate in small communities who are also supporting a range of clubs and services. For example, fetes are lucky to raise \$3,000 in comparison to city schools which can generate up to \$30,000. Issues regarding availability of quality education for children with disabilities and diverse backgrounds have been addressed under the heading of availability and access.

The Victorian Federation of State School Parents' Clubs Incorporated thanks the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for the opportunity to present this submission on behalf of parents from across the state, especially those parents from rural and remote communities. The Victorian Federation of State School Parents' Clubs looks forward to a range of positive outcomes from the inquiry which will ultimately improve the opportunities for all children.

#### **[Specialist teachers]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** With the specialist services and the contracts - they seem to go together and it's been an issue that's come up a couple of times. That is, not being able to get LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH teachers and the reason being that they only put them on 10 month contracts. I was just wondering what your

experience is with the contracts and how it affects students in remote areas.

**MS DONNAN:** Because of the contracts it does make it hard for LANGUAGES OTHER THAN ENGLISH teachers to actually go into the country areas. I know that a lot of the schools actually learn language other than English from the satellite. So there aren't the resources there to ... It's one of the Key Learning Areas – one of the eight curriculum standard frameworks – and whilst it's great to have it, if the resources aren't there to follow through on it ... The children are sat in front of the TV which doesn't always suffice. When they're pre-school children, they're happy to watch Playschool or Sesame Street. But for the older children there's not the interaction, there's not the stimulus there. So it's very important for the teachers to have the resources and to teach the children face to face. That doesn't seem to be happening at the moment.

**[Information technology]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** I was really, really pleased that you brought up distance education and the cost that goes with that. Something that's come up this morning is distance education moving into an IT format where people are doing it through computer or virtual classroom. Experiences I've had have resulted ... Our computer facilities are there but we don't have the maintenance to keep them going, to be able to consistently send your DECV stuff at the end of the week to be able to pass the unit. Our e-mail might be down on Thursday or Friday so we can't send it by e-mail.

**MS DONNAN:** With information technology, everything is going faster than the resources. You have teachers that are teaching computer that don't know how to teach computers. I know of a case where there's a boy in the class and he's right into computers and he knows more than the teacher. And the teacher's said to his parents 'I'll have to find him extra things to do because he's showing me what to do'. So there isn't the backup. Technology is a fantastic thing but unless you've actually got people that do know it inside out – and as you say, the maintenance side of it as well – to get it all running smoothly, the students don't always get the benefit of this great, fantastic technology.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** The State Parliament has just initiated a process by which they're going to have consideration for maintenance in rural areas. As you know the cost has extremely accelerated. Here you could get someone in Melbourne who'll come over and fix the computer for \$40 whereas at my school it's \$125 an hour to get in someone.

**MS DONNAN:** The country schools are really at a disadvantage in a lot of ways, especially because of distance and the time spent travelling.

The particular issue I look at with the Federation is road safety. There have been a number of near misses of children getting hurt. Hopefully there won't have to be a real tragedy for something to be actually done. They need to be proactive instead of reactive.

**[Conveyance Allowance]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Just with the buses – again it's been a big issue. Several people have spoken about the amalgamations. Do you know of the conveyancing allowance in Victoria - \$300 with no consideration of distance?

**MS DONNAN:** The conveyancing allowance only applies if they go to their nearest school. That can disadvantage some children. There is a case of a family in the middle of schools but the bus doesn't continue down and service that area so the parents drive the children to and from school which is 30 km. That's where parents don't have a choice of sending their child to the school they'd like them to go to. If they want the allowances they have to send them to the closest school. But the parents have to look at what's the best for their children. So they are disadvantaged in that respect.

**[Education Maintenance Allowance]**

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** With respect to the Education Maintenance Allowance is there any consideration given to rural people at all?

**MS DONNAN:** No. It's a flat rate of money. There have been one or two schools in the state which have refunded that money to those people. The Allowance itself is discriminatory because other parents can choose whether or not to pay the voluntary levies. But the Health Care Card recipients don't have a choice – the money is automatically taken from them. There was a case of a mother of a young boy who was supposed to be going on an excursion. The money was due on the Friday and she only got it in on the Friday night. They said it was too late, the bus was going on the Tuesday and that boy was denied going on that excursion. Even though she didn't have to pay the money because she had a credit so to speak ... This is how it can get so petty and some schools are inflexible.

Personally I like the excursions because they seem to learn more from that interaction. For families to actually take their children to these different things would cost quite a bit, whereas when they go with the school they're with their peers and on the same level and they just come back so bubbly and enthused about all the things they've learnt.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Is there anything else you wanted to cover?

**[Parent involvement]**

**MS DONNAN:** It's pretty hard for parents to actually have input to schools. It really does come down to the principal and the whole set-up. We have clubs ring us and say 'Our principal's really good because he lets us do that or do this'. We think 'Lets you! You're allowed to'. But some principals are more open and willing to take on board parents' and students' input and don't just recognise parents' clubs for the dollar value. There's a whole social thing that goes with it as well. Children learn – well everybody learns 90% from actively doing something. With the Civics and Citizenship they've got all these great resources in place but it would be great if somebody in charge actually believed in democracy and practised it. You come across some pretty sad stories with parents ringing up. They just don't know where to go and they feel so disempowered.

We only have access to clubs and parents who are members. It would be really great if there was something produced which explained to all parents that they can question things. Also some schools have some great ideas. For example, on pupil free days they might have the parents up there joining in on computer training. You hear of those great things and you just want to pack up and take your kids to that school. You think if it's working there and the kids are benefiting from it, why can't it be done somewhere else. Publicising good ideas would need to be in the different languages as well. Some people assume that other parents don't care but a lot of the time it's because they haven't been empowered and they just don't know where to start.

**COMMISSIONER ROBERTS:** Thank you very much.

AT 6.13 PM THE MATTER WAS ADJOURNED.