

Rural and Remote Education Inquiry – NSW Public Hearing in Walgett NSW – 3 March 1999

Chris Sidoti,
Human Rights
Commissioner

I think it might be good if I introduce what we're doing and why we're doing it, to place the discussion this afternoon in a context. I will then ask Barb to say a little bit about herself and her particular interest in the work. We can work through some of the issues that have been already been identified for us or other things that you've got on your mind.

The inquiry that we started this week, day on in Bourke on Monday, is an inquiry into rural and remote education. It comes from a much broader program that the Commission commenced last year and that on a lesser scale we're continuing this year. This was a program called Bush Talks which was simply a way of us getting out and about as much as we could to listen to what people in country areas had to say about human rights issues within their localities. We had no agenda at all and basically allowed groups that we met with to tell us what was on their minds, what were the issues in their area and to try to help us work out our responses to them.

As a Commission we gave people two commitments in that process. One was to feed back information as quickly as we could and we've done that. The second was to not just take the information people gave to us, but to look at how we as a Human Rights Commission could tailor our work program to respond to some of the concerns that people presented to us. Wherever we went probably the two biggest issues were health services and education. There were many others as well and I won't go into those today, but health and education were two of the major ones.

In the education area what we decided to do was to undertake this National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education which, as I say, we commenced on Monday. The reason we're doing it this way is that the Commission has a track record of doing inquiries that have proved to be quite successful in bringing about changes to government policies and programs and changes as well to broader community attitudes to different issues. We're not doing that in the health area because in the health area we found that there was already an enormous amount of information available. The one thing that we're not short of in health is facts and figures. The problem there tends to be more that nobody was interested much in doing anything to fix up the problem, responding to the facts and figures that were available, so our project there is somewhat different.

In the education area we felt that there was really not much broad information at a national level at least about what was happening in rural and remote education. We felt that this area lent itself more to the kind of inquiry that the Commission does where we meet with people, try to get a broad cross section of views, undertake research, collect whatever data is available, prepare a report that goes to parliament with our findings and with recommendations about the things that need to be done to address any problems that exist. During the course of last year problem areas were identified to us by people. They related to things like education for kids with disabilities, Indigenous education, particular problems of kids on isolated properties or in remote communities, questions about the use of technology in both the possibilities of what could be opened up by technology and the difficulty in getting access to it. They are just four particular issue areas and I am sure that there are many more and there were many more that were raised. The process for this inquiry is that we will be doing what we do here today and have done this week in a number of other communities. We have a more formal part which we skipped because of lack of road accessibility this morning in Walgett, where people can go on record officially saying this is our submission. We are having meetings with young people themselves, at both primary and secondary school level and we've done that this afternoon in Walgett. A more general meeting to which we invite particularly parents and teachers but also other members of the community that are interested.

These kinds of processes will be run in a number of towns around the country during the course of this year. We can't get everywhere, obviously and we can't talk to everybody even if we get to a particular town. So we're also inviting people who want to, to drop us a line or to ring on a cheap phone line. We've got a local call fee only line, a 1300 number. We will collect information about people's views however they want to give it to us. These kinds of face to face

	<p>meetings, I think are really important for us to get an appreciation of what's happening and that's why we will try to get out to a good number of communities during the course of the year.</p> <p>The report itself won't be completed until sometime towards the middle of next year, so it's not a rush job, it's something that we are going to take a significant period to do and to try and do it properly. That report goes to Federal Parliament, it will contain recommendations and then we're in the business of trying to get them implemented. That's our process. Barb, do you want to say a little bit about your interest and involvement?</p>
<p>Barbara Flick, Co- Commissioner</p>	<p>I first of all want to pay my respects to the traditional owners and elders of this region, the Kamilaroi and the Yawallyi people and other peoples who have moved in here since the bigger missions closed down. I want to acknowledge my family who are here.</p> <p>I did most of my primary school education at Collarenebri and my secondary education was spent on the verandah at Collarenebri school, doing Blackfriars correspondence. There were certainly no Aboriginal languages in the school then and there were certainly no other symbols of Aboriginal people. The school really didn't acknowledge us at all in that process.</p> <p>I'm excited to come back to this inquiry and listen to children both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, talk about their opportunities to learn about all the people who live here and the history of this region. Education is empowerment and it's for all our children to be given the opportunity to develop as full human beings who can contribute to our society. We are concerned about the myriad of issues confronting parents and children who are living in the rural and isolated areas. We're interested to listen to some of the good things that are happening, some of the community initiatives that are happening as well as some of the difficulties that are still being faced by people today. That's all I'd like to say at this stage.</p>
<p>Chris Sidoti</p>	<p>In each state that we go to, there's a person who's got particular state knowledge who will be assisting us and they come from a variety of backgrounds. Since we picked the north west as the key part of our on the ground work in New South Wales, we thought it was hard to go past Barbara as a person who's come from here and who's steeped in human rights work, to be our assistant here. In other parts we have people who are education specialists, some who have been principals of schools in rural areas, others who have a concern about isolated children. There is a fair range of assistant commissioners, or Co-commissioners we call them, in different parts of the country. It's terrific that Barb is our Co-commissioner in this part of the country.</p> <p>The white sheets that I think that many or some of you have got do raise some questions, but we really see that as a bit of a checklist more than anything else. They fall into a number of categories and I don't intend to go through each question in turn but there are things that might prompt particular views and interests that you have got through the course of the afternoon. Certainly towards the end of it I will be flicking my eye through the list to see if there are things that we haven't really touched on. Given that we didn't have a formal session today, what I'd like to do if I may, is ask particular people that I know are here to give us some background on the areas in which they are involved. We can perhaps open up some of the broader issues from talking about things like the high school and the Community of Schools proposal about which I've heard a little. Are there people here from the primary school? Anyone from the Catholic school? Maybe you could give us some information about the number of kids at the school, the number of things that are going on there. If we can get that data out first and then try and talk about a number of issues that arise from that along our checklist.</p>
<p>Anne McGee, Principal, Walgett High School</p> <p>[Aboriginal students]</p>	<p>We've got an enrolment of 186 students this year 70% of who are Aboriginal. There are quite a few students who are doing one subject through the DEC at Walgett High School. I think that we offer a fairly extensive curriculum to all our students and the fact that we've got the DEC at Walgett High School is good in that it improves the range of subjects that we can offer. We've started a project to teach Aboriginal languages to students. Students in Year 7 and Year 8 have the choice between Kamilaroi and Yawallyi and German. The High School has got a good track record over the last few years with discipline and welfare. We are trying to concentrate on improving the standards of education. Of the four students who wanted to get a UAI last year, all of them did so and all of them got to the place of their choice.</p>

Barbara Flick	Have the recent changes to Abstudy policy had an impact on the school.?
Anne McGee [Abstudy]	No it hasn't really. Students tend to either stay and be happy to stay or they tend to move over to TAFE, so we've had a policy for two or three years now where if we can encourage students back into school through TAFE we will do it. The cultural centre has had a big impact on bringing students back into school through TAFE.
Barbara Flick	How many high school students are Aboriginal?
Anne McGee	In this year's Year 12 there are 10 students. Of those, there are two that are Aboriginal. We are getting more and more students. We had two last year that completed the HSC out of 24.
Barbara Flick	What percentage of children who complete Year 6 choose to stay here to do their high school?
Anne McGee [Retention]	From the primary school I think that most of the students stay. Probably we're looking at about 95% of the students from the primary school. From St Josephs, 10% probably.
Barbara Flick	What sort of interaction is there in the school between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children?
Anne McGee	There are very rarely any problems or any complaints. The students interact fairly well. Sport tends to have been a field where they get together.
Barbara Flick	There's an ASSPA Committee at the school? Does that benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children?
Anne McGee [ASSPA]	The ASSPA Committee is mainly concerned with supporting Aboriginal students. But it does benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The ASSPA [Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness] Committee purchased a bus some years ago and that bus is available to everybody for transport. If students need to go somewhere whether they're aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, we don't discriminate.
Chris Sidoti	I notice that the actual enrolments have dropped by 50%. Is that because of the school at the Ridge? They dropped by 50% between 1996 and 1999.
Anne McGee	Some of those would be distance education students who have moved from the area, and there has been a drop off in distance education. That's starting to pick up again this year. But it's mainly because of the Lightning Ridge enrolment. This year Lightning Ridge are up to year 10. They've had a huge impact on the school.
Charles Vella, Principal, Walgett Primary School [Aboriginal students]	<p>We have an overall population of 266 students. Of those 266, 56 are distance education students. Our overall Aboriginal enrolment takes in 85% of those numbers. Our Aboriginal enrolment in the face to face school is 95% of the population. We are currently in the process of establishing an early childhood centre to cater for the identified needs of the preschool children in town. These needs haven't been totally catered for in the past. When that is up and running we should be able to cater for 23 students.</p> <p>The expectations of the community are that we provide very high standards of teaching and learning and accept no less than high standards of behaviour. We've continued to develop a good relationship with the community and more and more of the community are coming into work within the school, both in a paid and a voluntary manner. We are using that local knowledge of the Aboriginal community. An Aboriginal language program has been developed in conjunction with the High School.</p>
Barbara Flick	Charles, how many of your teachers are new this year?
Charles Vella	I have no new appointments at this stage, but I do have new casuals who are working the school. I am expecting two new appointments this year.

Barbara Flick	What's the average length of stay?
Charles Vella [Teacher experience]	The school is designated an incentive transfer school, as is the High School, so three years is the minimum period. It's difficult to answer that question because there are those who stay their three years and move on, but we currently have two teachers who are in their fourth and fifth years respectively. It depends on the individual circumstances.
Barbara Flick	And generally when they come, have they had much teaching experience?
Charles Vella	I would have to say that they have had fairly limited experience, overall, depending again on the individual circumstances.
Barbara Flick	What percentage of Aboriginal people live in Walgett in the general population, and how is that reflected in the school population?
Participant	The Aboriginal population of Walgett is now about 60%.
Barbara Flick	And yet we're seeing in the schools that we're looking at 80, 90, 98%
Charles Vella	95% in the public school.
Participant	I think that St Josephs is somewhere around 29% Aboriginal students.
Barbara Flick	How are you supporting newly graduated teachers when they come to a place with a high percentage of Aboriginal children in the schools? Do they have cultural awareness orientation programs?
Charles Vella [Teacher induction]	<p>This year through our equity funding and Country Area Program assistance a two day orientation course was put on for new appointments at the Ridge for teachers appointed to Lightning Ridge, Walgett, Goodooga, and the other Centrals in this area. Part of that was cultural awareness activities. Last year we did invite members of the local community to come in and talk to our new appointments. This was in term two last year. Unfortunately it didn't happen. We have made attempts in this regard. We've encouraged new staff to go out with our AEAs [Aboriginal Education Assistants] to meet the parents of the students they are teaching to talk about what is happening within the school program. We had appointed to the school and Aboriginal early resource teacher and part of that teacher's role was to involve the community in the school.</p> <p>I would certainly like more. I would be the first to say that I suffered from culture shock when I first arrived. I have a few more years under my belt than first appointments. I do think that we need to be able to help those communication links between the school and the community.</p>
Barbara Flick	How many Aboriginal staff are there in the school?
Charles Vella	Permanent staff. We have four Aboriginal cleaning staff at this stage. On a temporary basis we have three Aboriginal staff at this stage.
Barbara Flick	If you had the resources or ability to introduce more things into the school what would you opt for?
Charles Vella [Community involvement]	I would wish for the opportunity to bring more of the community in to help them understand the teaching and learning environment and to support their students in the teaching and learning programs. That would be my first wish, my second wish would be to have more of the Aboriginal community involved in the presentation of the teaching and learning programs whether that be in the form of extra Aboriginal education assistance or in the form of classroom teachers.
Chris Sidoti	Pat, do you want to tell us about the Community of Schools project?

<p>Pat Cavenagh, Senior Officer, Walgett Community of Schools Project</p> <p>[Community of Schools Project]</p> <p>[Community involvement in schooling]</p>	<p>Just very briefly Chris, I don't think that you're aware that I've only been in my current position for the past two weeks. There are people in the room who can speak about the project in far more detail than I.</p> <p>It is a very exciting project. The reason for that it is because it is very much a community driven project. Its origins lie with the community – the broad Walgett community. It is intended that the project will continue to be community driven. We're in the process now of establishing a broad based community management committee which will be very much be in the driving seat as far as the project's concerned. It's very easy to talk about the negatives involved in education in Walgett, but in the two weeks that I've been here I've seen a lot of positive things. I think that the most positive thing that I've seen in Walgett as far as education's concern is the degree and extent of interest in education that extends across the community. Here in Walgett, it really has impressed me the degree of involvement and the extent of good will amongst people who see that there are problems in education here in Walgett and they want to do something about it. As far as I'm concerned, that's very encouraging.</p> <p>As I say, I really think that there are people here who know much more about the project than I do and are much more aware of what's involved in it. Our most obvious aim and the immediate aim that we're attempting to address is to assist the schools in Walgett with children who for one reason or another are not fulfilling their educational potential in the schools. That's the first need that we have to address. In the medium to long term though, we hope to facilitate the relationship between the community of Walgett and the educational institutions at all levels here, from primary school through to TAFE and beyond. We hope to be able to assist the young teachers who come to towns like this, to assist them in making contact with the community and in developing and implementing curriculum that are appropriate to all the children in Walgett. I suppose the pressing and most important long-term aim is to facilitate a whole of government response to the educational needs of the town.</p> <p>I know that's very general, but for the past two weeks we've been preoccupied with establishing our offices and with establishing links with the community. Our project cannot work unless we are backed by the community and unless we have very definite and meaningful links with the community. Our first task really is to establish those links with the community, which is why we are attempting to establish a broad based management committee. I should say that we do intend it to be very broad based. We initially of course will be inviting representatives from organisations and service providers, but we hope to open it up to the whole community.</p>
<p>Anne Dennis, Principal Education Officer, Walgett Community of Schools Project</p>	<p>I'm the Principal Education Officer at the centre, the Education and Cultural Centre. I see my role as motivating and encouraging students to fulfil their full potential at school and really enjoy developing and furthering their education. Also I see the centre as establishing and encouraging the school community partnership and developing that partnership between community members and the educational system. Really, I suppose encouraging students who want to be at school, and giving them and providing them with the opportunity to get those skills so that they can further their education.</p>
<p>Ian Wilson, District Superintendent, Department of Education and Training – Moree District</p> <p>[Community of Schools project]</p>	<p>This project, the community of schools project is a government response to a need that came of the community, which was seen to occur after a community crisis in January 1997. The Premier was asked to visit Walgett and was caught up at the airport with some people who were a little aggrieved and those issues were put to him. His response was that the government would respond in a way that was appropriate.</p> <p>That then led to a range of consultant meetings with the community here at Euragi Goondi and in the town centres, and a range of consultations over the rest of the year. This led to the development of a proposal which was presented to the community basically to hear their views on the matter and how they could add to it or whatever. Out of that came a groundswell of opinion from all sections of the community, that's Gingie, the town community and the Namoi community and the representatives of the school groups, the AECG [Aboriginal Education Consultative Group], the ASSPA committees. There was complete endorsement of a proposal which is called the Walgett Community of Schools project and that has seen the growth of the Walgett Cultural and Education Centre as part of another dimension to better provide</p>

<p>[Early childhood education]</p> <p>[Transition]</p> <p>[Aboriginal community involvement in education]</p>	<p>educational service delivery in a rural town.</p> <p>That service delivery has a number of aspects, from the early childhood facility that Charles has already spoken about which will provide a range of three services, transition, education from preschool to primary school, early intervention services, and a twenty place preschool facility which will ensure that no child in Walgett misses out on the opportunity to access a preschool experience. That's moving ahead now. The primary school provision and the secondary school provision are being looked at in terms of the stage of development of learning in line with the Eltis Report. We are also looking at teacher collaboration and development of programs across those stages of learning and a working towards a greater relationship and a richer relationship in the transition from the primary school to the high school in the Year 5 – 8 area. The program also involves a preparatory stage in Years 9 and 10 into the senior years of schooling or the vocational educational area. We are developing a range of programs in that area to meet the needs of students and a closer link with the TAFE which is now under the Department of Education and Training banner in terms of delivery of adult education.</p> <p>The centre that Anne and Pat have spoken about provides a dimension of provision for special education to cater for students that don't fit the normal mainstream type of lessons. That is a rich dimension to the delivery of education services in Walgett. Part of the community meetings indicated a need for a greater cultural base to the learning program. The Department of Education with its implementation of Aboriginal Education policy, ongoing multi-phase implementation, is enriching that by endorsing the special education programs with a very strong cultural base. These will access the community in terms of delivery. We are also working on the training and development of the teachers in terms of the knowledge of the Aboriginal culture and heritage of this area and being able to meet the needs of students by having that driven through the teacher programs in the classroom. At this point in time we've got the centre established. Since about April last year we've had the centre established and staff in place and we expect to commence our first programs next week with students. It's quite an exciting phase in the development of the delivery in education in this community and it is seen as being very responsive to the community needs at this point in time.</p>
Chris Sidoti	The programs for students next week, are they one to one programs for individual students or are you looking at doing something for individual students?
<p>Ian Wilson</p> <p>[Whole of government approach to education]</p>	<p>Small groups of students who have been identified through the classroom teachers and the principal and support staff in the primary school and also at the high school and then designing a program around entry behaviours. They are working not only in a one to one situation but also back in the classroom. That will mean ongoing support for the teachers in the mainstream, plus a range of cultural and alternative programs that will access the community expertise.</p> <p>Anne is in charge of designing those programs and we have two classroom teachers as well that tap into that. That drives a broader agenda in terms of being able to coordinated interagency support. So total government agency support for individual students as a case-managed program to ensure that those students are back on track as quickly as possible and accessing mainstream education. His [Pat Cavenagh] role is far broader to engage DOCS, juvenile justice, police, health, all those community services for outside of the school time and then Anne will be designing the program inside of school time.</p>