

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 2

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO STUDENTS
WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

At Sydney on Tuesday 23 March 2003

The Committee met at 9.15 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R. M. Parker (Chair)

The Hon. Tony Catanzariti
The Hon. M. A. Ficarra
Dr John Kaye
The Hon. Shaoquett Moselmane
Reverend the Hon. G. K. M. Moyes
The Hon. C. M. Robertson

CHAIR: Welcome to the second public hearing of the inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2. This inquiry was established in response to concerns raised by teachers and parents about the adequacy of funding, special education places, curriculum support services and the assessment process for children with disabilities or special needs attending New South Wales schools. In addition to the public hearings yesterday and today the Committee will hold another full day of hearing on 10 May with a focus on advocacy organisations working within this area.

Yesterday the Committee heard from parents of children with disabilities or special needs, teachers, principals and non-government education providers. Today it will take evidence from a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives of relevant unions, the Department of Education and Training and academics. The Committee has received what I believe is a record of more than 750 submissions for this inquiry and, I stand to be corrected, but most inquiries average approximately 300 submissions. So the interest from the public is significant, and so it should be.

There is a hearing link available in this room for those people who require it. There is a Braille copy of the terms of reference and hearing schedule available at the table at the back of the room. A full transcript of evidence from the hearings will be placed on the Committee's website approximately 24 hours after each day. There are some guidelines for broadcast of proceedings. Only Committee members and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photos. The media understand the guidelines, and I do not think I need go through them. A copy of the guidelines is available. If messages need to be passed to Committee members please do so through the secretariat staff. Please turn off mobile phones.

GARY ROBERT ZADKOVICH, Deputy President, New South Wales Teachers Federation,

EDWARD KENNY, Organiser, New South Wales Teachers Federation,

HENRY REJENDRA, Organiser, New South Wales Teachers Federation, and

SUSAN JANE SIMPSON, Research Officer, New South Wales Teachers Federation, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Mr ZADKOVICH: I want to make an opening statement. The federation's central contention in an investigation of this kind is that the funding commitments in both State and Federal government's over decades now have not kept pace with the needs of students with disabilities and special needs. When you go to the data that has been provided in our submission it is clear that we, in public schools, are suffering from a double impact effect. As government's have adopted a market-based approach to education, as more families with the means to avail themselves of private schooling are encouraged to leave, as we see the widening gap between the resource provisions in public schools as distinct from private schools, we are losing more of those students from public schools that we would regard as having low support needs and higher family income backgrounds.

That means that the cohort, the enrolment within public schools across the State across the country has changed. We now have a much higher proportion of high-support needs students at a time when the proportion of State and Federal governments' funding has declined—not the actual hundreds of millions of dollars that politicians talk about, but the proportion of this nation's resources that are being allocated to meet the needs of students in public schools has declined. There was a time in Australia when we had 79 per cent of enrolments in public schools and received just under 70 per cent of Federal Government funding. We have lost 12 per cent total enrolment share over 30 years, it is true, but we have been reduced in terms of our proportion of that Federal Government funding to receiving just over 30 per cent. It is blatantly untrue for anyone to declare that the increase in private schools' funding somehow matches the increase in enrolments in that private school sector.

Against that background public school teachers, and schools across the State and nation, struggle against ever-increasing odds to meet the needs of our students. There is ample evidence in our submission where we cite research analysis from Professor Vinson. I have also brought with me today a supplementary document which I will table, if the Committee so wishes, which is a facts sheet heavily based on the work of Jim McMorrow, a very learned expert in the area of schools' funding. He has worked in the Commonwealth bureaucracy and he has also done work for political parties. He is a very widely respected commentator on funding issues. We would also tender that information to reinforce the points I have just made.

Finally the New South Wales Teachers Federation contends that as we are seeing hundreds of million of dollars from the Federal Government now being pumped into special programs, like the Building the Education Revolution, Infrastructure Investment, the National Partnerships, the Low SES School Communities and Teacher Quality Literacy Numeracy, the one glaring omission is that we do not have a national partnership for special education. We believe that must be an issue that all politicians commit to in the near future.

Document tabled.

CHAIR: Mr Zadkovich, you mentioned the 2002 Vinson report and the recommendations made in that report are still referred in relation to issues with counsellors and special education. A number of other submissions have also referred to the Vinson report. Will you elaborate on why those issues have not been addressed?

Mr ZADKOVICH: It comes down to governments not being prepared to commit the funding required to support schools in meeting the needs of those students. For example, in recent years we have seen a very much-appreciated reduction in class sizes in this State in the early years of schooling K-2. We have also seen in recent years the only increase in class sizes we have experienced in public education, and that was an increase in class sizes for special education, to offset the cost of providing a teacher's aide for every special education class. That epitomises, in our view, the degree to which special education students have missed out on their due share of government funding and support.

CHAIR: Evidence has been given to the Committee, including your submission, noting that the department is talking about a new funding model based on prevalence of disabilities in the community. What is your view of that funding model?

Mr KENNY: In our submission we comment on the proposals of the Department of Education and Training in relation to what is sometimes known as census-based funding or prevalence-based funding. In general we are opposed to that proposition in that we believe that it is important that individual students with disabilities, learning difficulties or behavioural disorders are actually recognised and identified and that their specific needs are addressed. In a prevalence-based or census-based arrangement we believe that individual students could slip through the net. There are also concerns, I might add, and my colleague Sue Simpson has done research on this so I welcome the opportunity for her to comment as well, about what prevalence figure is used is open to debate at the very least.

For example, if we take the current proposal of the Department of Education and Training in relation to students with autism, it proposes to base funding allocations to regular schools for students with autism spectrum disorder at what some might describe as the lower end of the autism spectrum disorder, that is, not very high support needs students. I think that is debatable by the way too, but for those students it proposes a prevalence figure of one in 100.

That may be a prevalence figure that comes from some research somewhere. But equally you could probably find any number of figures that suggest that prevalence is actually much greater than that. The difficulty also rises in relation to that proposal in that it is known that there are schools that for whatever reason, and sometimes the reasons are not known, where there are concentrations of students far in excess of that prevalence figure. So if we take a very simplistic example, you might have a primary school with an enrolment of 400 students. They are going to be funded for four students. They may well have a dozen or more students with diagnosed autism spectrum disorder. So there is clearly a problem with that approach when that situation arises.

In relation to mental health disorders, it seems to me that with both autism and mental health disorders what is known is that the rate of diagnosis of school-aged students with those disorders has gone through the roof and continues to increase massively. There are figures that I think are quite dramatic quoted in our submission in relation to this. I believe it is a very disturbing situation where we have such large numbers of students in our schools with diagnosed mental health disorders and any proposal that goes to not properly identifying those students individually and having a proper diagnosis and an individualised intervention for them. These are serious mental health disorders we are talking about. To have a proposal that adopts some kind of census-based or in the case of the current proposal of the Department of Education and Training [DET] to base funding allocations to schools for students with mental health disorders on the basis of their NAPLAN tests scores is puzzling. That is putting it mildly, I suppose. I understand the rationale of that by the way, and there is a rationale. Don't look at me quite so surprisingly, Dr Kaye.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I have never heard one that made any sense.

CHAIR: Sometimes they call it spin.

Mr KENNY: Let me for the record state that it is known there is a high correlation between mental health disorders and low socioeconomic status [SES] communities. That is known. If you accept that, in general, schools in low SES communities tended to score at the lower end in terms of NAPLAN test results, then a correlation might be drawn. I am just stating that. However, I do not resile from what I said. It is puzzling and for most members of the general community and our members in particular it is more than puzzling, it is quite stupefying. Having said that, it is a very vexed issue. I will just finish by saying you can carve up the money any way you like—this way, that way, any other way. But at the end of the day if there is not enough money it does not matter. That is the real issue. The level of resources is inadequate, grossly inadequate.

CHAIR: A great amount of our discussion yesterday was about assessments, students getting funding based on their primary disability and whether assessments should be based on functioning capacity or disability or both. Does the Teachers Federation have a view on that?

Mr KENNY: I was actually going to refer to this matter. It is found in our submission on pages 8 and 10. I do not know if members of the Committee have it in front of them. With your permission I would like to make one observation in relation to the issue of integration funding support of students with disabilities. That is

found on page 9 of our submission. There is currently no transparency in how a dollar figure is arrived at for an individual student once they have a disability diagnosis or confirmation. In the process of determining exactly how much money is then allocated to a school to support the needs of that individual student, there is no transparency. It is a mystical process. It really requires a transparent approach so that at least you do not have the possibility of people making accusations about manipulation of that process. I would like to make that point.

In relation to the issue of functional assessment versus diagnosis—I think that is what you are asking—we have a view that those two things are not mutually exclusive and should not be seen as mutually exclusive. One could and should complement the other. There was an example of a trial some years ago by the DET in which the Teachers Federation and other stakeholders were also involved. That was in relation to the resource and staffing provisions for special schools. It was called the resource based staffing trial and arose from a document called the Comino review in 2000. That really combined both a diagnostic approach and a functional assessment for the purposes of determining levels of resources and staffing for those schools. We thought it was a very promising development, and probably for that reason the DET abandoned it. So that was one example where both approaches might be applied.

There is also, I think, the opportunity to have an either/or approach. It is certainly true, undeniably true, that there are students in isolated rural communities and in low SES communities that simply do not have access to the diagnostic services that they should have. That is a whole-of-government issue and ought to be addressed. But if that is the case, then certainly there is a case for a functional assessment to be applied in the absence of a diagnostic approach. Finally I make this point, that with certain conditions, notably mental health, as I have already commented, and autism spectrum disorder, the process of diagnosis in itself is valuable and can lead to interventions which are specific and necessary. We are talking about in some instances medical conditions that require treatment and that diagnosis is required. It is not the function of schools obviously to prescribe medications and so forth and so on. But it is often useful to be aware of it and to take into account the nature of the condition. It is true that is not the case in relation to every disorder, intellectual disabilities and so forth, but for some conditions it would certainly be the case.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The New South Wales Government in its submission, which became available to the public yesterday, claims that it spends about \$1.1 billion a year in government schools on disability education or special needs education. It claims that that is growing at about 10 per cent per annum, a 76 per cent increase over seven years. By your figures the rate of growth of the number of children with special needs, the gross number, is growing at a far greater rate than 10 per cent per year. Also by your submission the support needs of those children are growing dramatically. The mix of children who present with special needs requires a greater resource base than the children who presented 10 or 15 years ago. Can you comment on what your members are telling you about what all this means in the classroom and the schoolyard?

Ms SIMPSON: I might comment on that because I am certainly the one who has had the major responsibility for putting the figures together and, also, for the last eight years I, in fact, have been in a classroom teaching. What I will say about the figures, as we have indicated in our submission, the New South Wales Government has changed the way in which it has reported the budget figures in terms of special education. So it was difficult for us in the time frame to get our submission in here on time—given I have been in this position only since the beginning of the school year—and to do any sort of independent research. However, the research that we have used to supply the figures on funding and the change in the enrolment patterns is a paper that is currently in press produced by two Macquarie University academics but has been subject to peer review and one of the peer reviewers was Tony Vinson. So we feel it is a very reliable document to provide us with information post the appearance of the Vinson inquiry.

Dr JOHN KAYE: This is Graham and Sweller, is it?

Ms SIMPSON: Yes, that is Graham and Sweller. Now, I think what sometimes confounds analysis is that there have been changes to the way in which various disabilities have been identified, the various coverage of particular programs, and certainly in the footnotes to the Graham and Sweller article that I certainly have, they talk about the particular methodologies and inquiries they have made to provide those figures. But what you can broadly say—and I have had a quick read of the department's submission and given that it only appeared yesterday it has had to be pretty quick—is that we certainly are both in agreement that there has been a substantial and dramatic increase in the diagnosis of mental health disorders, and autism in particular, but also a confirmation of the trend as identified by Vinson that we have more students with multiple disabilities, more severe and moderate disability students in support classes in regular classrooms.

In terms of the funding, we certainly acknowledge that funding has increased. From the figures from Graham and Sweller you can see that the funding has not matched the change in the enrolment pattern. We certainly see that is one of the reasons why governments—and it is not just here in New South Wales or departments of education—are looking at different funding models, seeing that if we move perhaps to a census-based model we might be able to control the funding. But as we have indicated elsewhere, the expectations of the education system, the expectations of teachers in terms of what we are expected to do with our students and the standards have increased. It is reflected in the legislation of course, and as we have also identified in the paper with My School websites, reporting of NAPLAN results, a focus on individuals achieving to their greatest endeavours, this means that teachers are trying in fact to do a great deal more.

I might just point out my particular experience. I taught for 11 years and I worked for the federation for 14 years and then I went back teaching for eight years. The change in those 14 years from when I was still involved in education so I still knew what was going on, to actually being in a classroom was enormous. The biggest change was in terms of the issues of classroom management. I was teaching students in a not dissimilar area to when I was teaching before in the St George and Canterbury-Bankstown-Sutherland shire areas and not dissimilar students, but in terms of the individual needs that I was having to meet within the classroom in terms of the higher expectations and in particular in recent years the increased retention rates, in particular when you are looking at years 11 and 12. When I began teaching, kids just left school in year 9—I am a secondary year teacher, so I was seeing those differences.

Your major relationship as a teacher is with your students; that is your major relationship. You are just struggling to try and do your best. Our classroom sizes have not changed as a secondary teacher in that 14-year gap where I was working for the federation. So class sizes have not changed and no more release time, so even though when I read the department's submission we are meant to be on school learning support teams and we are meant to be consulting, often we do not have the time to do that. Yes, I am working with more teachers aides, where I would not have, but it is there for a reason, because I have more students with more challenging behaviours, and behaviours that do not just require a mere differentiation in the curriculum.

We are used to teaching students who can just look at the work and just fly and students who are a little bit slower. When you are dealing with students who have conduct disorders, with emotional disturbances, you cannot ignore them. You still have to provide what you were doing before, but when you have 30 kids in the classroom—and I might add with 30 kids, when we now have computers and you are meant to have your data projector there, that takes a desk away. You do have a teacher's aide, so you put it in there, but where do they sit? You just become crowded and that creates problem. You have a kid with autism, who does not really want to sit near the other kids in the class. Where do you put that child?

These are the everyday issues. I think what we have tried to do with our submission is to put those frustrations into a context of the change in the enrolment patterns—it was a shock to me frankly to look at those figures from Graham and Sweller—to put that into context, to look at the funding and acknowledge, yes, governments have increased funding but it has not kept up with the expectations that are on schools through the education policies nor have kept up with the human rights expectations. The law requires something and we support the law but it is one thing to make the laws, it is another to be able to find the money to properly finance it. In a way, it is a bit like the debate we are having in health. This is a health issue in terms of schools. We are grappling to find out how to find the money.

What we are saying is that the State governments have not found the money. We need a national partnership but equally we are quite serious in looking at the private school funding because when I have been teaching in schools that have been underresourced and then I go and have a look at some of the private schools, even from the outside let alone going inside, and when I see that my prime relationship is with my students and I am struggling—and I mean struggling, not just me but all my colleagues are struggling—to provide the best, I ask the question: where are the priorities?

Mr ZADKOVICH: Can I just supplement that, Dr Kaye, by talking about the same context? If you look at page 17 of our submission, there is a graph, which shows the declining proportion of Federal Government funding coming to public schools.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Excuse me, Gary, to be fair, you only ever quote Commonwealth funding. When you refer to percentages of decline, would you do an amalgamated funding percentage with both State and Federal funding?

Mr ZADKOVICH: By all means, Dr Moyes, and that is why on page 18, when Professor Vinson conducted his independent assessment of this matter, when one combines State Government and Federal Government funding together, Dr Vinson's analysis on page 18 indicated that over that period 1996-97 through to 2001-02 the percentage increase for government school students combining State and Federal was 27.4 per cent. The percentage increase for private school students for the same period was 45.1 per cent, so the double whammy effect of a declining overall proportion of total government funding of public schools is real and it is verified by independent analysis.

We are talking about the school system that educates more than 80 per cent of the students with disabilities and special needs. That is that double impact I talked about. The proportion of students with special needs in public schools is rising at a greater proportion than the proportion of those students with special needs in the private school sector, so we have an increasing need and demand at a time when our over all proportion of State and Federal government funding has declined. That is why you hear the laments from teachers like Sue today. The reality of trying to support these students in our classroom is real. Politicians and bureaucrats like to talk hundreds of millions of dollars or billions of dollars. We want to talk of the proportion of overall resources that are going to meet the needs of these students.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Mr Kenny, we have two granddaughters living in our home with us. Every evening that I happen to be home we discuss their progress at university. They are both doing their degrees in teaching, one majoring in psychology and the other in special needs education. She is in third year special needs and has been doing quite a bit of in-school work. I am getting the impression that a lot of teachers who have done special needs education are not coping really well with their classes. What should be done to improve special needs education training and what about up-to-date professional improvement?

Mr KENNY: Development.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Development.

Mr KENNY: I am not surprised to hear anecdotal reports that teachers of special education classes may well be struggling. If the context of their work was a special school, for example, the level of disability of students in those environments over a period of years has increased dramatically. The incidence of students with very severe autism, combined with intellectual, physical and/or sensory disabilities makes for the most challenging teaching environment that there is.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: No question. You do not have to argue that.

Mr KENNY: In fact, what I was going to say is that it would be one of the most challenging work environments that there is.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: No question.

Mr KENNY: So, the fact that people may be experiencing extreme levels of stress and indeed physical and psychological injury in those environments is really not surprising, given at least in some respects that the level of resources for those environments has hardly kept pace with the change in the nature of the population and, in one instance—and we have already cited it—class sizes in some of those environments have actually increased or were increased in 2005. I really did—and I welcome your question for this reason—want to make specific and special reference to the issue of the resource and staffing needs of special education settings such as special schools and special classes because I think they could be quite easily swamped and forgotten by the overwhelming situation.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And secondary trained teachers in high schools?

Mr KENNY: Yes.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Any suggestion about improvement of education. I do not want to take other people's time.

Mr KENNY: You are talking about professional development?

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Yes.

Mr KENNY: I could just comment that the whole area of ongoing quality professional development opportunities for teachers generally—and that includes the very complex environments of special education—are woefully inadequate and successive generations of government and bureaucracies have simply failed to address the professional development needs of the teaching profession and that includes special educators.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I have read your submission, which good and informative. I am interested to get the individual student's perspective. Does any student who is a pain in the neck now have to have a label? Is there some cultural change going on which may or may not relate to the current funding model? I am interested to hear your views on that? When there is a clinical psychiatric diagnosis, because it seems to be the trend to put labels on people at a very young age, it can be very difficult to shake after a recovery. I acknowledge there is an increased expectation from society that is impacting on the education system, so I am not making a value statement. I am concerned there is a potential that may be encouraged by the individual labelling funding model to increase labels in young people. It is a philosophical question but I would be interested to hear your views, even though the matter has not been discussed at a conference.

Ms SIMPSON: From my recent teaching experience, I was not conscious of that. I think you have to draw a distinction between those people who might be doing the submissions to get the funding and who are having to do their submissions in terms of various categories.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The labels?

Ms SIMPSON: The labels that give rise to funding. That tends to be in the more severe categories. You mentioned the "pain-in-the-neck" students. There is an expectation now that we teach individual students. We have to be able to know why it is that a certain kid is not performing. Is it because they sit up all night playing video games? Is it because they come to school hungry? Or is it because there is a particular diagnosis? We then have to design our particular programs or modifications to suit the particular problem. When you are managing a whole class, you need to know if so-and-so has not had enough to eat and if there are others in the school we need to then provide a breakfast program.

As teachers we have to understand our students so that we know how best to teach them. Certainly in a secondary environment there is a gap between the knowledge the classroom teacher has and what might be provided in detailed submissions. I will know in my classroom, and I am thinking of students I was teaching last year, that certain students have emotional behaviours at home. Yes, there will be a teacher's aid with the teacher in that particular classroom. In terms of the exact detail of the analysis, I simply do not know. And often teachers do not have time to go into that tremendous detail.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The system is asking for a label in order to obtain funding for aid in the class?

Ms SIMPSON: Yes, but it is not always the classroom teacher who is doing the submission.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: No. I realise that. It is the culture.

Ms SIMPSON: There is a bit of a gap. On the other hand, on the other side, to follow on from Ted Kenny's response about the functional assessment, the diagnostic assessment versus the census-based assessment, you do make sure that the funding does go to the particular student. But we have to be so careful that we do not stigmatise students for all sorts of reasons: they may have gay parents or parents in jail or all sorts of things. If you see that as a problem—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Perhaps an issue.

Ms SIMPSON: It is an issue that can be got around in terms of training. In labelling of kids these are not the only ones. We are more concerned at the moment with what is happening with labelling of schools. That can have an effect on enrolments, particularly when looking at special education. With the labelling of schools some have so many more concentrations of students with learning difficulties, particular diagnoses, that local communities then come to form certain perceptions and say that they will not send their kids there. That is certainly contributing in public education to our schools having a higher proportion of students with disabilities and learning needs.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It was not very long ago that those kids were quickly shafted, because the age was low for young persons to enter school. That has changed.

Mr ZADKOVICH: If I could comment on the labelling, there is a discourse in the broader community about this issue. It concerns me that at times it is discussed in a way that teachers are cynically using labels to attract funding.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: No, no.

Mr ZADKOVICH: I have heard that, right! The so-called label is, in essence, the identification of the students' needs. Teachers as professionals believe that those needs should be identified and that they should be met by adequate resourcing and support. I have heard a lot from departmental officers about changes that are mooted at the moment, as if we want to move away from labelling kids, as if that is a really negative thing to do, towards something that does not involve so-called labelling. Well, unfortunately, I see some of that as a move away from the responsibility for adequately funding what I call "identified needs", not labels.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: My question comes from the fact that the issue of labelling in psychiatry is still very controversial. There is massive controversy in psychiatry itself. It is interesting that this issue has moved into the education sector.

Mr RAJENDRA: It may be controversial. However, the experiences in the classroom are quite extraordinary. As the organiser for Camden, Campbelltown, St Marys and Mount Druitt one would argue that they are probably the most disadvantaged communities in metropolitan Sydney. I have worked with schools where they tried to go through every hoop—be it diagnosis, be it risk assessment, be it assault reports to police and so on—and the experiences were so extraordinary that they tried all of that but they get nothing. They get nothing from the department. The only thing they get from the department or the government is when they take up the fight and throw in industrial action. Miraculously, resources appear! But sometimes it is two or three years later, after the problem first existed. It is a means to somehow get some support to schools, whether it is a label or an experience.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Okay, thank you.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yesterday the Committee heard from a number of groups, particularly private, independent and Catholic schools, arguing that they should get a significant slice of funding as well. Where does the federation stand on that, particularly as you are arguing that you have 80 per cent of students with a disability?

Mr ZADKOVICH: Professor Vinson looked also at the issue of what is called the funding link. When the Coalition was last in State Government they increase the funding link, the per capita funding link, from 20 per cent to 25 per cent. Essentially, that means that for every \$1 spent on a public school student, a private school student will receive 25¢ as a funding link. We have a situation where private schools obtain a windfall through that funding link.

It goes like this: If students are identified as having special needs and disabilities in public schools and we gain some additional funding, we have 80 per cent of those students with those special education needs. We gain some additional funding and that flows automatically through this funding link of 25 per cent to a school sector that has less than 20 per cent of students with special needs. Funding mechanisms like that need urgent review, because we would claim that there has been a disproportionate amount of government funding going to private schools, albeit with an enrolment of special needs students, because of the way the funding link works.

Similarly, as my colleague pointed out, when you have correlation between a low socioeconomic status, family background and academic achievement and other social invisible issues such as mental health and so on, we have a higher proportion of students with those needs. Our contention is that we are not saying that there are not special needs students in private schools, but we see the needs of public school students not being met as that funding increase works for the advantage of private schools.

Mr RAJENDRA: Yesterday I heard a parent giving evidence to this Committee. She tried to enrol her Down's syndrome child into a private school, and the school said no, it could not enrol the child because it was too expensive to have that child. For as long as that happens, where will that child have to go? It will have to go

to the public system. The clear priority has to be the public school system, to support parents like that one who wants a place for their child to have a quality education.

CHAIR: Thank you for attending today. The Committee would have liked to ask many more questions, but we have run out of time. Perhaps the Committee will communicate with you further as we progress through the inquiry. Communication is a two-way street. Our recommendations will be made to the State Government, albeit we may make recommendations in relation to the Federal context.

Mr ZADKOVICH: The Teachers Federation thanks the Committee for this opportunity.

(The witnesses withdrew)

PAMELA MARY SMITH, Organiser, Independent Education Union, and

PATRICIA MURNANE, Learning Support Leader, New South Wales-Australian Capital Territory Independent Education Union, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Please outline the capacity in which you appear today.

Ms P. SMITH: I am an organiser with the Independent Education Union [IEU], which covers teachers and support staff in the non-government school sector.

Mrs MURNANE: I am employed by the Catholic Education Office in the Diocese of Parramatta as a Learning Support Leader and teacher at Emmaus Catholic College, Kemps Creek, which is about eight kilometres south of St Marys, in the south-western suburbs of Sydney.

CHAIR: Do you wish to make a brief opening statement?

Ms P. SMITH: Thank you. The IEU greatly appreciates this opportunity. I will not go through our written submission in detail because it contains a number of facts, figures, details and also some recommendations. The IEU, as indicated, is the union that is at the coalface, working with our members, principals, teachers and support staff in Catholic and independent schools. Our members include classroom teachers, supporting students to be integrated in mainstream settings. They include the teachers' aides working with those students. We also have union members working in special schools such as Mater Dei, the Aspect schools, which cover students with autism spectrum, Kingsdene Special School, and a range of those sorts of settings in mainstream and special schools.

As we have outlined, funding is a major priority for us. The majority of our funding in our sector of the students comes from the Federal Government through programs for individual students based on need. We would argue that there are two major issues in regard to funding. There is an inadequacy in funding to meet students' needs and also the definitions of "disability" and "special needs" are not really adequate. I am sure that the Teachers Federation would have said that as well—there are so many students in our schools these days with a range of disorders, conduct disorders, psychiatric disabilities that may be short-term or longer-term, students whose particular needs are compounded by family circumstances, refugee status, indigenous background, rural and remoteness.

Both the quantum of funding and the definition of "disability" to attract funding are very significant. We had indicated also that we believe that there should be some minimum standards set in regard to availability of staff, class sizes, time for planning, planning and preparation, working with families, working with agencies and, as the federation also said, professional development of teachers and support staff. One very practical example is a young woman teacher in her first year of teaching who told me that she has a severely autism spectrum child in her class. She struggled for months to get any training or support to help them meet that child's needs. Professional development is a major issue for us. My colleague, Patricia Murnane, works in a school, dealing day-to-day with the practicalities of supporting special-needs students. Patricia might like to comment briefly.

Mrs MURNANE: This is my twentieth year of working as a special education teacher. Prior to that I began life in 1976 as a high school geography and economics teacher. I have taught from kindergarten to year 12 both as a regular classroom teacher and in special education in both primary and secondary schools. I came here today to tell you that the needs that I know of in my school are basically those for all schools, and will be for government and non-government schools. I think we are talking the same story—we are talking about the amount of work, the intensification of the work and looking after students with particular needs, which are overwhelming. I am pretty exhausted myself. Every day there is a new issue for these children.

You will understand that non-government schools get their funding for those children with identified needs from the Federal Government. I am in a Catholic systemic school, so the way it works is that through Parramatta diocese the students are allocated points—that is how it works at the moment—in various categories of disability. There are about seven categories. If a child is outside those categories, such as a child with attention deficit disorder, which is called a specific learning difficulty, the child does not attract funding of its own. We are talking about children with cognitive disability, certain mental health issues where the children are getting counselling and ongoing psychological and psychiatric support, and certain physical categories of

hearing, vision and autism—that spectrum. I have photocopied a profile of my school, which might be helpful. The story of my school—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: There are no names in it, are there?

Mrs MURNANE: No. There are no names.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Does it identify the school?

Mrs MURNANE: It does identify the school. Do you want me to resubmit it with no school name?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: No, we can deal with that.

Mrs MURNANE: The information is accurate as far as numbers go. It is a school of 915 students or thereabouts. We have 59 funded students and, of those, 34 do life skills programs from years 7 to 12. That is another issue, but with the national curriculum and the current curriculum in New South Wales that is a vital ingredient that I would like the Committee to take on board as something that cannot be lost. Without the life skills programs we might as well send those students to hell as send them to school. It is just an impossibility for them to get through school, let alone get to year 12 nowadays, without having those highly supportive programs that are tailored to their learning needs. At our school we have those children and what I call the "grey area" kids—children with specific learning difficulties. At our school at the moment we cater for 117 of our 915 students with special provision and in-class support and literacy classes—all the sorts of things that you try to get good value for with the money that comes.

CHAIR: I am sorry to interrupt but we have limited time. We probably have a fair bit of that information in the document and if we can proceed to questions we will probably flesh out some of those things. We also have your submission. We appreciate that case study information but I think we will move on.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: A lot of witnesses have talked about the lack of transparency in the funding and how the department classifies children with special needs and disabilities, and the changes in identification. A lot of witnesses have said they want more emphasis on functionality, not purely diagnosis, but we have also heard there is a place for knowing what you are dealing with. Do you have any strong views on improving how the department identifies, funds and accurately assesses what the needs are going to be in schools?

Ms P. SMITH: When you are talking about the department are you talking about the State department, because we do not deal with the State department?

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Yes. How do you do it then? Do you use a similar system?

Ms P. SMITH: In a sense the State department does impact because the definitions of special need and disability originate at State level, but in terms of our students accessing funding we do that through the Federal Government. Students in the Catholic and independent sectors have to be diagnosed—in a sense they have to be identified as being in a funding category, and at particular levels of need. The issue we have in terms of funding in particular is that we believe a child with a need or disability should be supported irrespective of where their parents choose to place that child. Because we also cover the early childhood sector, day care and preschools, we see children with special needs from a very early stage and our members teach them. Our view is the funding should follow the child. A child's needs should be identified and the level of funding should be supportive of that child.

As we know, many children move in and out of government and non-government sectors from time to time. One of the biggest concerns we have, and I guess this is a transparency issue, is how the funding can stop or fall into a hole at the transition points. We have a number of stories that our members and indeed parents tell us. A child with, say, Down syndrome moving from an early childhood setting into school and then perhaps going from a government primary school later on to a Catholic secondary school can face barriers that arise artificially at those transition points. We certainly believe in transparency, but identification of a need should be linked with funding and that funding should be able to be ascertained whatever the placement and setting. The focus should be on children and their needs irrespective of where their parents choose to place them. That movement in and out of sectors occurs very strongly.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Would it assist if there was a national partnership between the Federal and State governments so we had clarification and everybody using the same criteria and reviewing those criteria regularly?

Ms P. SMITH: We would be very supportive of a nationally consistent approach to the identification and funding of disabilities and needs, and we have said in our submission that would probably need to occur through the national partnership, either by adding to the current national partnership structure or by putting in an additional one. Yes, certainly we need some nationally agreed and consistent approaches. These days we are getting national curriculum and national assessment, so surely we can move to looking at greater national consistency and transparency with regard to the identification and funding of students with needs and disabilities.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Patricia, you outlined that there were some students who currently do not attract funding but clearly have special needs. Yesterday we heard from parents with children with dyslexia and dyspraxia. Are these conditions currently not funded?

Mrs MURNANE: No, they are not funded unless they are tied with some other category. They are the ones who might be the pains in the neck in a way, as I heard said before, because people do not understand their need. The point of identification is a way of communicating need. Yes, the whole of the world works in boxes, and that is how you get funding. That is how we categorise in our lives especially through government things, because that is how you attract some sort of system of funding. From a teacher's point of view, however, once they have got a so-called label they can start to think about what that really means. We know there are lots of good recommendations for looking after and teaching students with particular styles of disability or learning difficulty, but anyone with a specific learning difficulty, as they are generally called, does not attract funding. At the same time we are all employed to ensure that they get a proper schooling and feel really good at the end of their schooling, which is an important point for our society.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: In non-government schools how do you determine how many places you allocate for special education?

Mrs MURNANE: There is no allocation. The Disability Discrimination Act says you cannot do that, unless it is a totally unreasonable thing, because the Act talks about reasonableness and unreasonableness. When anyone applies at our school with special needs we alert our office, so we fill in a form and then write out a plan showing what that person needs and how they could be supported. Basically no-one is denied. For example, take the case of someone in a wheelchair. If you are in a multi-storey school and there is another Catholic high school nearby that the child could go to it might be suggested they go to that school because it is on one level. Basically they do not even do that because it is about finding capital grants money to put in elevators and other things for the kids because you have to physically modify the school. You cannot say no, and the kid has a right to be there.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I clarify one answer you gave when you said there was no funding for dyslexia and dyspraxia? I understand that to mean you are saying there is no funding available from the Catholic education authorities.

Mrs MURNANE: No, Commonwealth funding. It comes under the categories of Commonwealth funding. Sometimes you can get funding for dyspraxia under physical impairment if it is shown to be quite a disabling condition, but generally speaking no. You will get funding for people with language disorders only if it is severe, so you are looking at the bottom two per cent of students.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In terms of the block grants that are given to the Catholic education authorities, for example, there is nothing to stop them spending money on dyspraxia, just as there is nothing to stop the State Government spending its funds on dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Mrs MURNANE: I think the fact that I am employed as a special education teacher is evidence of a system, albeit the same as for the State Government's teachers, of using money to support children with needs. The Federal money would be between \$500 and \$1,000 per student per year on average at my school, which equates to about six minutes of teacher aide time per day—that is what that money looks like, lots of kids getting \$510 year. We are not talking big money.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So your funding comes out of the accumulation of student fees and the State and Federal block grants that go to the relevant Catholic education authorities?

Mrs MURNANE: I guess we would say so. I am employed as a teacher through the Catholic Education Office and that would come through the normal funding for teachers, but we pay for teacher aide-class support and some resourcing through that extra Federal money for students with disabilities.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So the Catholic Education Office accepts therefore that part of their block grant is in respect of children with special needs?

Ms P. SMITH: Dr Kaye, I am sure you have heard from the Catholic Education Commission as to how they structure their funding and the 11 Catholic dioceses in New South Wales. All would contribute significant amounts to the special needs area and that would include the payment of teacher and teacher aide salaries and also the provision—there is an ever-increasing demand—for specialist services in hearing and visual impairment, speech pathology services and school counselling et cetera. So, yes, there is funding, although never enough from the Federal Government, and also the Catholic employers will need to supplement that in various ways to meet the needs.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I take you to item 4.2 in your submission where you have your members saying to you, "Students with severe multiple disabilities who are funded for only one disability". This goes back to my previous question. It is for the education authority, whether it be an independent school or whether it be a relevant Catholic education authority, to make that decision about how they spend those funds on multiple disabilities, just as it is a decision of the State department of education to only fund on what they refer to as a primary disability.

Ms P. SMITH: I think in making that point we are pointing to the inadequacies of the funding model. When we say, "funded" in our submission we are really talking about the funds that are attracted from the Commonwealth Government for students with a fundable need or disability.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you are talking about special purpose funds. You are not talking about the block grants or the substantial block grant funds from both State and Commonwealth.

Ms P. SMITH: No. In our submission when we have used the word "funded" we are talking about the Commonwealth funds that are attracted by a student with a defined fundable need or disability.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How does a teacher in a Catholic systemic school know where the money is coming from? Is it labelled in some way? When they say that students with severe multiple disabilities are funded for only one disability, are they aware that that is just Commonwealth funding or just State funding and that there is no funding coming from the authority?

Ms P. SMITH: Before I worked for the IEU, and this is my sixteenth year with the IEU, I worked for eight years with Parramatta Catholic Education office as senior education officer for special purpose programs, which were the Commonwealth-funded programs. It would be clearly identified for a particular student what the disability was and what the funding was for.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But my question was in respect of teachers, not in respect of people who work for the organisation.

Ms P. SMITH: Do you know in particular what students are funded and for which disability?

Mrs MURNANE: Yes. As a learning support teacher, through the principal I am given a printout of all the students who are funded from the Commonwealth Government, their disability, how many points that is which equals how much money per year and then it is advisories about continual updating of documentation some kids have to do every two years for language, et cetera, and those sorts of things. So I know exactly how much accrues. That money at our school and in most Catholic schools that I know of goes to pay teacher assistants in the classroom. And then basically you try to pro rata the amount of teachers aid compared to the amount of money that the child is funded for. So if they are given \$1,900 or \$2,000 for some of them or \$500, that is how we try to allocate the teacher aid time with those students.

If I look at my document I just indicate we try sometimes to put those kids as carefully as possible and some of them in the same classes so we can double our money's worth, so to speak. So you have a teacher aid in there for more than the \$510 will spend. So we try to do it intelligently, which is why I put that out, that little thing, just to show ways of trying to be as ingenious as possible with the small amount of money, because I think people do get their money's worth but we know actually it is not enough for any of these children. It would not matter what school; it is just not enough.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I think you have added a very helpful appendix on special provision and I note that under students who have profound speaking, reading difficulties and those who have visual impairment and aural impairment and so on, you appoint someone to be a reader or a writer or an interpreter and that is very good. My question is: A lot of that work could possibly be done by the most advanced technology. Have you got the resources to move into the technological support?

Mrs MURNANE: Not particularly, and I think one of the reasons for, I mean, there is some quite advanced technology run by some people at my school. I think it is two things. One is actual time to have that sorted. If I devoted all my time to that, it would take me all my time; then there is nothing left for the rest. The other is that a lot of kids with learning needs need human contact. You are right, I think there is a lot of really good technology out there and I wish I had the time to devote to it but I do not. But they also need a whole lot of mentoring, coaching, a whole lot of human contact and in the end that is what we can provide and provide quite well and that is the way it is.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I do not dispute that at all. The only thing is that I have myself used both writing and reading technology, and I am amazed at what can be done to help.

Mrs MURNANE: We have a girl in year 11 with visual impairment, so an itinerant teacher comes by once a week maybe and she is putting some reading technology onto her computer. So we do have, various children do have those things and some kids have to use computers for all their word processing because they have very poor hand control. The other thing to note is also that special provisions is also about the fact that, as you know, in the school certificate and HSC, in the actual exams the children have to write. Therefore, that is why it is really important that we have them ready for those two specific things. All the way through, kids deserve that. But the other flow-on effect is if they are used to someone scribing for them, when it comes to the exam they do not have to go through the emotional barrier, which I think is so embarrassing someone's doing your writing for you.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I know last year at HSC there were some victories in this field. I wish you well.

Ms P. SMITH: Briefly, in 3.5 in our recommendations when we have urged the development of a framework for resource standards, one of our dot points is special technology requirements for high-needs students. So our members certainly tell us of this as an emerging issue. Technology though of course requires training and it also requires maintenance. So technology is wonderful but there are on-costs that always go with it which need to be built into the budgeting, but I think your point is well taken.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: If you wait longer today to some of the other people who are talking you will discover a source of funds for special technology and you will also discover a special source for the training of your teachers.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Can you elaborate on the duties of a teacher's aide?

Mrs MURNANE: Teachers aides vary. It also is dependent upon their skills. Teachers aides usually now do a TAFE certificate 3 in assisting students with special needs. So at my school they all have that. So they have quite a fair overall understanding of students and their needs. Their duties basically are they usually go in the classroom, assisting, encouraging, sometimes scribing, and maybe interpreting teacher instruction or reminding, those sorts of things. They will assist students with poor literacy, difficulties with research work. A lot of students have lack of organisation skills for many different reasons so they get them organised so they can do their tasks. We have them on playground duty at the moment.

I have a child in year 7, who has come in year 7 with autism and a mild intellectual difficulty. On motor skills he is just a beautiful boy but I was a bit concerned, well, he has very few social skills. So we have someone monitoring that he is okay, that he is in a good spot, maybe say, "Let's go to the library for a while" or

"Let's go down here". I would not let him go to the canteen by himself because there are far too many kids. Sort of being a bit of a guardian angel, do you know what I mean? So that is 40 minutes out of the teacher's time already just spent on that and that has to happen every day. I know I got a little bit more funding from the CEO to have that happen for that boy. He came out of the support class into a giant high school and he is doing very well.

Ms P. SMITH: Mrs Murnane is in a mainstream school and the aides in that setting play a very important role. In special schools—for example I go to Mater Dei at Camden which in my union organising role is one of the schools I deal with—teachers aides in schools with very high intervention need students play perhaps an even more significant role because they work as partners with teachers implementing the program which is often a very structured program. Students for example in Aspect schools, in schools like Mater Dei and Kingsdene, the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind, students are on very structured programs and the aides work in partnership with the teachers to present that program. Some of those students also have significant emotional and behaviour needs, and the aides in those special settings have often had very intensive training in how to deal with students' emotional and behaviour issues as well.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Can you give us an outline of the method of assessing the students with their disabilities? What method do you use to get that?

Mrs MURNANE: I will give you an example from yesterday, if that is okay. A couple of days ago I got an audiogram hanging on a little boy in year 7 on whom I had had no previous information from the primary school. We had tried and it seemed that no assessment had been done at his primary school. So it said he had a moderate hearing issue. So I was about to give him anyhow, so I always do what is called a reading analysis. So I did that for his reading accuracy and comprehension. I checked his phonetics, so it is his sound skills, his sounds knowledge. I then actually have done what is called a language screener. I have a masters so I can do that; otherwise you have to be a speech therapist.

That indicated, because it was very, very poor his result, I would suggest he probably has a severe language disorder. So now we have hearing and severe language disorder, and that is not an unusual thing obviously. Then I have also done what is called a k-bit test, which is screening for cognitive disability, because I can, and that is indicating that his verbal is very poor but nicely it had some really good hand-eye skills. So he has a lot of strength in visual learning, basically. I am thinking that is about average. So I have identified a real strength, apart from the fact that he is a great little person with a great personality—a nice little boy, a very settled child. So I have identified a strength from that, but I certainly have identified the weaknesses.

With all that information, because these are top order assessing tools that people, if you do that thing, people like speech pathologists and psychologists will accept them. Now I will put it through. Now I have to put in paperwork to ask for a special language assessment and I will do a cognitive assessment of him, trying to see for hearing issues, so that is about four more different sort of forms. I will also put in for a speech assessment through our one speech pathologist at Parramatta. I am also going to go through Nepean Hospital because that is the only issue we also put in the paper. Nepean Hospital runs a fantastic speech pathology department and service for children and adolescents but they are totally overwhelmed. So I am hoping to get maybe a Medicare assessment through there because these people do not have any money. They are in a low socioeconomic area. Then I might even get some lessons; you can get a few little bits of block therapy for that boy there.

Then I will get the school's special—he is already on special provision because we knew he had learning issues. I just had not got to get him so far this year. There have been other problems. That was yesterday, and that was probably about a quarter of my day and I still had work to do, but that is sort of how you do it. He who perseveres wins basically is how it works. Kids who are identified by teachers who will have the energy and who will persevere and who know how to get through the systems and you have to be skilled, but he who perseveres wins, you hope.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Most of your schools have that facility there?

Mrs MURNANE: Basically, yes, but not everyone will have 20 years experience like myself. But basically that is how they do it and how they are asked to do it and coached to do it and trying to train up to do, yes. That is how you do it, and it is a long road to get the few dollars extra.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I appreciate the way you put your case; it is very constructive and fair. I just want to ask a simple question in relation to the question that Dr Kaye asked earlier

about dyslexia and dyspraxia, where the issues of specific learning difficulties are not identified. Do schools try and find another label to try and get funding for these students?

Mrs MURNANE: No. There is no other label. Unless you can prove an intellectual difficulty, unless you can get the right school prove that your communication language skills are very poor, you cannot. You just have a specific thing, and it is quite easily identified. The trouble is it needs time and all these children need overteaching, as it is called, and a lot of time and effort. They have got a thinking potential but they have got these different processing issues, and especially if you are a person that knows what the world is like, you can really work it out, you are probably more prone to anxiety because you know one part of the world, part of the school world, is not working. You start to lose confidence and a lot of children go into anxiety issues or they go into acting-out issues.

So a lot of children with behavioural issues if they are caught early enough and we find out that they have not got fine logical processing skills or that however they are teaching the reading and numeracy it is not working well, or there are other things, we know that there is outside stuff but schools can control what is within that part. Unless that is caught early and dealt with and dealt with early then you have this business of kids' needs not being met, they are feeling bad and so they can act bad, so to speak, because they want to feel powerful like everyone else in the world.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Have the professionals that you represent had any input at all into the work the State Government is doing on developing a functional assessment tool and also the work they are doing in relation to the proposed school learning support program? Do you know if any of your members have participated in any of that?

Mrs MURNANE: I think it would be State Government business.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: But the definitions that come out the other side of the functional assessment are what you are using for your Federal funding. I just wondered if you are involved at all?

Dr JOHN KAYE: I do not think that is true.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Yes, it is, they have to use the State definitions for their Federal funding.

Ms P. SMITH: Could I just observe that one way we do participate through State bodies is, of course, the IEU is represented on the New South Wales Board of Studies and the Special Education Advisory Committee of the Board of Studies, we do have input there. We also have representation to the Institute of Teachers in New South Wales, which plays a role now in teacher education courses at university. So we do input in a range of ways to State authorities, but we do not always have a direct input, Christine, in the way that you were suggesting. As I said, we have 28,000 members in New South Wales, many of whom work directly or indirectly in the special needs area, and we always welcome opportunities for input and professional dialogue, and that is, in effect, why we are here today: We do welcome those opportunities.

CHAIR: That concludes today. We appreciate your presentation. We have met some wonderful parents and teachers and advocates today. Your parents and students are very lucky to have you.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

JENNIFER STEPHENSON, Director, Macquarie University Special Education Centre, Macquarie University, and President, Australian Association of Special Education, affirmed and examined:

FRANCESCA MacLAURIN, Immediate Past President, Australian Association of Special Education, NSW Chapter, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: There is a capacity for you to give us a brief opening statement if you would like.

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Even though I am here in two hats with two organisations I think there are things that we share in common. We are both dedicated to promoting evidence-based practice for the education of children with special needs and disabilities. We believe that a good research base exists to inform that practice, but that evidence-based practice does not always get into schools and it is not always endorsed in schools. We both also agree that teachers are pivotal to providing services to kids with special education needs, so teachers need to be appropriately trained and supported.

CHAIR: Can I just pick up on that last statement that you made about teacher training? It has been a comment that has been raised in a number of submissions we have received and in a little bit of our evidence. Could you flesh out your comments a little bit more in terms of your views on teacher training and the adequacy of that or where we need to pick that up if it is at all needed?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I think both the Macquarie University Special Education Centre [MUSEC] and the Australian Association of Special Education [AASE] would agree that all students with special education needs or disabilities should have a teacher who is appropriately qualified. How you are actually organised will vary on the placement of the child. I think that for students who are in segregated settings in schools or in special classes their classroom teacher should have a special education qualification. For those who are being included in regular classes, the student and the class teacher should have adequate support from a consultant who is a trained special educator.

At the moment we know that about 60 per cent of teachers in segregated special education schools in New South Wales have a special education qualification, which means that 40 per cent of them do not hold a special education qualification. There are not so much figures available about itinerant teachers who provide support to students who are fully included. I had a student last year who did a survey of the teachers providing behaviour support in two of the Sydney regions, and she found, I think, 54 per cent of those teachers have a qualification in special education. I do not know if that reflects the level of qualification of other support teachers, but, again, it is certainly nowhere near 100 per cent. So I think both AASE and MUSEC would agree that that level of trained personnel is just not adequate.

CHAIR: When you are talking about mainstream classes and complex needs, we have heard a lot about behavioural needs, et cetera, the general teacher training these days—it is a long time since I trained as a teacher so I am not up to speed with how much content there is—is there enough content in general teacher training for teachers in terms of some of the challenging behaviours they are likely to meet up with these days?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: That is a good question. All teacher trainees who are going to be regular classroom teachers complete one unit on the education of students with special needs. That unit has to touch base on a lot of content area—the legal position, effective teaching strategies, as well as behaviour management. So they probably get enough to be able to understand what programs might be put in place by a special educator, probably enough to put in place programs for students who have less high support needs, but I certainly do not think they are equipped to manage children with challenging behaviour.

This is another area of research for us at Macquarie. I have got a student at the moment who is surveying the teacher education programs in all Australian universities to look at the behaviour management content that regular teachers provide, because it is obviously an area of concern and an area that teachers report as very stressful and one of the things that contributes to teacher burnout and leaving the profession.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Just to follow on from that: How does that compare with the rural and regional areas?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I do not know. I would imagine that the percentage of qualified teachers in rural areas would be even less than it is in metropolitan areas, but I do not know, we do not have that information.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Is it available?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Possibly. You would have to ask the New South Wales Department of Education and Training [DET].

CHAIR: Apart from those recommendations with teaching, and we talked about the support to teachers out in the school environment, what about assessment? We have had a great deal of discussion about assessment and also talked about ways in which school counsellors interact with that process. Do you have a view on assessment at all?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: The Macquarie University Special Education Centre basically takes a non-categorical approach to special education in that we are not convinced getting a label, such as learning difficulties or ADHD or Down syndrome or whatever, is necessarily helpful to teachers in planning programs, that it is much more important to be able to assess kids' performance on the curriculum. So you need a curriculum that has been fairly finely sequenced and you need to be able to assess what students know, what their strengths are, what they do not know, where they need intervention. I guess that would be our perspective on assessment, and, again, for kids without high support needs many classroom teachers would probably have some level of skill there. But certainly if they were supported by somebody with a deeper level of knowledge about assessment, particularly curriculum-based assessment, they would be able to do a better job.

Dr MacLAURIN: The Australian Association of Special Education would support that view very strongly, a non-categorical approach to assessment, and perhaps in terms of the implications for teacher preparation and teacher training that teachers understand the need to fine tune assessment instruments in order to look at what is going on with the student rather than have the student in the assessment process in lock-step so that the student passes or fails the program. Indeed, it is the other way round; the program should, in fact, be designed and supported around the assessed needs of the student. Teachers need skills in making those assessments and making them accurately and making them in an ongoing way so that they are able to monitor the student process.

This level of training is specific; it needs to be explicitly addressed in the professional learning of teachers; and that is a very high priority, particularly in terms of students with special education needs. If it is a universal need among all students there is definitely a need among students who have special needs.

CHAIR: Your submission talks about the response to intervention model as a model that you think is something worth basing an approach on. Would you like to talk a little bit more about how you see that working?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: The response to intervention model is a model that has emerged in the United States, particularly around reading instruction. Essentially, it envisages instruction at three levels. So it starts off with all students receiving an appropriate curriculum, and you will be aware that in reading there is a certain amount of argument about what an appropriate curriculum is there, and research-based instructional strategies. Once everybody has received that initial level of appropriate curriculum and appropriate instruction there will be some students who do not respond to that, so when they are assessed against benchmarks they are not reaching them.

So the next level, the second tier, in response to intervention, is to set up small group instruction where you have students with similar needs getting more intense instruction in small groups. Again, that will rescue some children and there will be some, again, who fail that second level who will need much more intense, much more specific individualised intervention at the highest tier of intervention. You can see that this process is a way particularly of identifying children with special education needs who are placed in regular classes without having a diagnostic category. It looks at who learns to read. If you are having trouble learning to read you will be provided with additional support until in fact you do manage to learn to read.

It has been introduced in New South Wales in one form in the positive behaviour intervention and support, which is called positive behaviour for learning in New South Wales, where basically it is the same idea: a whole-school approach is taken to classroom management, classroom behaviour, school discipline—whatever label you want to put on it—and research-based practices are put into place at a whole-school level. Most children will respond to that. There will be small groups of students who do not respond who will need small group teaching for social skills or general how-you-live-your-life in school-type skills. And then again there will

be students with more severe problem behaviour who do not respond to that level of intervention who will need intense individualised programming and intervention.

CHAIR: What is your view on the proposed school learning support program of the Department of Education and Training? I think a trial is about to be rolled out.

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I think MUSEC and AASE are very supportive of the idea of making sure that each school has access to an appropriate support person to help teachers and students with special education needs. So the basic concept I think is a good one to provide that support at a school level, someone who will be familiar with the school, know the teachers and students and be able to provide that support. The problem, of course, is whether that support person actually has the capacity to provide the level of support that is needed. As we have both already said there are concerns that if teachers do not have additional qualifications they may not have the capacity to provide the level of support that is needed.

Certainly one thing that has troubled us at MUSEC is one of the ways the New South Wales Department of Education and Training [DET] has been approaching that. It is using a series of on-line courses that teachers can complete at home, with additional tutorial sessions, which, in itself, is a very good way to deliver information. MUSEC delivers a lot of its content on-line with discussion boards and that kind of thing. We were approached by New South Wales DET to see if we would consider giving some credit to those on-line courses so teachers could then come and get a formal qualification with us. As part of our response to that I looked in detail at two of those on-line programs. I have to say I have quite severe concerns about the content, particularly the one on motor coordination disorders, and I have raised those concerns with DET. I have received an acknowledgment of those concerns but I have not had any consultation with them.

The motor coordination one in particular appears to endorse the use of perceptual motor programs for children with special education needs. Those programs have been around since the 1950s and 1960s with the basic idea that if you can somehow improve the underlying deficits of students which, in this model, lie with their perceptual and motor skills, you will automatically get flow-on to improved academic performance. The bottom line is that research has shown consistently that perceptual motor programs do not improve academic skills and they do not even improve perceptual motor skills. I have real concerns that those kinds of programs appear to be being endorsed.

The one on dealing with kids with problem behaviour has probably got a bit more useful information in it but it is also mixed in with a lot of information that I would regard as not having a firm research base. We know a lot about how to deal with problem behaviour and how to put in effective programs for kids with problem behaviour, most of it coming from a background of applied behaviour analysis. If one read this particular on-line course one would certainly not be aware of that range of effective strategies. Some of the things that are recommended are quite bizarre, like hanging pictures on the wall to create a calming atmosphere, locating certain areas in the classroom with the ways a teacher would react to a student and using physical exercise as a way to help deal with problem behaviour, just ideas that I personally have not been able to find any research support for. With both courses, although they have some reasonable content, I certainly have concerns about some of the other content that is in them.

Dr MacLAURIN: I will comment from the point of view of AASE. Our concerns are somewhat mirrored in those of MUSEC. However, I would say they boil down to two things—teacher quality and the quality of pedagogy. Information per se is very useful; it gives us a great background and to know aetiology and to understand nomenclature associated with disability is terribly empowering from a conversational point of view. However, in terms of what happens for a teacher in the classroom with a student who has special education needs can I assure you that the quality of the teacher, no matter what the needs of the students, will always determine the outcome. Giving teachers information is step one.

Step two is ongoing professional monitoring, ongoing peer and mentor support with people who know what they are doing, helping them, alongside them, giving them the confidence, extra additional and very careful supervision by the senior people within the school who believe in the power of education to change the lives of these people. The second thing is the quality of the pedagogy. Good teaching practice is good teaching practice no matter what classroom it happens in. Information and the completion of on-line training for the satisfaction of yourself to build your confidence in what you are doing is one thing, but it does not make you a great teacher of students. You need more than that. So our concerns would be around the sufficiency and the fact that the affirmation, the acknowledgment of a good teacher and good teaching practice cannot be emphasised enough, and certainly is not emphasised within these activities.

CHAIR: Do you say you were not consulted prior to but only consulted after the event?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: About the on-line programs?

CHAIR: Yes.

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Yes, as far as I know, and I may be incorrect, DET has received no independent feedback on the content of those programs. They appear to be being evaluated by asking the teachers who participate in them what they think of them. So obviously teachers who know very little in those areas and receive quite a jazzy, engaging program enjoy it, of course they do, and they assume that the material and the information they get is reliable.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Particularly since it comes from DET. Apart from the issues you have with on-line training you seem to be generally in favour of the School Learning Support Program [SLSP]. Is that correct?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Insofar as I understand it, I think, having an appropriately qualified support person allocated to a particular school so they are familiar with that setting, is probably a good way to go. As Checka was saying, having someone who can work in the classroom with teachers, provide coaching and mentoring is an effective approach.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What do you mean by an "appropriately qualified" support person?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I would consider either an undergraduate degree in special education, although I think they are few and far between now with the requirements of the Institute of Teachers for undergraduate programs but certainly a post-graduate diploma or a masters in special education.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The equivalent of either one or two years' full-time post-graduate training?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Both are one-year full-time courses now.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The equivalent of one-year full-time training?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Will you briefly indicate what range of skills such a person would require for this model to work?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: They obviously need skills in curriculum-based assessment so that they can assess children against the required curriculum. They need skills in introducing teachers to explicit teaching strategies—explicit teaching strategies are not generally kindly regarded by mainstream educators but we know for many children with special education needs they are extremely effective, and that is what they need, particularly for basic academic skills in literacy and numeracy and also for cognitive skills such as the skills we use automatically for reading and comprehension.

They need skills in being able to monitor student learning. One only knows a program, no matter what research base it has got, is effective when that student learns and can demonstrate the learning. So special educators certainly need skills in helping teachers monitor ongoing student progress. Of course, because most of them are working in classrooms with teachers they need skills in coaching, mentoring, providing feedback to teachers so that the teachers themselves can develop those skills.

Dr JOHN KAYE: As you would be aware the program proposed by the department was cost neutral, that is to say, the provision of the additional in-school support was to be funded by the retraction of a number of other services. In the balance, if we play the cost-neutral game—which we should not because as every submission, apart from the one from DET, has said it needs more funding—what is being gained versus what is being lost? How would you measure that up?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I think that is a really hard question to answer. Many of the itinerant teachers would probably have relationships with the schools they service now, so in some ways there possibly would not be a lot of change in what they do, I think, having teachers formally allocated. There would

probably be some loss of expertise in that the one support person would be expected to deal with problems with literacy, numeracy, behaviour, whatever.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is it possible for one person to deal with all those problems?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Ideally, no, but certainly one person with a generic special education qualification is better at it than someone with no special education qualification.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer to "both MUSEC and AASE take a non-categorical approach". I take that to mean that you do not believe that we should label kids mildly intellectually disabled or autistic and so on?

Dr MacLAURIN: From the point of view of AASE the reason we have that view, and we have had that view for many, many years, is because it is not terribly helpful. Find me a student who has a significant support need, say, by dint of an intellectual disability or some sort of brain damage who does not have a communication disorder, who does not have some rigidity in their behaviour, who does not have some motor coordination problem! Find me a student who has some sort of an emotional substrate to their learning problems who can learn effectively, communicate effectively and behave socially appropriately! I suppose, the suggestion that a category will help is always diminished by the reality. I suppose that because AASE represents parents, teachers, principals, people with that interest, their experiences tell them that the categorisation is not a help. It used to provide some sort of support, I suppose, in terms of at least helping parents to come to some understanding about what might be the prognosis for their child but in terms of what teachers do it is of very little help. That is our view.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I have visited your centre MUSEC and also Cognitive Sciences at Macquarie University and I am very impressed with the work that you are doing. You may have heard me ask a similar question of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I have two granddaughters living at our home who are both doing special education degrees, one emphasis is in psychology and the other is in third year of special education. Every mealtime they talk about classes and where they are doing practical work and so on. First, their comments are that teachers are not coping in public schools in the classes they are in. Second, they really question what is happening in ongoing professional development for teachers.

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I do not get out into classrooms as much as I like but I certainly hear the stories that the students bring in to my sessions and I would say there are a lot of teachers out there who are not coping, and a lot of children with special education needs and disabilities who are not getting appropriate education.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And who have not had the training of either of my granddaughters.

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Exactly. In relation to the ongoing professional development, my own impression is particularly in segregated settings in special schools they have received very little in the way of appropriate professional development over the last 10 years. Probably 15 years ago there was a bit of a push to provide appropriate professional development, but they seem to be left increasingly to their own devices. Obviously, people who are left to their own devices will sometimes pick up ideas that are not appropriate. New South Wales has adopted the quality-teaching model as a way of looking at teaching practice and deciding what is appropriate teaching practice and as a framework for reflection for teachers to look at their own practice in their classrooms. This model is supposed to apply to all schools in New South Wales.

It does have a research base. Again it comes from the US and there was some research in Queensland as well. The problem with that is that there is absolutely no research whatsoever that looks at the application of this model to students with intellectual disability, students with autism, students with higher support needs. There is a little bit of work with students with learning difficulties—the American label, who were including the regular schools in America. So in a lot of ways the professional development that was provided under that umbrella is not always appropriate to the needs of teachers of students with high support needs. I think the push to provide professional development in that framework has kind of put people working with kids with high support needs in the background. So I do not think they have received appropriate ongoing professional development.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Would this be especially true for those in special purpose schools?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Yes.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I am not saying this in a pejorative fashion, and who have received only primary teacher training but are teaching at secondary level?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Yes, although when working with kids with really high support needs the level of your training is probably not all that relevant. In some ways primary teaching would be more appropriate because you are working with children who are learning foundation skills.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: In relation to your comments about appropriate qualifications, in answer to a question from Dr John Kaye, we heard earlier that if not qualified teachers then counsellors are acceptable and if counsellors are not there then aides would do the job of a special education officer or the particular person who would look after disabled students. What is your view in that regard?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Teacher aides or education officers can play a valuable role in the education of students with special needs because they can provide that one-to-one teaching that a regular class teacher may not be able to provide. Having said that, a teacher aide needs to work under the supervision of someone who does have the appropriate knowledge to design teaching programs, someone who can coach them in the way that they are to be carried out, someone who can design appropriate behaviour management programs and coach the aide in the way that they are to be carried out.

To take a child with significant behaviour problems and employ a teacher aide with little or no qualifications in education and attach that aide to the student as a means of moderating their behaviour is probably not a very effective way of teaching new behaviours to that student. A teacher aide will be only as effective as the supervision that is provided to them by a teacher and the school. It is often said that when we use teacher aides in that way that means the least qualified person in the school becomes responsible for the students with the most complex learning and behaviour needs, and that is not appropriate.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: In your summary of recommendations on page 3, the last dot points states:

The New South Wales Department of Education put in place policies and procedures to support teachers in implementing effective evidence-based practice and to discourage the misuse of resources in implementing unproven and disproven interventions.

What does that mean?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: One of the interests of people at the Macquarie University Special Education Centre is why teachers pick up and use practices that have been disproven, have been shown to be ineffective or are yet to be shown to be ineffective. I have already talked about perceptual motor programs as an example of a practice that is still reasonably widespread and those programs have been known for a long time to be ineffective. Some of the other issues that are out there at the moment are programs for children particularly with autism based on sensory integration. There is absolutely no research base to show those programs are effective in changing student behaviour. Yet schools are buying into them and providing programs based on that model of behaviour.

Many of the segregated special schools have installed multisensory environments, which are essentially rooms equipped with a range of electronic equipment that provides lights, sounds, smells, maybe operated by switches. Again there is practically no research on the use of multisensory environments with children with high support needs. There is no evidence that they deliver educational outcomes. Yet schools have been spending thousands of dollars on installing these rooms. They are quite popular in New South Wales. They are just some examples of practices that are out there that cause us concern. Of course, when resources, teacher time and money are put into those kinds of unproven programs, they are taking resources away from things that we know do work.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: In relation to evidence-based practice, why have organisations such as your own, which are experts in the field over so many years, not been consulted on the curriculum and ongoing updating of teacher training that incorporates evidence-based practice? I would have thought that would be elementary. Why is it not happening?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I think essentially with special education at the moment the Institute of Teachers does not endorse special education programs. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training [DET] will recognise certain teacher special education programs as meeting their needs. At the moment I guess it is a bit of a free for all as to what gets in those courses. Certainly we would like to have more input. As I say, we have made representations to New South Wales DET recently about some of our concerns.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: If your described course became the focus for education in this field, how would country people access it?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: Our course and probably many other courses in universities in Australia, all the materials are totally available online. So anyone who has access to a computer can access our courses. The seminars are all video recorded. At the moment we are experimenting with using Skype and QuickTime streaming.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You would offer it externally?

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: We offer it externally. They do not need to come to MUSEC [Macquarie University Special Education Centre].

CHAIR: That concludes our questions. Thank you very much for your attendance.

Dr MacLAURIN: On behalf of the New South Wales Chapter Committee, thank you for the opportunity to contribute and congratulations on your work. It is really important work.

Associate Professor STEPHENSON: I can only endorse Checka's comments.

CHAIR: Thank you. We think it is important and obviously the number of submissions we have received indicates that is clearly the view of a great many people. We look forward to continuing our dialogue with you. If you have any other information, by all means send it to us.

(The witnesses withdrew)

MAX COLTHEART, Professor, Macquarie University, Sydney, New South Wales, affirmed and examined:

JAMES JUSTICE BOND, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Welcome to the inquiry. Would you state the capacity in which you are appearing today?

Professor COLTHEART: I am the Director of Research at Macquarie University, or at least I was until two months ago. I do research on learning to read and developmental dyslexia.

Mr BOND: I am a student at Macquarie University.

CHAIR: Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement?

Professor COLTHEART: I think Jim would like to do that.

Mr BOND: I will try to make this as short as possible, but it is a long story. I started lobbying back in 1988 with the State and Federal governments about the inclusion of dyslexia as a disability. Prior to that, I first applied for a position with the Australian Protective Services, a Federal government department. I was qualified as a security officer. The CES [Commonwealth Employment Service] and the CRS, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service and employment agency, both assessed me, trained me, spent a lot of money. I attempted to gain employment as a security officer with government agencies. However, when I approached the medical they actually put down on my document that I was unemployable because of my dyslexia.

I popped along to the Human Rights Commission. I attempted to lodge a complaint and they informed me that dyslexia was not included under the Human Rights Commission Act. I made an appointment to see then Senator Tate and he decided to look into this issue. They were currently looking at the disability discrimination Act that was coming out in 1992. I sat down with his advisers, Geoff McDonald and various other people to vent this issue. However, in 1992 the Disability Discrimination Act did come through and it included dyslexia as a disability in legal terms. I thought, "My job is over and done with. Maybe I can get on with my life and move forward."

I applied for a job here in New South Wales with the New South Wales Police Service as a security officer, thinking that my job was done. However, they discriminated against me. I lodged a complaint at the Antidiscrimination Board, and won my case. I am able to say this in this forum, I received a \$60,000 for being discriminated against back in 1988 and also a lot of changes were made within the New South Wales police department. For discrimination that was the top money granted then. I started to apply for other positions and was never employed because of my dyslexia. To cut a long story short, I have been out there battling at schools, representing parents with this particular issue.

I first went to the Department of Education probably about three years after 1988, so early 1990s. I started to deal with the education department, teachers, principals, so on and so forth. They informed me, "We have a disability criteria that does not include dyslexia as a disability." In attendance at that particular meeting, what I can recall, there was Beverly Milson—she was State coordinator, I think, at the time—and she had about 12 people there from all these different divisions. What could we do about the issue? I said, "There is technology out there to assist people with dyslexia." They have known about that since probably the mid-1990s, probably 1997.

Bearing in mind at that point in time I was a council member for the Catholic College, Tuggerah, and St Peter's Catholic College, then known as the Mater Day Catholic College, and I was using that system to advance the issue of dyslexia. The principal was quite good. I ended up becoming the State council representative for Catholic school parents here in New South Wales and Canberra. So I know the problem in the system. Getting back to the Department of Education and Training, I started to lobby them really hard. I have been dealing with Brian Smyth King, the director of special needs.

CHAIR: I give you a word of caution. You need to be careful in making adverse comments about individuals.

Mr BOND: Fine. I dealt with the director of special needs and at the end of the day he informed me, reinforcing that they do not include dyslexia as a disability within their disability criteria. I pointed out to this

group of people and also the previous deputy director general, Dr Alan Lachlan, who was going to make it change and then he was subsequently sacked from his position about this particular issue. So I dealt with the director of special needs over these issues.

At the end of the day the Department of Education and Training refuses to put in their disability criteria the disability of dyslexia. I pointed out several times about the Commonwealth, the Human Rights Commission Act, the Anti-Discrimination Act of New South Wales and including the right of the child under the education article section 23 of the United Nations that Mr Baker pointed out yesterday in his evidence that dyslexia is also included. I cannot see why the Department of Education and Training is unable to put in their disability criteria the disability that is already recognised here in Australia. They are at total odds with the bigger laws of our country.

We have a State Government that is totally ignoring our laws and they tend to get away with it. However, at the end of the day I lobbied State Parliament. By the way, everybody in this room, thank you very much for supporting the full bipartisan support of the education amendment, education support for significant learning difficulty bill. Prior to that I was discriminated against by my local State member, Grant McBride—sorry. Discrimination did take place on my issue of dyslexia.

At the end of the day we had other changes made to the Anti-Discrimination Act for people with dyslexia too because this is what it is about; it is about dyslexia discrimination and we are not receiving appropriate care by our education department, Catholic education or the New South Wales education system. They are totally ignoring the issue and this is what we need to be dealt with. We get this legislation up and running and additional legislation to point out to the Department of Education and Training once again that dyslexia is to be included in their criteria as a disability.

At the end of the day, I met with the director of special needs, Brian Smyth King and with a few other people from the department. I asked Professor Colheart if he would attend the meeting with me. I needed somebody to read 20 suggestions and I was hoping demanding changes within our system after the education amendment went through. The director of special needs is sitting over at the table there and I said, "Well, Brian, what changes—sorry, the director of special needs.

CHAIR: I understand the story and how passionate you are about this in your advocacy. However, we have limited time so it would be better if we asked questions with respect to our recommendations.

Mr BOND: I understand this. At the end of the day this is a public hearing.

CHAIR: It is a public hearing and it is being published. If you want your evidence to be included, you need to be very mindful of making any adverse comment about people. Some of your evidence cannot be included.

Mr BOND: I understand where you are coming from. I asked the question: "What changes would be made?" No changes would be made. "What we do here in Bridge Street is totally different to what they do in Macquarie Street". Therefore, the Department of Education and Training is totally ignoring new legislation and the needs of people with dyslexia within education. They are daily discriminating against people with dyslexia and other disabilities. I am 50 years of age. I have been totally ignored by governments, both State and Federal governments in this issue, politicians and various other people. We have a new generation coming up here in this society and hopefully technology will be implemented within the Department of Education and Training and teachers training to deal with this problem, and it is a bad problem; 53 per cent of the prison population is illiterate. That is all I have to say to you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Bond. I appreciate that. We have limited time. Professor Colheart, would you give us your view on assessment of dyslexia in particular or other comments with respect to our inquiry and any recommendations we could make?

Professor COLTHEART: I do not have much to add to my submission. I will just make a couple of points. One is that literacy levels are low in Australia; official surveys have shown that. I am sure you will have heard from many parents who are complaining about the literacy of their children. There is no doubt that there is a big problem out there. The best way to think about this is that there are two reasons why a child might struggle to learn to read. One is the form of instruction the child is getting. That is a kind of child who if they were taught by evidence-based methods would learn to read fine. The technical terms for those children—not a very polite

one—is instructional casualty, but this is well recognised in the literature. Then there is a smaller but substantial group of children who will not succeed even if they are taught by best-practice methods in the classroom. They need something special. That is a good working definition of dyslexia; a child who will not succeed in learning to read even if exposed to best-classroom practice, and there are a lot of those children around.

It is hard to distinguish the two groups in a school where reading is not being taught very well, and there are many schools like that. So amongst the group of children who are not progressing in a school like that, some will be dyslexic and some will not. The other point concerns the label "dyslexia". It is quite often argued by the educational bureaucracy that it harms a child's self-esteem to be labelled as dyslexic, but if you talk to a parent, most parents will tell you, "I was delighted to hear that my son was dyslexic because it meant that he was not just dumb." So labelling is something that is welcomed by the dyslexic community, not rejected. That is all I want to say at the moment.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Why do you think that evidence-based practices have not been implemented in the curriculum for special education?

Professor COLTHEART: I think that would be a good question to ask after lunch to the people you will be speaking to you then. I do not know what the answer is. In other countries recently in both America and Britain there have been national surveys of the teaching of reading which have resulted in an emphasis on evidence-based methods in teaching and so the teacher training curricula now contain many courses on how children learn to read, why some struggle and what evidence there is about efficient treatment. This just is not happening in Australia. It is to do with faculties of education in universities. It is a question of who controls the curriculum because that is the only place where effective change can happen. It is not the teachers' fault they do not know what to do because they were not trained. It is the curriculum.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Do you have any comment on dyslexia, dyspraxia and other forms of special educational needs that are not identified? Dyslexia is a huge issue in this modern age and everybody understands we must do more about it. We will pay a cost in the end for dyslexia and the many conditions that are not identified and are swept under the carpet and ignored; society always pays, whether it is gaol, unemployment or health needs.

Professor COLTHEART: That is very well documented. There is an economic cost to having less than a literate population, as well as personal and social costs to the people with dyslexia themselves. There are two kinds of costs. That is something that government should be interested in but as far as we can tell departments of education in various parts of Australia are not persuaded by that otherwise their curricula would be different; they would have courses in special education as part of teacher training just explaining what these different conditions are—what is dyslexia, what is dysgraphia, what is dyspraxia? It is not very hard to explain this and it is not very hard to identify it in the classroom but you need to be trained to do that. Teachers are not being trained to do that.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Are there any other States or countries doing it better that can be used as models?

Professor COLTHEART: Certainly other countries, in Britain. First of all, it is possible to be diagnosed as dyslexic. If you are diagnosed as dyslexic the options you have are to go to a special school for dyslexic children—and there are State schools for dyslexic children—or if not, there is a legal mandate that the school must provide an individualised program for each child diagnosed as dyslexic. This empowers the parents. They know that they can sue the school if there is not such a program, so they can ask to see this program. So things have turned around very well in the United Kingdom. It is similar in Canada and North America. We are very behind here.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You said what was needed was for faculties of education to do pre-service training to teach trainee teachers how to identify the conditions of dyslexia, dyspraxia and what was the third one?

Professor COLTHEART: Dysgraphia, which is a spelling disorder. Dyslexia is about reading dysgraphia is about spelling.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You did not then go on to say that we also need to teach pre-service teachers how to deal with the problem.

Professor COLTHEART: We need at least to teach them how to identify the problem. Then the question is: If teachers can identify children who are dyslexic, what should happen to them? There are a number of possibilities. One is to have dyslexia clinics that children can be referred to. The other is to have specialised teachers, who focus on helping people with dyslexia. You could have people with a master's degree in special education who are working in the schools. That teacher's job in the school will be to make recommendations about the children being identified as dyslexic, so there is an in-school solution and an out-of-school solution, and one is much more expensive than the other. Dyslexia clinics are expensive.

I would like to see both those things happening because that saves the child who happens to be in a school where there is not very good provision, at least there is the possibility of going to a clinic. Then there is the question of how to pay. The dyslexia clinics that exist are expensive and so a large proportion of the population are cut off from them. There is a big political solution to try to find dyslexia clinics that are funded or at least means tested or free outside of schools, but even within schools. If every teacher knows how to recognise dyslexia and if some of the teachers are trained on how to treat dyslexia, that is going to help a great deal. Again it comes back to the curriculum.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The changing of pre-service training in the direction you suggest is actually not a high-cost activity?

Professor COLTHEART: No.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The provision of additional teachers is a very high-cost activity going up the hierarchy, as is the provision of clinics. Of course, all these costs are justified by reduction in social costs later on, if indeed you need to have a utilitarian view of how these things work. From a human rights point of view you should not worry about those sorts of things. Do you have a figure of what it would cost us to address the dyslexia problems of New South Wales?

Professor COLTHEART: If the only thing that happened as a result of this inquiry was that the teacher training curricula changed so that teachers left their pre-service training knowing what dyslexia was and how to identify it, that would be very, very cheap. It is a question of whether you can exert any influence on the curricula. It is not a question of costs, it is a practicality question: how can you change the curricula in teacher training courses? If that is the only thing you did, you would help a lot of people.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Mr Bond, can you read or write?

Mr BOND: I have problems in writing my own address and my reading skills are extremely limited, like cat, dog and that is all.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Could I throw a bouquet here. Was it one of the members of the secretariat who actually typed up your submission?

Mr BOND: Absolutely, and thank you very much.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Thank you for doing that because many people do not understand that if you cannot read or write, how on earth are you going to get your submission into an inquiry like this? And you cannot even read it once you have got it.

Mr BOND: That is correct.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Professor Coltheart, firstly I understand that you have been elected as a world leader in the field of cognitive sciences and that professional association. Congratulations on that. We love to see Australians getting to the very top level in that field. Also, recently the Australian Government and Her Majesty have honoured you at the highest level. Congratulations.

Professor COLTHEART: Thank you.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You spoke about teacher training. The Committee has raised these issues with other people, including the Teachers Federation and so on. I understand that you have been doing some specialised training in this field with regular teachers in the public school system.

Professor COLTHEART: Yes, that is true. Some schools are enlightened in this instant, and they realise that this is a problem. They also realise that the teachers at the school cannot do much about it because they have not been trained. So we go to the school, a group of four or five of us from my research centre, and spend a day or two doing post-service per training.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Are you funded to do that through the Department of Education and Training?

Professor COLTHEART: No. We do not charge.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You do not charge; I think that is a very interesting comment. You are training public school teachers in the most advanced way to both recognise students with severe learning difficulties and how they best can respond to them?

Professor COLTHEART: That is true, particularly on how to assess them, because we have developed an online website, which is also free, for parents and teachers to administer remotely the reading tests for their children in order to detect not only whether the child has a serious problem but which type of problem it is. I should mention that there is more than one kind of dyslexia. So there is no single treatment for dyslexia, it depends on which subtype of dyslexia you have. The subtypes are fairly easy to describe. Even parents grasp the idea of subtyping and can test their own children.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Professor Castle and yourself have developed a free access online training program at the Macquarie Centre for Cognitive Sciences?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes, that is right.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: What have you learnt about the effectiveness of the use of technology?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes, this is a difficult point. If someone is adult dyslexic, there is no evidence to suggest that they can effectively be taught to read, partly because they are an adult and less able to learn than a seven-year-old, and partly because they have learnt so many ways of getting around this problem that it is probably appropriate mostly to think, for an adult, of technological aids. I am a bit more dubious about saying, "Here is a seven-year-old dyslexic child, that child will never be able to learn to read so let us put the technology in straight away". I think of the technology as important, but as a last resort. Even with the severely disabled.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: They need that human mentoring and support?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Could you clarify what technology you are talking about?

Professor COLTHEART: A variety of things. For instance, text-to-speech of various kinds. There is software for that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you are not talking about learning aids, but reading and writing replacement aids?

Professor COLTHEART: That is correct.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I will follow-up on that point with Mr Bond. You said you are currently a student at Macquarie University. How are you progressing with technology?

Mr BOND: I was unable to gain access to education until I came across this type of technology. I am doing extremely well at Macquarie University. I am doing a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Political Science and my last assessment I got very honoured marks. So that is how I am coping with university.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Your technology is primarily reading replacement and writing replacement?

Mr BOND: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: My question relates to evidence-base. In reading and writing over the long years there has been lots of debate about evidence and appropriate reading processes. I usually do not bring in personal examples, but I will. I have a son who did not read until he got to high school and had the old-fashioned teacher writing on the board while he spoke the words and then he learnt. So I understand the ramifications of best practice. Do we still have debates about evidence of best practice and reading? Is there still controversy about who knows what best?

Professor COLTHEART: We do not think there is any controversy in Britain or America, because the national surveys there went into literature in great detail and then they were empowered by the government. For example, schools in America do not get funded unless they use a program that is one listed as a best practice program.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: But that used to happen to us.

Professor COLTHEART: Yes. And it should happen again.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: That is why my son did not learn to read.

Professor COLTHEART: That is right. One of the problems is that a lot of parents who come to me ask what to do and I say, "Have you access to any retired teachers who would not mind helping your child?" Retired teachers know all about it. Teachers who graduated in 1970s or 1980s have rather low levels of literacy themselves. There has been a variety of studies showing that phonological awareness, which is really important for learning to read, is poor in the graduates of teacher training programs. If you ask the teacher "How many sounds are there in 'chat'?", the correct answer is three, but you often get the answer "Four". There are four letters.

That is what they are supposed to be teaching five-year-olds: that "chat" has three sounds in it: "ch", "a" and "t". Young children will often say "Four", and so you have to teach them that "c" and "h" are not sounds, they are letters. How can you teach a child that if you cannot do it yourself. So what came out of teacher training programs was very different in the 1970s compared to the 1950s and 1960s.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: What do you say about "yacht"?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes, we have to face up to the fact that the English writing system is the worst in the world. There are ways around that. It is only 25 per cent of the words of English that are like that, and "yacht" being one of the worst. Even if all you could do when faced with a new word is to sound it out, you will get "yacht" wrong, but you will still get 75 per cent of words right. So it is better than nothing. Then you have to face up to the fact that there are these other words that have to be memorised. If you are reading Italian or Hungarian there are no such words. Ours is the worst there is.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So many persons who cannot read actually impress their memory skills, so they can trick you.

Professor COLTHEART: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Excuse the expression, because I have been going on about the problem with labels, but what sort of diagnostic test is there? What is the diagnostic test for dyslexia?

Professor COLTHEART: If the child is in a school where most of the children are learning well, and if you look at the methods of teaching and reading that are being used there and they are evidence based, you can be pretty sure that any child at that school who is doing badly is dyslexic. So you can see the complications. If the teaching is bad, it will be very hard to assign a diagnosis without professional help. If the teaching is good, children who are two years behind their chronological age in reading will be dyslectic.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: To some degree or other?

Professor COLTHEART: To some degree or other. Then the question is: Which kind of dyslexia? That is a technical question, but it is a secondary question. Once you find that these children are two years behind their chronological age, something needs to be done about them. They need specialised diagnosis and specialised treatment.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I find this very interesting. You have identified Britain as a country that has taken various steps in addressing dyslexia. Are there any Australian States that have taken similar steps?

Professor COLTHEART: No.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is there any reason behind that?

Professor COLTHEART: Again, the different States are different with respect to teacher training, but a survey of teacher training all the way across Australia showed that no State was doing well in teaching teachers about reading. That was a national survey of every single teacher-training course. They were asked: What proportion of the curriculum is devoted to teaching about reading? That proportion varied from 0 per cent to 5 per cent. Even the best ones are only spending 5 per cent of their curriculum on teaching teachers about learning to read. And 5 per cent is not enough.

CHAIR: Yesterday a parent spoke about technology, not text-to-sound, and vice versa. Could you explain about that technology?

Professor COLTHEART: You have to distinguish between technology that you use to replace reading or technology that you use to help people learn to read when they are children. There are lots of very good computer-based programs, evidence-based, that have shown to be effective, which children can use at home on the computer to teach them things like elementary phonics. It is not as if there is not anything out there, there are five or six programs to teach children phonics that they can use on the computer, which have been experimentally verified as effective. That is technological in the sense that the child can sit in front of a computer and practice as much as they like. The programs are designed to be fun; they are games. But we know that they do teach the children, so that is the issue—technological assistance, or technological learning.

CHAIR: I am sure they that Committee will hear about the increases in funding for Reading Recovery in the next 24 hours. Do you think that Reading Recovery will identify more children with dyslexia, or without the identification will that still be a problem?

Professor COLTHEART: I am not sure what you mean about the funding, what will it be for?

CHAIR: There is a proposal to increase the number of support teachers in the Reading Recovery program at the early stages.

Professor COLTHEART: I think that would be very unfortunate. Reading Recovery is not cost-effective. There have been many studies showing that there are better programs that are much cheaper. Reading Recovery is very expensive because it is one on one. That is the first problem with it. Secondly, it is quite inflexible in the sense that the bottom X per cent of children in the class are given Reading Recovery. In some classes the bottom X per cent will be really good readers, and in some other classes nobody will be a good reader. That is just a very ineffective approach. There are many things that are better than Reading Recovery, but Reading Recovery has a very strong lobby. At the moment there is a large battle in England about what slice of the cake Reading Recovery will get. I would be against Reading Recovery on the grounds that studies have shown that it is not as cost-effective as many other programs.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The Committee got a lot of positive feedback from teachers about Reading Recovery, and that it really does reintegrate kids back into the educational stream and gives them access. Is your criticism of Reading Recovery in respect of the way in which it is allocated by just being given to the bottom X per cent? I think it is 5 per cent of the class.

Professor COLTHEART: Yes, something low like that. That is a major issue.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Or, is it what happens once the kid goes in Reading Recovery?

Professor COLTHEART: Two objections. The major one is the first one. It is simply blindly given to the bottom X per cent without any assessment. You should assess all those children. You would find that in one class no child is having a problem, but in another class they are all having a problem. So, you give Reading Recovery to the children who need it, not to the bottom X per cent.

The second problem is, as I said before there are different kinds of dyslexia. So a single program will not help all children. In Reading Recovery there is no attempt to decide whether a bad reader is a bad reader of subtype A, and so they need that specialised help. For example, the two major subtypes of dyslexia are, first, not knowing the sound rules, so the person is very poor at phonics, and, second, having a very small sight vocabulary, so the person does not recognise many words. When given the word "yacht", that person would pronounce the word as it looks, rather than pronounce it as "yot".

When given the word "have", a very common word, that person would read it as "hayve". These are two different patterns. One is not knowing the rules, but someone who reads "yacht" as not sounding like "yot", and "have" as sounding like "hayve", they know the rules beautifully and do not need to be taught phonics, they need to be taught sight words. Those are the two big patterns. They need different kinds of treatment, and Reading Recovery does not attempt that kind of differential diagnosis.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In the interests of keeping the baby with the bath water simultaneously, are you suggested that we abandon Reading Recovery? Are you suggesting that it be more appropriately targeted?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And that there be modifications to it to identify the specific reading problems that students present with?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes. If it were replaced with something else, that might be more cost effective. Instead, if it did two things, and one is assess children first to see if they need help, and then try to differentiate the help according to the type of problem they have, then Reading Recovery certainly would be far better than nothing.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: At the moment it is done totally off the bottom percentile?

Professor COLTHEART: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Is it?

Professor COLTHEART: I think you should ask people from the department.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Yes, we will, later on.

Professor COLTHEART: Ask them those two questions. One, how do you decide whether a children should get it or not? Two, what about different subtypes?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Okay, and how you target what is required.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: It does not suit everybody.

Professor COLTHEART: That is right.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: You mentioned that it was not particularly effective nor was it cost effective, which are clearly criteria for evidence-based policy decision-making. Would the money be better spent on other programs? Is it worth retaining Reading Recovery because we have gone down that road or are there better programs?

Professor COLTHEART: That would be itself the subject of a useful inquiry provided that most of the people who were discussing this were scientists.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Can you not get all the scientists to agree?

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: That is the problem. We do not have enough scientists.

Professor COLTHEART: If you want to judge whether somebody is a distinguished scientist you could look at the learned academies like the Academy of Science and the Academy of the Social Sciences. You could pick out everybody there who has been elected to one of those academies, and so is an outstanding scientist, who works on reading. That is a fairly simple thing to do. You will get seven or eight people. That is an objective criterion. These people have been recognised by their peers as experts in reading. Then you just ask them to evaluate. A lot of those people will also be experts in program evaluation. There you will not have any political interference, if I can use that expression. Those people will make a recommendation and then it will be up to Parliament and the department to decide what to do. The question is: would you find a program that is more cost effective? The answer is yes. This has already been done once. The State Parliament several years ago commissioned a report into the efficacy of Reading Recovery. The report said that it was not very efficacious and the response to that was to suppress the report and increase the funding for Reading Recovery.

CHAIR: Is that right?

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Why are we not surprised? Not enough scientists—we need more scientists!

CHAIR: I think we have gained a great deal of information today from your evidence and perhaps we might continue that conversation in terms of getting some information.

Mr BOND: I would like to say something. Just because you are dyslectic does not affect your intelligence, not in my case and that of many other people I know. This is a misperception in the community about dyslexia: "You're dumb, you're stupid. Sit at the back of the classroom." That is the way you are treated all your life. I have dealt with parents lately in public schools and Catholic schools, and nothing is being done about this particular issue. I have an IQ of 143, which is in the top 5 per cent in Australia and yet I am unable to read and write, so please do something effective about this issue, and do it quickly. People are committing suicide and there is a prison population and everything else that comes out of this. We need the disability criteria to include dyslexia as that legislation states. We need leadership from you people, our politicians, who we elect to be leaders. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Thank you both for coming in.

(Luncheon adjournment)

MICHAEL COUTTS-TROTTER, Director General, Department of Education and Training, and

DEONNE SMITH, General Manager, Access and Equity, Department of Education and Training, sworn and examined, and

BRIAN SMYTH KING, Director, Disability Programs, Department of Education and Training, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: As you would be aware, we have the capacity for you to make a brief opening statement.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Thank you for the opportunity to appear. I just want to comment on a couple of the major factors that influence the environment in which we try to meet the needs of the children we serve. The first is the rise in the prevalence and complexity of disabilities, especially autism and mental health. As a community we are putting greater value on human diversity and asserting the rights of children with disabilities to be educated on the same footing as all children in mainstream schools. There is a quite proper expectation that schooling will achieve something valuable and largely measurable for every child, and that in part explains why funding for disability and special education is rising so rapidly and has risen from \$600 million a year to about \$1.1 billion in the past six years and that the average cost per student has risen from about \$15,000 to \$23,000.

There is a range of perspectives at play here. There is the availability of good evidence in some areas and poor evidence in others. The task of building a base of evidence on which we can judge what is the best response in particular circumstances is very important and there is, to a degree, somewhat of a tension between the convenience of the school system and the choices that parents want to make for their children. In other words, more parents want more children better integrated into the mainstream of education and that comes with challenges but it carries with it an increasing expectation for all of us that every teacher will be well able to meet the needs of every child in every classroom. To achieve that is an extraordinarily difficult task but that is what sits behind the expectations of all parents for their children but particularly parents of children with disabilities and particular learning needs.

CHAIR: I guess it is about expectations of parents. You would be aware that we have had in excess of 730 submissions to this inquiry.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes.

CHAIR: So there is significant interest in this inquiry and significant concern from parents and teachers alike. As a parent my children tell me when I say I am disappointed in their behaviour that is the highest criticism. It is disappointing that the department could not get its act together enough to give us a submission until Thursday.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I can only apologise.

CHAIR: So we have had limited time to go through your submission but in the limited time we have had I am not sure that it addresses a number of the issues that we wanted to get to the bottom of in terms of education provision. You may need to take this on notice but it would be useful if you could give us the information, for example, on the breakdown of the number of students with disabilities and special needs in each category of schools for specific purposes, support classes in mainstream schools and those in mainstream classrooms.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: It is provided in graphical form but we can provide it to you in that form as well and we will.

CHAIR: Thank you. In terms of increasing demands, you talk about an increase in the number of students with disabilities and special needs. Is that coming from the data that you collect?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes it is. When you look at the \$1,100 million we spend, about \$900 million of that is driven by demand. In other words, it is driven by a disability confirmation and a choice by a

parent to commit their children to public education. So the overwhelming majority of the budget is driven by demand in that fashion. The significant areas of growth are students particularly with autism being accommodated in regular classes and also there are shifts in the mix of support classes between various forms of disability but overall the number of support classes and the number of children in support classes continue to rise.

CHAIR: I note that Monash University undertook an inquiry in 2007 into portable funding models for students. Did you participate in that inquiry? Did New South Wales submit to that inquiry?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I will ask Mr Smyth King because I am not aware.

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes we did.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes we did.

CHAIR: You put a submission into that inquiry?

Mr SMYTH KING: It was not an inquiry; it was a research paper.

CHAIR: So you did submit?

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes. Every State and Territory did.

CHAIR: That looked at the possibility of having funding connected to the student and staying with them. That study concluded that funding levels for students with disabilities and special needs are inadequate. I guess based on that, and you telling us the number of students is increasing, what is your view in terms of the current level of funding for students with disabilities and special needs?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: My view as a director general is that I always like more resources to do the work we need to do.

CHAIR: What is your unmet need? Do you have an assessment of that?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: No, I do not have an assessment of unmet need, but just to complete that thought the budget for public education rose by nearly \$900 million last year—a 10 per cent increase—and some of that money was within that \$1.1 billion but a lot of that money is additional funding under national partnerships that directly targets schools based on an assessment of need, which includes importantly need as determined by the children's results in literacy and numeracy assessments. Just back to my opening remark about the expectation that schooling will achieve something valuable and measurable for every child, what marks New South Wales out when it comes to literacy and numeracy assessment is that about 1 per cent of children are exempt from that assessment. In other words, if you look at Victoria we have a half to a third the number of children exempt from NAPLAN assessments.

In other words, a lot of children in this cohort are participating with proper expectations that their literacy and numeracy will improve in that assessment. That assessment, among other things, does drive additional funding outside of disability programs into the school serving those students. So when you come to questions of funding you have to properly consider the whole of the budget that is available, and the whole of the budget that is available, thankfully in recent years, has been rising. I would like it to rise more and faster. The director general of health would like the same thing. The director general of human services would like the same thing. Unfortunately, there are complex and difficult competing priorities that have to be worked out by governments and Parliaments.

CHAIR: Your submission talks about—and we have talked about this with other witnesses—a mix of categorical and census models for funding and a mix of those two things. Have you investigated other ways or better ways of allocating funds?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We will be, and I will turn to that. There is always going to be a mix of funding models. The recent reviews that I have read agree on one thing: that there is no single approach that works best. It is quite appropriate to establish a categorical identification for some children for a range of reasons, but we are experimenting, as you know, in one region and also in 265 schools, with an approach to

allocating funding that does not require a disability categorisation, that aims to equip every school and every classroom to identify the learning needs of children as early as possible and be able to respond to those needs within a school or across a group of schools, which is moving from responding to an acute problem to trying to intervene earlier and more effectively.

What we do need in our armoury is a better tool to assess the functional needs of some of the children we are talking about. So we have some assessments—NAPLAN, Best Start—but they do not adequately get to the kind of detailed assessment of learning emotional and social need that school communities need to respond to the needs of those children. We have been working on the development of a functional assessment tool. Nobody in the world, as best I understand it from my expert colleagues, has really got a tool that is entirely satisfactory. We are proposing to trial that functional assessment tool with 2,000 students later this year and we will learn from that. But it will not be a panacea; it will be an additional tool; it will be a very useful, I hope, additional tool. But once you identify need you then have to identify how you respond to that need. So it will help us but it will not answer all of our challenges.

CHAIR: The number of departmental staff here today that were taking notes will give you some feedback later on some of the commentary about that and in particular some criticisms that we heard about today, the online training—

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Can I tackle those?

CHAIR: I guess they will give you that feedback.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Can I have an opportunity to describe the online training?

CHAIR: We have some other questions at the moment. You had a lot of staff here and they took notes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I will ask you the question.

CHAIR: In terms of funding also, if you can take it on notice just to give us an understanding of where the money goes, Federally to State, down that way?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Do you want me to just quickly go through the headline figures? Do you want me to take it on notice?

CHAIR: It would make it quicker and easier if you could just give us a rundown of where it all goes.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Within the \$1.1 billion and then elsewhere?

CHAIR: Yes. I think it would be useful for the benefit of our inquiry.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are asking for a breakdown of the entire \$1.1 billion into categories?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Schools for specific purposes, support classes, integration and students receiving additional support for their learning?

CHAIR: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Also, can you cut it in another direction as to what that money is actually spent on?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Sure. It basically understates the expenditure in the area. It does not include school counsellors; it does not include behavioural support in mainstream settings. It is \$146 million. It does not include any of the support services—cars, travel, phones, computers—all of the practical tools that people need to do their work; it is essentially salaries for a range of occupations.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So that can be explained on the—

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I will break it down for you, absolutely.

CHAIR: If you want to do that that is fine—just for my own sense of understanding.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: And mine. It is very complicated.

CHAIR: We have had a number of discussions about the old chestnut of assessment and categorisation and giving children labels and also about who does that within the school system and about school counsellors. What is the department's view? I think you have put something in your submission in relation to that.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Our view, to be tested in 221 schools in the Illawarra south east, is that for children with lower support needs we think the processes that schools, that counsellors, that families and parents and health professionals outside the school system go through in order to establish a categorisation to attract funding up to \$6,000 a child is not a good use of people's time. I have met a number of parents who have described to me their own personal expense in going through that process. But also the pressure on their child to be categorised and then have a category confirmed and confirmed again. In this case it won support of \$1,300; the process would have cost \$5,000 or \$6,000 per family.

So we think there is a better approach there that will free up the time of counsellors to do other work, that will relieve from schools and parents and experts the pressure to produce a categorisation that attracts funding for no reason other than to do that, and a change of culture within our department that really focuses the responsibility we all have to identify need as early as possible and respond as early as possible, regardless of the needs of the child. It is an open question what that really will mean in practice to the work of counsellors, and we will be looking very closely at evaluating that and publishing that evaluation from the Illawarra south east trial.

CHAIR: In terms of school counsellors, have you got a contingency plan, given the number who are close to retiring?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: The average age of 54, yes.

CHAIR: I was going to say baby boomers.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We are seeing that people in early middle age continue to work on. There are a variety of things that we could do, and I will provide information to the Committee about what kind of encouragement and supports we offer people to undertake education to become school counsellors. But what you are seeing under the national partnership arrangements and, to a degree, under the child wellbeing system changes, is an attempt to develop a range of health services, allied health services and paraprofessional support in and around schools—everything from youth workers through to psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists—and to try and make those services more readily available in and around schools, because the task of getting a child between a range of therapy services outside school is just heartbreakingly difficult for a lot of parents. So the extent to which we can bring those services into or close to the school makes things a lot easier for parents and families.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: We heard a lot today about the need to be more evidence-based in setting up training programs, in setting up policies. We had experts from the Macquarie University Special Education Centre and the Australian Association of Special Education, we had Professor Max Coltheart, internationally renowned and recognised, and they all say they want to be consulted in setting up appropriate effective and cost-effective evidence-based training and policies and helping in the setting of the curricula for special education. When are we ever going to see that happen?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We are working with Professor Coltheart on the Dalwood service. They are right to say that, and I think it is fair to say that, particularly within the broad education field, there is room for better quality, more rigorous evaluation of what we do. Under the national partnerships, for example, in literacy and numeracy we are evaluating the effectiveness not just of reading recovery but multi-lit and a range of other intervention programs that are either whole-class or one-on-one interventions, because what you can fairly say is that with most interventions that we work with and are effective the question is are they the most effective intervention for that child or group of children in that circumstance? I think it is equally fair to say that there is more evaluation we can do to inform those decisions.

So we are serious about this. We have established an evaluation panel for the public school system and the non-government school system in support of the national partnerships to get to many of these questions. It involves a range of leading academics—Denise Bradley and the like—and they will really put pressure on us to demonstrate the worth of the policies we choose to pursue, and, again, those evaluations will be peer-reviewed, publicly available and provide feedback into the process of building an evidence base. So the work we do on the functional assessment tool, likewise—evaluated, assessed, building the evidence base. The work we are doing in the school learning support teacher trial in the Illawarra, similarly. We want this to be credibly evaluated independently of the agency so it adds to the stock of academic and educational evidence and it leaves people in no doubt that we are open-minded and guided by what the evidence tells us about what works.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: There is a lot of concern in the submissions and from the witnesses that appeared before us about dyslexia. It is widely recognised internationally yet there is an overwhelming belief that we are not recognising it and not intervening early enough, not giving enough support to the students and parents feel frustrated. When are we going to see a change?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We do not do anything perfectly. I think our response to the learning needs of children with dyslexia can be improved. We are not alone in not establishing it as a category of disability. There is the question of categorisation and there is the question of how effectively we meet the learning needs of the children in that group, and I think there is more work to do. We are working in the Hunter Central Coast, for example, with the WYNN technology; we are trying to continue to improve what we do, and that in a large part, in any organisation that relies on such a large number of teachers and other professionals, is about investing in the professional capacities of our teachers.

It is about developing high-quality training and support materials, professional development materials. We have been developed for us at Cambridge University and Warwick University in the United Kingdom a training model, for our staff, of dyslexia that will add to the modules we have got on autism and behaviour and motor skills, and language and curriculum access. I know some comments were made about the quality of those materials. They are built on academic evidence out of the United Kingdom. They are high-quality materials produced by teams of academics, tested against evidence. They have got an experience of seven to eight years in the United Kingdom, a shorter period here. They are high-quality materials. The extent to which they have been evaluated in practise, they evaluate extraordinarily well. We are missing training on dyslexia. That is being developed and we want to provide that.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: We want to see ongoing training identification because taxpayers will pay the price for it eventually.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Absolutely. To the extent a child's learning is frustrated and unsuccessful then their behaviour worsens and then it becomes a much more complex problem. One missed opportunity leads to a whole range of other problems.

Dr JOHN KAYE: On page 22 of your submission you say, "Funding systems have also been identified as a possible contributing factor in the increasing number of students presenting with certain disabilities, that is, the creation of perverse incentives for diagnosis for access to specialist or additional support is dependant on a formal diagnosis". I was surprised to read that. What are you suggesting by that? Are you suggesting that schools, parents and teachers are fraudulently abusing the diagnosis system?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We are suggesting at the margins that unfortunately if you run a system that attracts guaranteed funding for some categories of disability, and some children's learning needs sit on the boundaries of those categories, there is a pressure on school counsellors and professionals, some of whom have written to me, to produce a categorisation that tries to provide funding to meet the needs of the child. It is entirely human response. It is a problem at the margins. It is a problem that we identify in practise but it is a problem that has been identified in research. You characterise it in a way that I would not characterise it. As I say, it is an entirely human response to try to meet the needs of a child.

Dr JOHN KAYE: There is another way to peel that onion which is to say that teachers are desperate to get resources, they recognise the needs they have got, and if it is happening—and you do not produce evidence, you just say you just rely on international research, but if there were—it is purely a response to teachers identifying the difficulty of getting resources through other means.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I am agreeing in part with that point but it is also—this is just what I have read of various pieces of research—does a child attract a medical or psychological categorisation or is simply poorly behaved as a result of their learning being frustrated? They are not succeeding at school. Their learning is frustrated. They are frustrated and angry. Their behaviour develops in response to that. They constantly have to go into a classroom in a situation where they are not succeeding on what is being asked of them. There is a danger that we medicalise everything and that we run processes that are too complex and too elaborate that demand an acute problem before we provide a response. It is much better to try to identify problems earlier and make resources available earlier before a complex amalgam of problems compound themselves.

There is always a lack of funding at the margins of any education system. There would not be a head of an education authority, public or private, who would come in here and say, "I am confident we fully meet the needs of every child in every school." We do not. They are complex and difficult prioritisations and allocations of skill, time and money and I know that that can be awfully frustrating to families and teachers and parents. Part of what we can do for some of those families and schools is to simplify the process and remove from them the anxiety of having to go through a process of categorisation. But categorisation and labels can be immensely important and immensely useful in meeting the real needs of children. It is a mix of approaches.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer to pages 46-47 of your submission where you refer to access to support classes in regular and special schools. You say, "Each region is responsible for facilitating the access of students with a disability" and then you go on to say, "students are placed in special classes based on their educational needs and preferences of parents".

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are you totally happy with the way regions are implementing their responsibility to allocate students to support classes and fulfilling their duty to make sure that they are placed in special classes based on their educational need and preferences of parents?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Why? Are you suggesting that I should not be? I do not have evidence to say that I should not be. Perhaps you do.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I seek leave to table a generic letter sent from regions.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Have you permission from the writer?

Dr JOHN KAYE: I do not have permission from the writer; I have permission from the person who received the letter. I have de-identified the person who received the letter. I am happy to pass it around the Committee. This letter is generic. It informs a parent of the outcome of the application of their child's placement into a support class, in this case, in 2008. The application has not been recommended. That letter was sent to a parent of a child at John Warby Public School, and the school identified the child as having violent behaviours and was desperate for placement. The parent was also desperate for a placement.

On 31 March 2008 that letter was sent saying there was no placement. The school community was outraged. There was a federation meeting on 7 May 2008, which threatened industrial action. The principal sent the exact same application again with the threat of industrial action unless the placement was made at the beginning of the next round, which was the beginning of next term. That placement was then made. My question is: Does it take the threat of industrial action to get a placement? Are your regions fulfilling their obligation to identify and make the best class placement based on the needs of the child's learning requirements, and in consultation with parents and carers?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: A couple of years ago the Auditor-General's report made a series of recommendations, including that we change the way we gather and use information to manage the process of regional placement, and the creation of special support classes in mainstream schools. We have responded to, I think, most of the Auditor General's recommendations. They were all accepted. They are all being implemented. But we continue to review the operation of the regional placement process since the Auditor General delivered his report, and I am told by Deonne Smith that a review is underway at present. I cannot answer the specifics of this letter, Dr Kay. It is not a case that had been brought to my attention before now.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But this type of generic letter is sent out quite often. Why was a student who was identified in this letter as not having needs that match the support class requirements, and after the threat of industrial action, given a placement? What message does that send?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: It could well be that as you describe the chain of events it is accurate, but it may not be. I do not have the perspective of the person who signed this letter or the perspective of the regional panel to weigh up against the sequences you have described. It simply would not be fair for me to pass judgement on that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you think there are sufficient support class placements for the demand both in SSPs and in mainstream schools?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Other than 422 support classes for children with a mild intellectual disability, every category of support class is driven by demand. In other words, if the children are identified we make a place for them. Many of those categories of support class are actually well below—well below—maximum levels of enrolment. For example, the Schools for Specific Purposes dealing with children with a mix of mild intellectual disability and behavioural problems are only about 50 per cent full. I think the capacity is there. The process of selecting the right placement for a child is a difficult one. There is a range of views about what the right placement for any particular child is. The views of the parents, which, of course, are very important, the views of teachers in the school and the views of a regional placement panel do not always align about what the best placement is for a particular child at a particular time. So there is a range of reasons why an application is rejected. Without knowing the specifics, I cannot answer.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Just building on your previous statement, why is it then that principals are asked to prioritise their students with disabilities when they are seeking a special placement if the system is awash with special placements—

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: No, I am not describing it as awash with special placements. It is a system that does a pretty good job of responding to this particular area of need, and that is evidenced by the increase in the number of support classes, enrolments and funding.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I do not understand the answer to your question because we have still got principals who are asked to say, "You have a number of students you want to want to find placements"—

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I might refer to my colleague.

Mr SMYTH KING: The placement panel process is a region by region one, as you would appreciate. The role of that panel, which comprises not just regional people but school principals and the like, is to look at all of the students that have been nominated and referred for placement, and look at the relative need of those individual students and determine where best they can place them, given the services that they have available to them. In that context what we ask principals to do is to rank or prioritise the referrals that they have got for each of their group that might be going forward to a placement panel so that we can see across the range of schools that might be seeking placements for students in those schools, where they are and who they might be.

It is not always the case that a child gets into the actual class that has been identified by the parent as a preferred choice but the child may be offered a placement in another support class in another school somewhere else. Support classes are not classes that belong to an individual school. They are what we call "regional resources" and they are hosted by schools and so that a support class in a particular school will take students from a range of schools within a local area or a geographical sort of region, and enrol them in that particular provision sometimes for a short time, other times for a long-term placement.

Dr JOHN KAYE: To the point of the abundance of availability across the system, why are there so few language classes, for example, in the Hunter? Every time I go there teachers tell me that and I come back and say, "I have been to the Hunter to campaign on Tilligra Dam only to be told about how bad the situation is with language classes". Why are there so few language classes?

Mr SMYTH KING: There are a number of classes in the system which are determined, I guess, by their nature through the learning assistance program. They are language, reading and IM classes. They are the classes that are within that existing program. Behaviour classes are within that range of captor programs that have sort of a set number of classes and that is it, and that is the answer I can give you to that question.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Teachers constantly say to me, "I needed to place student X into a language class. This student is going to have a shocking time in school unless we can get them taught soon." Yet they cannot find those placements.

Mr SMYTH KING: The other side of that is that if teachers were able to address the learning needs of those children within their home schools in the first instance with appropriate support, then there would be less need for those particular specialist classes, which have a very limited reach in terms of geography. There is also the issue of why we would put a whole lot of language-delayed children or disordered children together in one classroom where the models that they would have for learning would be other children who have equally challenging language needs. It is about trying to get the system responding to those children in the schools in which they are enrolled.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mr Smyth King, have you collected evidence on that or are you just making a statement? The anecdotal evidence we are getting from teachers is exactly the opposite, that it is sliced bread. These kids go off to language classes and, in many cases, they come back with the communication skills they need. How do you expect a classroom teacher to have the time and expertise to address a complex problem like language disorder?

Mr SMYTH KING: Going back to Michael's earlier comments about the learning support program and the trial that is taking place, it is about trying to get services that are expert but available locally. We would recognise very readily there will be children who have particular complex needs that need additional interventions and it will be beyond what the local school and the people in the local school can provide. That is why we have the sorts of provisions that we have throughout the system. We have got support classes in special schools and we have also got teachers in regular schools working alongside their peers and their colleagues to support the learning of individual children.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I am pleased to hear you say that because your school learning support program proposal from last year was going to get rid of all the language classes.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: No. The pilot in the Illawarra South East, and I stand to be corrected by my colleagues, those children that are in language classes will remain in language classes, but we will not be taking new enrolments into that class. We will openly evaluate the effectiveness of that approach.

Dr JOHN KAYE: At page 45 of your 2009 proposal you talk about the school learning support program proposal. Why did you not mention that the program was cost neutral and there were no new funds? Why did you not talk about the closure of the support learning assistance program, language classes and the early school support program, the loss of dollars from funding support, special reading classes and so on?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Actually it is funding positive. We are putting a little bit of extra money into the trial in the Illawarra South East. There are 221 schools—197 schools get more resources, I think 18 or so schools get the same amount of resources, and 6 schools get fewer resources, but under the learning assistance program they would have got fewer resources because of enrolments falling. Also 46 of those schools get guaranteed support where they had none before. It is about trying to use the talents, time and resources of a collection of our staff in a better way within and between schools. We do have to keep an open mind.

It may not work as we intend it to but it is modelled on a very successful program in 265 schools. The evidence to date suggests there is a good chance it will work. I do not accept your categorisation or the way you have categorised it. I think we have been extraordinarily open about this at every step of the way. The problem for us has been the quantity of information and queries that people have about it meant that I do not think we could get enough information out quickly enough to all the people who quite properly had an interest.

Dr JOHN KAYE: If you go to page 45 of your submission and read the description of the proposed school learning support program it neatly omits all the things that are to be sacrificed in order to create—

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: The pilot in the Illawarra South East has been developed quite openly in consultation with the teachers union, in consultation with professional associations, in public meetings, in focus groups, with staff who are affected. All of the information has been made available to them to allow them to give us feedback that has enabled us to finetune what was our proposal last year and what is being piloted in the Illawarra. I do not accept that we are trying to present the best face to the world on this at all.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I ask you to take this question on notice and supply the Committee with a detailed description of what is being trialled in the Illawarra and south-east region?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: If you have connections in the working party the teachers union could give it to you anyway.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I have a connection here and I am asking you to do it. In fact, the Teachers Federation has not given me a copy of it, nor has the parents and citizens association or any other person involved.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I am sorry; I am being flippant. I am happy to provide it.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Thank you, I appreciate that.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Mr Coutts-Trotter, you will remember the last two budget expenditure review Committees where I asked you specific questions about budgeting for various forms of disability and dyslexia.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: And as I recall you knew more about it than I did.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And you answered very favourably. Where does dyslexia rank on your list of disabilities that are funded by the department?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I am not sure how to answer that other than to say the children with dyslexia who as a result have a particular learning need are grouped within those 50,000 students that we describe on page 14 of the submission:

More than 50,000 students in mainstream classes experiencing difficulties in learning are supported by 1,387 specialist teachers across the State and other resources.

That is the group that contains the children you are talking about.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You said earlier that more parents want their children in mainstream classes. That also came out throughout the hearing yesterday. You said there were a number of challenges. Can you outline some of those challenges and how you have been addressing them?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Sure, and I will invite my colleagues to pitch in as they see fit. The real challenge is that different children with different levels of need have different requirements for professional support within the classroom, ranging from children with identified moderate or severe disabilities that attract packages of funding through to those that are at the lower level of need and required teachers and other staff to do a really good job of identifying what their learning needs, behavioural needs and emotional needs are and constructing a classroom that meet those needs. The trial that we are talking about in the Illawarra and the program that we have in place in the 267 schools attempt to rapidly equip teachers and school learning support officers, the old teacher aides, with more information about autism, about the needs of children with motor difficulties, about how to establish, maintain and support good behaviour in a classroom and in a school. The training that those teachers and other staff undertake is training that was developed in the United Kingdom. It has been developed from a very strong base of academic evidence.

The results to date of this approach in those 267 schools has been reviewed for us and the highlights are that in those 267 schools, of the parents surveyed 86 per cent believe that that initiative has been beneficial to their school and 78 per cent of teachers also thought the initiative had been beneficial to their school. All the groups reported that there was an improved capacity of classroom teachers to provide support to all students with additional learning needs—87 per cent of parents thought that, 72 per cent of teachers thought that, and 85 per cent of primary principals and 90 per cent of secondary principals thought that. Importantly, 78 per cent of parents and 64 per cent of teachers reported that support was now more immediately available to students. There is something quite positive to work on there. No doubt we can refine it further, but the initial assessment is that for a cohort of children, a cohort of families, this approach, which is really modelled on what is done extremely well in the United Kingdom, seems to be working well.

Ms D. SMITH: The other thing that we try to do is support schools and, most importantly, classroom teachers to cater for the diverse range of children in their class and take the view that children are part of a

diverse community and part of a diverse community in the school too. We need to do everything we can as a system to support the learning of the child. At a school level there are school learning support teams that have, usually, a member of the leadership team chairing it but also the school counsellor, teacher representatives, parents when it is about their particular child, school learning support officers when they are working with a particular child and other people that the school might bring in to support the learning. That school learning support team has an overview of the needs of children within the whole school. But, importantly, if a classroom teacher was a bit worried about a young person in their class there is somebody they can go to for support and advice. I have seen some amazing school learning support teams in operation. I guess that is the core within the school.

We also have a process where there are planning meetings with parents so that we can find out early on from parents what works at home, their perspective about how things are going at school and swap advice, give advice and get some advice from the families and also perhaps talk about things that are working well or not working so well at school. We try to provide funding as much as possible in a flexible way so that the school and the teacher can decide whether the best use of that funding is to provide release time for the classroom teacher so that they can access more professional learning or planning time or whether what the child really needs is another adult to support them in the class. So perhaps buying some additional teacher aide time, or a combination of those things, talking in consultation with the classroom teacher and parent.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I will ask you about the online facility that you wanted to talk about.

CHAIR: He gave us that information. He managed to slip it in.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I want to understand how it works. Can you give us a presentation?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: If the Committee is interested we could organise a presentation for you. I have had one and I found it very useful. Equally, if the Committee wanted to pursue in more detail the functional assessment tool, we would be happy to organise a particular briefing on that. There is a lot of detail to that. If that is of use to the Committee we would be happy to do it.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Has that gone to EMSAD yet?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: EMSAD means?

Dr JOHN KAYE: Nobody knows what it means.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Educational measurement—

Dr JOHN KAYE: It has been lost in the sands of time.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I have a final question that is important for the parents, in particular, who have sincerely expressed their situations. Does the department have a system where it can help parents navigate through this process?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Indeed we do. As I said, one of the things we can do for parents is do everything we can to simplify the processes so there are fewer more difficult things they need to do on behalf of their children. Even given that, it still remains a complex system. To a parent arriving fresh to it, it can be simply baffling. At a school level it is the responsibility—

Ms D. SMITH: —of the school learning support team. Often when a child comes to school either the parent or the teacher are the ones who first notice something and pursue additional help. At a school level parents often are provided with support by the principal or the school learning support teacher or the classroom teacher or a combination of those things. The school often will go to the region for support or guidance. Sometimes parents go straight to the region, maybe because they do not like what they have heard at the school.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Or the local politician?

Ms D. SMITH: Or the local politician.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Of course local members of Parliament are important advocates, absolutely.

Ms D. SMITH: Sometimes before a child is even enrolled there are local advocacy groups that have been supporting them and the family since they were babies and they will come and provide support. My sense is as somebody who has worked in a region, a State office and also a school for a long time is that it can be complex to navigate and it is not always the same experience for each person. I do not want to continually talk about the school learning support program but one of the things that we are doing in conjunction with that is working with some of the family advocacy groups that support families and children with particular learning needs on our communications strategy so that there is more detailed information upfront about what you can expect from schools and how you can support your child at school and at home. There are things in place but there is work to do.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We can never do too much communication and the task for us is that we do tend to use professional language, and that is true of every specialist occupation, but it can be very difficult for parents to come to grips with what we are trying to tell them.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Particularly on that issue we have had a lot of highly articulate people, who really have their issues to express, but we recognise that many of the persons dealing with this are not highly articulate and have difficulty navigating the system, so I guess Shaoquett's question was more about people being sensitive to those issues.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: And are in crisis and are under extraordinary strain and disabilities so often with families.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Is there potential with the change to the process of removing so much concentration on labelling for youngsters to slip through the cracks because they are not making trouble in the class? Is there potential for this to occur in your new processes?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I do not think so because what parents are responding to in trying to establish a categorisation is what they know to be a problem in the classroom. I think we have to be concerned about that but there is nothing that I have seen in the process to date that would suggest there is a higher risk if approaching it this way it did not require a categorisation.

Ms D. SMITH: No, because what we need to get better at is focusing on the functional needs of the child regardless of a label. In our system at the moment where we require a label and the category, there are some families who choose not to have their child tested. With all the pushing from schools and regions they take a family decision that they do not want to seek a diagnosis, and there are families that live in different parts of New South Wales that find it more difficult to get a label than others—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You mean there are no professional resources out there to give them a label?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes.

Ms D. SMITH: And also the label is not perfect. As a classroom teacher I have had two children sitting next to each other, both with similar needs, one that has a diagnosis and one that has not, but both with similar learning needs and equally I have been to schools with a class with two children with autism and one is functioning at a very high level and one is really struggling. It is not being anti-label, but it is providing help for the children that they need in the classroom, whether they have a label or not.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you have a special method of dealing with problem children in the schools, those with disabilities?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Problem children in what sense? Children who have behavioural problems or children with physical disabilities?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Children with disabilities?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Naughty ones.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Basically, yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you mean challenging behaviours, Tony?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You have had your chance.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: There are a whole variety of approaches. One thing that I think those members of the Committee who were engaged in the inquiry into bullying would have seen is the positive behaviours for learning programs placed in a number of schools, which is a whole school welfare program. If done well this provides a very clear framework within which the school's expectations of a student's behaviour in very explicit places, "This is how we behave well when lining up", "This is how we behave in corridors", "This is how we behave in class", "This is how we behave in the library" are really pinned down. All the staff in the school are taught in the same way in the same region and hold the same expectations about behaviour and there is a clear and consistent framework within which children behave at school. The effective programs like whole school programs like that in reducing the incidents of short and long suspensions and the incidence of referral for behaviour to an assistant principal, deputy principal or principal are simply extraordinary.

There are whole school approaches like that and then there are approaches within each individual classroom. If you wanted to have a look at the online training in behaviour, you would pick up an extraordinary wealth of information about evidence-based approaches to how you establish and maintain a classroom that will support good behaviour for all the children there, and then there are particular issues that a particular child might have. A child with otitis media cannot hear but constantly feel excluded. That could be why they are behaving badly. A child with dyslexia simply cannot tackle what is in front of them and if that is not identified, that will lead to bad behaviour. There is a complex range of reasons.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: An issue brought to our attention is that special teachers and general teachers throughout the system have a perception that the new proposals for funding structure will actually remove resources from their individual schools. Rather than a long answer will you take on notice how you will tackle that issue in relation to communication with the school and teaching sector about that?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The other issue that has come up frequently over the last two days is the Federal curriculum and the potential for it to remove the living skills program. What negotiations are taking place at State and Federal level to ensure that the program has a life and the reasons why?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Indeed. As you know, the national curriculum is between K-10 and in four subject areas and is available for public consultation. The Board of Studies of New South Wales is managing a consultation process across all school sectors. We have a major job to do within that in getting the views of public school teachers, school executives and school staff. We are also exclusively consulting with equity groups about fair access for all children to that national curriculum.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: NAPLAN?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes, so it is a high priority for us.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It was brought to attention that only the primary school curriculum is being offered in behavioural schools. Is that true?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Teachers in behavioural schools can be either primary or secondary trained and they must be trained or experienced in special education. I have been into, I think about 15, behavioural schools and they run to year 10.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So it is not the truth.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes.

CHAIR: But they do not necessarily have a high school curriculum offered, though, do they?

Ms D. SMITH: I was in a behavioural school a couple of weeks ago and there was a small group of children really focusing on early literacy skills to be honest. I saw a lesson where they were doing some conflict resolution and that sort of learning. There was a whole bunch of children who were accessing the secondary curriculum via distance education. I spoke to a boy who was doing year 10 geography, but he was the only person in that class who was at the stage to do that subject; a bunch of them were accessing the curriculum.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It maybe a descriptor.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: It has been brought to my notice, particularly in country areas, that it would be an advantage if there were classes attached to one particular school and then other kids could come into that particular class from around the region. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: We do run special support classes located in different schools.

Mr SMYTH KING: We responded to that through the Auditor-General's inquiry in 2006, where we had classes based on different categories of disability in what we were asked to consider was the concept of a multi-categorical task where children of different types of need might come to a special class. We have since established those classes, often in rural areas where it gives that extra provision of support for that particular community.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I am not talking about going from one town two hours away.

Ms D. SMITH: I think going to a special class works in some parts of the country because they are densely populated and there might be more schools in a particular area but it is never going to work well for some of our more remote schools where it is a couple of hours to another very small school. I met with a group of parents from remote areas of New South Wales last week and they were talking about the fact that sometimes you train up the class teacher or the principal and they move on as well. We were talking about how, as a system, can we provide support around that school and in that community as well as the other interventions that you need to provide for children who have more complex needs.

One of the suggestions that I think is a really good one from the group was that when we provide, for example, the online professional learning, that it is not just for school learning support teachers—that online program is happening in all the regions now—but the parents were saying could we not change the way we are doing this and in those really small schools offer the program to the whole staff, interested parents and interested community members. They were making the point that it is often the relief teacher, who lives in the community, who is the stable one, or the woman at the front desk. I think that is good advice and we were looking to doing that because the way we have been rolling it out is training a particular person in the school so that they can support the others and they are just saying, "It doesn't work for us, but equally we can't or won't put our child in the car and drive for three hours to go a support class. It is a silly idea."

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I have one more question.

CHAIR: We have run out of time.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Can we take it on notice, Madam Chair?

CHAIR: Yes. If members have further questions, they can place them on notice. I ask that return the answers to the questions taken on notice within 14 days. There maybe other questions on notice also. We will look at the offer that you suggested to us. Also, I suggest that you look at the presentation we saw yesterday from the teachers from the Sarah Redfern School.

Ms D. SMITH: We have seen it.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: I have been into the school to see it first-hand.

CHAIR: The presentation was excellent. With respect to the Illawarra trial, when will the evaluation be publicly available?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: It will be some time down the track. It would not inform this Committee's work.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is the evaluation of the consultation before the trial is held, because the trial has not started?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: No, it does not start until term two. It will be evaluated from term two onwards, so I do not think it will produce work that will be useful to the Committee, given your timetable.

CHAIR: When is that trial running from?

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: It is running from term two as long as the Government determines and at least a year.

CHAIR: There is no end to that trial.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: Yes.

CHAIR: And also you mentioned the bullying inquiry. We are looking forward to your response.

Mr COUTTS-TROTTER: It will be a month for that.

CHAIR: You have plenty of time.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

ELIZABETH GADEK, Chair, National Independent Special Schools Association, and

KERRIE LORNA NELSON, Deputy Chair, National Independent Special Schools Association, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I welcome representatives of the National Independent Special Schools Association. The Committee has the capacity for you to present a brief an opening statement if you wish.

Ms NELSON: I will outline the special schools within New South Wales that we represent. There are about 55 schools Australia-wide and about 25 in New South Wales. One thing about membership of the National Independent Special Schools Association [NISSA] is the diversity within this schooling setting. We have schools that are very small regional schools; for example, those that have grown up out of the need of a particular community. We have schools that are associated with a larger organisation or university; for example, the Macquarie University Special Education Centre [MUSE]. We have the Aspect schools that are part of a larger organisation. We have schools that are for a specific disability; for example, the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children [RIDBC] that have grown up for hearing and vision impaired children. And then a range of schools for children with autism, Giant Steps, Woodbury and the Aspect schools. There is an enormous diversity within the independent special schools sector.

Prior to the late 1970s, a lot of students did not have access to public education moneys, particularly with moderate- to semi-intellectual disabilities. Places such as the Challenge Foundation, the Endeavour Foundation and the Subnormal Children's Welfare Association, all had schools in little regional areas across New South Wales. There was then a process of assuming some of those schools into the public school sector. However, a whole range of those schools remained, and a lot of schools have very long histories—the RIDBC, 150 years; the Aspect schools, 40 years; and so forth. A lot of schools have been in their communities for a very long time.

Regarding funding, the majority of our schools, while State and Federally funded, rely on fundraising. Some schools have no fees attached to them at all and rely solely on fundraising to support their staffing in particular across the board. Some schools are very low-fee-paying schools, and some are in the higher bracket of fee-paying schools. Most people choose independent specialist schools, not because they are independent, but simply because it is a disability type or they are looking for very specific skills and knowledge to work with their children.

A lot of our schools do not maintain children across their schooling life. When we look at the transition processes of schools, our schools in this sector are very committed to children moving out of special schools and into their next most beneficial setting, particularly places like Aspect, St Lucy's and RIDBC at North Rocks, again moving children on. In terms of innovation, our sector is particularly innovative. The RIDBC has developed Renwick College in order to move forward that professional knowledge and understanding—in music, the development of multi-literature programs, and Aspect with the development of the satellite class program. Some other schools are doing things around research. Again, the Giant Steps school is doing research with the University of Sydney. It is very broad, very innovative, and it is trying to be very much at the cutting edge of disability provision within New South Wales.

Demand is increasing, however variable, depending on the school. In some smaller geographical schools in regional New South Wales where population is pretty stagnant, their demand is not great. In other schools, for example there is one school with 56 students and it has a waiting list of nearly 400. Aspect schools, with a population of 700, have a waiting list of around 600 students. Demand is certainly high. Parents are very much looking for choice in schooling and for expertise when working with children.

Schools in this sector are also very keen to work cooperatively across the sector with other independent schools, Catholic schools and certainly public schools, in sharing that knowledge. A lot of times we will do combined professional development work with transition programs for children. Certainly the demand is there. Inclusion integration, again, is the cornerstone of our independent schools and we are very committed to that in terms of the ethos of our schools. However, how do we actually do that, and can we deliver good integration programs? Sometimes not, because the provision is not there to move students into those particular areas. Again, parent choice: it certainly comes back to that. Choice of schooling is available to kids in the neuro-typical

population. A choice of schooling should be available to kids with disabilities, particularly significant disabilities. That is a bit of a wrap-up. Have I missed anything?

Ms GADEK: No, I guess Kerrie summarised neatly our organisation as it represents a wide variety of schools. Very much, because we are independent and smaller, we work with the families. We consider building capacity and the family is the thing we need to do. As Kerrie stressed, it is the transition level. Our schools are just an option for schooling. It is not one-size-fits-all; it is an option for children at some age and stage of their development that they need a more intensive specialised setting. We are working with the family to build capacity so that that child can move on to a less specialised educational setting.

CHAIR: When they move on from your schools, typically they would enter another independent school?

Ms GADEK: No, it is the parents' choice.

CHAIR: What is the ratio? Do you have any statistics on that?

Ms GADEK: I do for my own schools. As we said, we represent NISSA, but obviously we have other jobs. I work for Autism Spectrum Australia, Aspect. I can give statistics for that. As a sample of a NISSA school, probably—are you asking how many students go to the primary school sector?

CHAIR: When they move on, do they go into the public system or do they stay within the independent system?

Ms GADEK: Mainly they would go to the public school sector.

Ms NELSON: That would be the case. They would move across the schooling sectors. Basically that would be dependent on parent choice. Parents are often choosing schools in their locality, so that there is inclusion with Scouts and so on. It could be an independent, Catholic or public school. Certainly from my perspective in my school we offer all those options for integration, and parents choose.

CHAIR: In terms of assessment, you would be aware that the Committee has discussed that for the past two days. The bulk of the submissions addressed assessment issues. We have talked about functionality versus other options, or a mix. Do you have a view on assessment? How is a child referred into your system? Is it through allied health professionals?

Ms NELSON: Very broadly, some will come through disability clinics. Some through allied health professionals, speech, IT, and the like. Some simply come by word of mouth. Some will come once a child has a diagnosis and parents go to the university of Google and find the schools that are most appropriate in their area. Assessment is very much across the board. I do not think that there is a one-size-fits-all assessment. Disability type and functionality need to be in there. Context will play a very important part in that. If a child is in a poorly run program and having an assessment, it will be a very different assessment from a child in a functionality assessment. In a well-run, highly structured program, that has some good teeth to it as well. Again, context plays an important part and the multi-disciplinary nature of those assessments need to be considered as opposed to just one assessment fitting the ground.

CHAIR: Another issue that has been raised is the portability of funding, the funding following the child. When you spoke about children moving on, what is your association's view of that concept?

Ms GADEK: Very much we think that the portability should be with the child. Obviously it is the parents' choice to come to us in the first place. We have that strong transition focus of moving a child on, as long as the funding covers all of the infrastructure costs, et cetera, that come with the child. We would need to say that for running a small, independent special school we cover all the infrastructure costs including electricity, rental, et cetera. So, that needs to be all covered within that funding if it is going to go to that kind of model.

I guess we were involved a couple of years ago in the Monash research study. We would agree with the outcomes that they looked at. I know from my brief notes that they tie the funds provided to accurate indicators of the actual costs. That is very important.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Would that proposed funding model based perhaps on functionality assessment and the funding coming with the student be better than what you have now? I am thinking from a parent's point of view. My child could have been in the public system and I could have decided to send them to your system or one of the independent schools or a Catholic school. How easy is it now for parents to navigate that?

Ms NELSON: To navigate the different sectors and the different funding? To be frank, I think there is an awful lot of confusion for parents. They do not know what an independent school provides or what a Catholic school provides—when they go mainstream are there teacher aides, when they go public is that the case? Is it more broadly assigned to program? I think it is very difficult to figure that out. Once you have figured it out nicely in one school your child shift schools, and of course the shift depends on the nature of that school as well.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: So the student would be the one who misses out. There is all the time it takes to reassess, to settle in and to get the appropriate services and whatever. What is happening to the student?

Ms NELSON: They are languishing.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Absolutely. You said your waiting lists are growing day by day. How would that affect future provision of schools? Where is the parent choice going? I know there is a lot of controversy within the public school system about students and parents leaving and therefore the public school system is perhaps unresourced as a result and non-government schools are attracting more parent support. How do you gauge what resources you need to build new schools? How does that process happen given that you have waiting lists?

Ms NELSON: Can we talk more specifically about our schools? The school I run is a no-fee-paid school, so our 55 parents will raise about \$2.5 million this year, and have done so for the last 13 years of the development of this school, in order to achieve an adequate funding level for their children. That includes teachers, therapists, family therapists, and educators or teachers' aides. In this particular instance there is an enormous commitment by parents to find a way of educating their children, which of course has enormous family benefit for them, and at the same time there is enormous accountability from schools. The demand is absolutely there but the ability in this instance to broaden that because of the issues around the facility—the actual bricks and mortar issues are some of the things that prevent it moving forward. However, I reject more students every single week than I take on, and it is a reasonably disappointing thing to do.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: So there is a need for more schools and services to be provided?

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Special schools.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Yes, special education schools.

Ms NELSON: There is a need for expertise and knowledge in particular areas. Certainly we want to share our knowledge base and make it accessible to everybody, but there certainly is an aspect of having some really good, solid and deep understanding of how to work with children with particular disabilities and making sure we have a range of professionals available for that. There are kids in some of our schools that are dealing with feeding and eating issues and mobility issues and teachers cannot handle that by themselves and need the constant support of therapists to move that forward.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: From the point of view of this Committee providing recommendations to the Government, do you have any burning issues that you would like us to consider in formulating those recommendations?

Ms GADEK: I think the burning issue for us is raising awareness that we even exist and I thank the Committee for asking us to come along because some people are not aware of us. As Kerrie illuminated, the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children started special education 150 years ago and started valuing the needs of educating students with special needs. We are continuing to do that today. Because we can be a lot more focused on an area of disability and we have those collaborations—we very much value that research—we can push forward the cutting edge of education. I think we are a really important part of the sector and we need to be valued.

Ms NELSON: Those questions of funding are age-old and in my 30 years it seems to be back to the same thing. The issues of disability type and how we are going to fund students across the board regardless of sector certainly have not been resolved. Those questions remain and they are constantly on our agenda at NISSA.

CHAIR: Another comment that has been made quite often in the last two days relates to teacher training. I guess you have a mixture of teachers in your schools but you have talked about the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children having Renwick College and some other training institutions setting up their own specialist courses. Do you have a view about the basic pre-service teacher training modules and whether they are adequate in identifying children with special needs and disabilities and behaviour issues, and how to deal with those?

Ms GADEK: I guess the answer is no. It is a simple question. We have been very worried about it at NISSA for quite a few years and have tried to engage universities in some discussion about it. We feel every teacher, whether they are going into special education or not, will meet children with special needs so they need some level of understanding. Positive support for behaviour is crucial for every child in a school. It is incredibly important and should be considered in teachers' pre-service training because they will meet children with special needs in their classes.

CHAIR: What has been the response when you have raised those issues?

Ms GADEK: Not much. I know anecdotally that Newcastle University was very good at offering that. They have led special education.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: They are still doing it well.

Ms GADEK: Absolutely. That is fantastic. When we get a teacher we undertake that training. We realise as an organisation we need to—

CHAIR: So you are doing it post-service?

Ms GADEK: Yes.

Ms NELSON: In the beginning teachers come out with a very generic understanding of special education and not terribly many skills, although they might have a good theoretical basis about inclusion and the like. They come with very few skills about how to observe behaviour and develop a behaviour support plan. None of those key skills is up and running.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are all the schools in NISSA members of the Association of Independent Schools?

Ms GADEK: No. That is a choice each school would make and some of our schools are faith-based so there are some Catholic schools. It is the schools' choice who they choose to represent them.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer to your submission and I congratulate you on it being short. You state, "The presence of an independent special education sector is essential in the promotion of excellence in the education of students with disabilities". Can you explain what you mean by that?

Ms NELSON: There is a strong competitive edge in the independent sector and I think competition within any sector or any industry is absolutely vital. If we are thinking about moving forward with standards a one-size-fits-all model has the possibility of squashing real change. While we are competitive we are also very cooperative across those sectors in trying to improve the quality and the standards. I also think the independent sector has a little more freedom to be more exploratory in the way we work and the way we develop our partnerships and networks because we are not constrained. We operate as an independent school, so with my board of governors I can move forward and develop a project with Sydney University, or Liz can develop a project with the University of Canberra, to improve the quality of students across the board. One of the things that we are very keen to do as an association is make sure that we share those skills. We are not about independent versus public but about students with disabilities across all sectors and how to move forward in skills and knowledge in that arena.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer you to a subsequent paragraph in which you say, "At present independent special schools also receive funding from the Australian Government but this is calculated on the average rate of educating a student in government mainstream schools, not the average rate of educating a student in a government special school." What do you base that statement on?

Ms GADEK: That is what we get per capita from the Australian Government.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The average government school recurrent cost [AGSRC].

Ms GADEK: Yes. The recurrent costs are based on a mainstream general school rather than looking at a special setting, which, with its smaller class size and teacher to child ratio, the therapy involvement and the special needs of the students, would be a lot more expensive to run. The AGSRC is based on a mainstream school, not a special school.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Have you been advised of that or where did you attain that understanding?

Ms GADEK: Yes, we have been advised of that. We are in the same mix as all the other independent schools. Because we are special schools we are in a different—

Dr JOHN KAYE: I think you may have slightly misinterpreted it. The AGSRC includes all the recurrent costs of running the government education system divided by the number of students, so it includes the costs of non-mainstream schools.

Ms GADEK: Yes, I guess the point is that the costs of running a special school by itself are higher than running a similar sized—

Dr JOHN KAYE: There is no question of that but I just want to challenge the statement in your submission, which says it is based on the costs of a student in a government mainstream school. Thirteen per cent of the AGSRC is special school and special education costs.

Ms GADEK: Yes, I see that it is part of the mix. I guess we are looking at 100 per cent of our costs being the special schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The AGSRC is an inflation measure. Private schools do not get the AGSRC; they get the AGSRC times some number, which varies. Special schools are in a category of their own federally. The significance of AGSRC in this particular discussion is that it measures inflation. Are you saying that inflation in special schools is greater than it is in mainstream schools?

Ms GADEK: No. I am not saying inflation is different, no.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I guess I do not quite understand the significance of that statement.

Ms GADEK: I guess it is just the cost of running—there is the difference between running a general schooling system and running an independent special school. Running an independent school has a greater cost than running a mainstream school.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I have been reflecting, as I listened to you, on an earlier part of my life where I was involved in developing special schools, particularly on the autism spectrum, in Melbourne. One of the things that occurred to me is that one of the enormous advantages we have in special schools is the motivation and intense commitment of parents. When I compare that with other parents and citizens associations that I attend in other places I just shake my head and wonder how on earth their disabled children will get the same benefits because their parents do not have the intensity of commitment. Would you like to comment on that?

Ms NELSON: Certainly, I think our parents see the benefit for their children. If I can talk about my school, where they come into my school at a very early age, their commitment to the school is not very high and it grows as they can see value in that.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And you have lots of activities that involve parents.

Ms NELSON: Absolutely. We are able to do all those sorts of things. Similarly, I think it is important to share that information as much as we can to the advantage of all students with disabilities across the board. However, I know that we are constrained by doing that because we are usually quite small independent organisations in that regard. But I certainly think we drive change in that regard and drive standard and our parents are coming now with a much greater expectation about what they will get from a special school.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: What they will do themselves and what they expect from you. I commend you for the work you are doing. It exhausts me to think about it. I do trouble with this great number of parents who have children just as needy and they miss out because they do not have that intense parental commitment.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Or ability.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Yes. Sometimes they just do not have the ability. You are quite right. Congratulations on what you are doing.

Ms NELSON: I think those parent support issues are absolutely critical in any schooling context and the idea that schooling is not simply about nine to three but it does cover across literally 24/7—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Education is for the whole of life.

Ms NELSON: Absolutely.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And part of that whole education must be within the total family context, and that means that the total family must be involved in the education of the child. It takes a village to raise a child.

Ms NELSON: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: My question relates to designating funds for special education to individual students. How do you, when that structure is the funding structure, avoid clinical labelling with individual student funding models? How do you avoid a clinical label for the human who is required to have funding designated to them?

Ms NELSON: Sorry, are you talking about in the present context about how we would do it now?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Yes. You are also endorsing a funding model that provides individual student funding and to follow the person. So when the assessment process—I recognise we have had lots of debate about functional—but if a government or whatever is going to fund individuals according to need as defined by, how do you avoid falling into clinical labelling for that funding to occur? Am I not being clear? Are you happy with clinical labels?

Ms NELSON: I suppose the way it operates in school at the moment is that we do have that whole range of clinical labels, and to be perfectly frank they get through the funding barrier and at that point I then file them and start to look at what that child needs within this context and within that broader family context. So I put it aside, other than knowing that the child has a disability type that might give me a bit of an understanding but it certainly does not give me the idea of what that program will look like for that individual because that process has been consultative with the parents and collaborative—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: With those schools.

Ms NELSON: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So the issues come out quite extensively that young persons displaying certain behavioural practices could well end up with a mental health label—that is just an example—and that mental health label actually gets them some resources into the school.

Ms NELSON: Yes.

Ms GADEK: Currently.

Ms NELSON: And it does.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So you are just registering an issue that happens.

Ms NELSON: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Can I just ask for clarification? You then take the funding that comes with that label and then you do an assessment, so in actual fact you are doing a more functionality internal process anyway. Would you find that that works better in terms of the outcome?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I was not challenging the process.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: No, it is just for me to understand. I think they are ahead of the game.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So they get transferred into the public sector with that label.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: They are ahead of the game.

Ms NELSON: Yes, and you are talking about it following and having that label sitting over that child.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: And the debate over labelling.

Ms NELSON: It is across the board. I think particularly within special education we are very keen on confidentiality and privacy as well, and some of those things we certainly do not share within context and it is just about, "this has been inherited" and that has to be part of our jargon that we use as opposed to "he has conduct disorder and ADHD and a mental health issue". The list could go on forever.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: And you are aware of the huge controversy in psychiatry itself about notes.

Ms NELSON: Yes.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You almost become what you are labelled.

Ms NELSON: You certainly do, so you have to look at the person that is before you, Ben or James or Larissa or whoever it is to make sure of the person standing in front of you and how we engage them with this context in order for it to be of value.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Throughout the past two days there has been a focus on the word "choice" and parents having the choice and no-one had any objection to that. I note that in your letter you highlight and emphasise the word "choice". Have you encountered any difficulties with that, or is any side trying to eliminate the potential for families to have the choice? In other words, what I am asking is: Why did you emphasise the word "choice" in such a manner?

Ms GADEK: I guess we see ourselves as parents making a conscious decision to choose an independent school so we see ourselves as part of that parent choice.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I am just curious as to why you have emphasised it the way you did in this letter. How do children fare when they move on from your schools onto other schools? Do you keep a tab, if you like, or how do they fare?

Ms GADEK: We have, and in fact my own organisation, Aspect, is doing a research project on that. We are following the students up for at least 12 months and then we have a separate research project that follows students up for quite a longitudinal study on some of our ex students. Again, if we can build capacity within the family and the child initially, we also do a very intensive transition program on to the next school so that we can build up the skills of that school, that we can do a very successful transition. In fact, it is incredibly successful for lots of the children who move on from us into the next setting, which is their parents' choice.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: How many schools do you have in this State?

Ms GADEK: In the State, 25.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: And the number of students?

Ms GADEK: Over a thousand.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You mentioned earlier that fundraising was a big part of your operation.

Ms NELSON: That is only one school. We are fundraising across the board.

Ms GADEK: It would be very important for all our schools.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: To what age do you hold the students? What class do they get to?

Ms NELSON: At my particular school they go to 18.

Ms GADEK: It would vary. Within NISSA, the schools would probably specialise, either be primary schools or secondary schools.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: So when they pass on they only go to a certain level and then they pass on?

Ms NELSON: Some schools are only K-6, then they transition those children through to their high school setting.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: But you do offer that service of high school as well.

Ms GADEK: Some of our lesser schools do, yes, but it is very much dependent on the actual school.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: So some of your schools may only go to a certain level.

Ms NELSON: Yes. Some will be primary school, some will be 7-12 and some will be K-12. So there are those transition points that might occur but there is also that transition from out of that school into another setting. A child might go from a special school setting into a unit in another school or straight into a mainstream class, depending on parental choice, how they are going, success of those transition processes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: With the funding, do the parents top up the funding to get it through to the school to help with the fees? How do you work that out?

Ms NELSON: Sorry, when they move on or when they are coming in?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: No, when they are with you.

Ms GADEK: Each of our Anglican schools would run it differently. Most would do as we have talked about, fundraising, and most would have school fees as well. Parents would have to make a contribution.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: So it would be a top up if they did not get enough funding from another source of whatever.

Ms NELSON: Absolutely, yes.

(The witnesses withdrew)

PETER KEVIN JOHNSON, School Counsellor,

KAY LORRAINE BARKER, Learning Support Coordinator,

JULIE LYNETTE ASHBY, Principal, and

MICHELLE MAY RALSTON, School Learning Support Coordinator, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming in this afternoon. One of the things we have found most informative is hearing from people who are out there doing the job that we are talking about. We have heard from some wonderful teachers and I am sure you will be the same. Could I ask you to state the capacity in which you are appearing? In terms of identification what we are talking about is the role that you perform and the type of school. We do not need identification otherwise.

Ms RALSTON: I am a special education teacher employed by the Department of Education and Training. I have been teaching for over 20 years in the public and the private school system. I am currently participating in the pilot school learning support coordinator program. I have been a mainstream teacher K to 6, a support class teacher, early intervention mild intellectual disability, and have been appointed to a multi-categorical class. I have been an itinerant teacher language support. I have also been a support teacher learning assistance, and I am currently a tutor for the online training autism spectrum disorder. I lecture on a casual basis at a university on special education for undergraduate early childhood and primary teachers. My qualifications include a Bachelor of Arts, Diploma in Education with a minor in Special Education and a Master of Special Education. I am representing my own views and not the views of my employer.

Ms ASHBY: I am here as a private citizen, not representing the views of the Department of Education. I am a principal at a government special school in a regional area. I have been with the Department of Education since 1979. I started out as a mainstream science teacher. I spent a number of years working across a number of high schools and subject areas as a casual teacher. I have been a teacher of a support class for intellectually mild in a high school and established the unit at a high school. For the last 11 years I have been working as a principal of a special school. The school is set up for students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities, but there are many students with multiple disabilities, including physical, sensory and autism.

I thank you for the opportunity to be part of this. I believe that there are wonderful things happening in schools for students with disabilities, but it is not without significant challenges and frustrations, and I am hoping that as a result of this inquiry we can strengthen the capacity of those wonderful staff who are in schools to deliver a quality education for students with disabilities and special needs.

Ms BARKER: I work as a learning support coordinator in a small Christian school, K to 12. I have worked in that school for the last 30 years, although I started in the government situation, quite similar actually to where I ended up, which is funny because across 30 years I have changed roles within the school that I am working in. We have a range of students who are all in the mainstream of the school, although we have quite a number of students who are not in separate classrooms except we do withdraw them for some particular occasions, mainly to do with social skills and other areas where we think that the small group training and then releasing kids back into the classroom is a good thing.

Really my interests, although I do work in a Christian school, are my own views. My intention is to make sure that kids get the best care that they can and that their education is inclusive and that we do the best together to make that happen.

Mr JOHNSON: I am a school counsellor. The views that I am representing today are my own and not those of my employer. Just little bit about my own background. I have been a teacher or involved in teaching for 30 years both as a former class teacher and now as a school counsellor. I began my career working with Aboriginal students out in Brewarrina and was there for four years and spent 10 or 12 years in a boys boarding school as a supervisor. I then retrained and became a school counsellor where I have worked in a range of different school settings mostly across south-west and western Sydney. I have worked both in schools with support classes where there have been a range of disabilities and I have also worked in mainstream schools where there are many students of course who are integrated into mainstream classes and who are currently being funded under the existing regime.

I am hoping, like some of the other speakers today, that this inquiry will result in some worthwhile changes that will improve the ability of teachers to meet the needs of kids in classrooms. I believe that teachers these days are not looking for ways out of work but looking to find more ways of being effective in their job and providing the best service to each kid that they can possibly provide. I think that at the moment many of them are feeling a great deal of frustration with the range of issues that they are finding themselves having to deal with and the inability of them to find suitable strategies to provide worthwhile opportunities for those particular kids.

CHAIR: Mr Johnson, a couple of issues in terms of school counsellors have been raised and I would like to get to those in a minute, but you seem to suggest some frustration about students in mainstream classes and the capacity of teachers to meet their needs. Would you like to flesh that out a little bit in terms of what you are saying about that?

Mr JOHNSON: I have worked in one particular high school for the last nine years and what I have found is that there appears to be an increasing number of kids with special needs, not only in terms of intellectual ability but also in terms of behaviour and mental health issues. There is such a diversity of issues that I find it hard to believe that a mainstream teacher could provide adequate service for them given the fact that I actually specialise, at least at my level in the department, and still struggle to come to grips with some of the requirements in order to provide adequate service to those children and I am not entirely sure that the way we going about providing suitable information to teachers to help them provide for those kids is the best way of doing it at present.

I think a lot of times what I am finding is that teachers are going to supervisors, the deputy principal, and asking them for advice as to what to do but they often do not know what to do either because they have no expertise in how to manage, say, something like selective mutism or a child with depression or anxiety or has a particular type of language disability or autism. There is just such a huge range of conditions that they are faced with and they want to do the right thing but they are not sure exactly how to provide that and to meet the kids' needs.

CHAIR: Is that because there is a lack of understanding from their preservice training or in-service training or because there needs to be more support to those teachers in terms of the classroom, or is it all of the above?

Mr JOHNSON: I think they need to have more specific advice in a high level of expertise, which in the last few years in particular I have noticed that the Internet, and in particular computers, has been fantastic in terms of allowing us to access information and the department's website has really blossomed, and I can see that there is a lot of potential within that, particularly thinking about for country people as well, who are a long way from services, to access the very best advice for a whole range of things in terms of general classroom strategies, and that is the type of thing that a few of us as school counsellors have prepared—short worksheets which are readable, which are maybe not too time-consuming but they are practical ideas for the teachers in the classroom, and that has been of some help. But there are many cases where even I do not fully know what the best strategy is for managing that particular condition.

CHAIR: In a moment I will ask Ms Ralston for her comments on that. Before we go down that path could I just also ask you about the comments that we have had in terms of school counsellors in connection with the impending workforce issues in relation to the numbers of school counsellors? Do you have a view about a suggested model where school counsellors are specialists in terms of identification of needs and supplemented by people who have social welfare type qualifications that look at those sorts of issues more? Do you have a view on that personally?

Mr JOHNSON: I have not given that a great deal of thought but I have discussed with my colleagues at times the fact that we are far too widely spread in terms of the range of issues that we can effectively deal with as school counsellors. If we focused on some of the bigger things and became very good at those then perhaps we could look elsewhere for the more specialised needs of students with particular conditions that are less common. The most obvious ones that come to mind for me are anxiety, depression and anger management issues for kids.

CHAIR: Ms Ralston, I think you said you had been part of the school learning support coordinator first pilot program and you are now conducting some of the training for the online training. The first pilot program—

Ms RALSTON: I will clarify it. What was happening was at the beginning of last year some people, including myself, were involved in a pilot school learning support coordinator program where schools selected us through the interview process and in addition to the existing services. So nothing else changed other than the schools received a school learning support coordinator shared amongst a group of schools—a local management group usually. This year the Department of Education wants to trial in the Illawarra region—so this is where they are calling it a trial, whereas I am involved in the pilot—

CHAIR: Now we understand.

Ms RALSTON: The trial is supposed to be, to the best of my knowledge, including the funding changes. The pilot program is in addition to what is already there, so we can still access the itinerant behaviour teachers, the itinerant language teachers, the STLAs, et cetera. However, in the Illawarra region it is supposed to be a trial of the proposal as it stands, including the funding. So that means that the itinerant teachers would no longer be in existence really and the idea is that they will change their title to become school learning support teachers, as recommended by the teachers federation.

Dr JOHN KAYE: As against school learning support coordinators?

Ms RALSTON: Yes, which is what I am involved in. So there is a pilot, which is coordinator, and there is a trial, which is teacher. The trial involves the funding changes as well.

CHAIR: But there is no increased funding?

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are losing other things?

Ms RALSTON: Yes.

CHAIR: Thank you. Now we understand. You are also doing some of the online training modules. There was some criticism from an earlier witness about the effectiveness of some of that training. What is your view on that? No doubt you will defend your aspect of it.

Ms RALSTON: Some of the things that were said by a previous witness—I am being careful with my words—which included reference to surveys to do with the school learning support coordinator pilot program, I have never heard of before and yet I am involved in that pilot program. So there have been surveys that were put forward today as examples of how it is working, and I have never heard of them, and that has happened before with other evaluations that have supposedly occurred. As far as on-line training is concerned, I have done, I have participated in, the autism spectrum disorder training, the motor coordination program and the behaviour program and I am currently tutoring in the autism spectrum on-line course. They are all useful. The behaviour management program—I have put this in my submission to the Department of Education and Training—does not address the needs of children with complex additional learning needs. It is very good basic classroom practise.

I would love to see every beginning teacher do that course and have someone help them practise and implement and see those strategies occur. It does not meet the needs of children or teachers who are working with children with much more complex disabilities. The autism on-line course has, I believe, been excellent. As a tutor there are teachers out there that I am working with who are actually assistant principals, learning assistance so they are at a regional level. They have never worked with a child with autism spectrum so this has been a really nice introduction to them. It does give some skills and strategies in assessment, evaluation and things that they can implement but it is only part of the story in our ongoing training. I have done no additional research about whether the courses that the Macquarie University people were suggesting were not validated in relation to motor coordination, so I do not have that opinion about it.

Dr JOHN KAYE: To summarise, do you say that if we take somebody who has experience in one area of disability education and we put them through the 110 hours of on-line training that is not adequate preparation for dealing with the other areas of special needs but not previously been educated or experienced in?

Ms RALSTON: That is very correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are currently piloting being a school learning support coordinator. Leaving aside the issue of the loss of the other things, how much training is required to be an effective school learning support coordinator, given that you come to the job with one specialty?

Ms RALSTON: I truly believe that all school learning support coordinators need to have a masters in special education as a basis.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Twelve months full-time.

Ms RALSTON: Yes, as a very minimum.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So for the SLSC model to be successful the department would need to provide 1,800 new people with master degrees?

Ms RALSTON: That is correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Let us suppose they did that, would that compensate for the loss of the other things that the trial is putting on-line? I am referring to language classes and all the others.

Ms RALSTON: Yes. I think that the model needs to be adapted somewhat. Say, for example, I would not be attaching a school learning support coordinator to one school and say, "That is your job for the next 10 years or until you apply for a transfer." I would be attaching them to a local management group, and then that local management group can say, "In our local area we really need expertise in behaviour management, in working with children with autism spectrum disorder, with language disorders", so that then the local management group can choose staff to meet that need. From there, the local management group, the schools, can have that person full-time in their school for a minimum of two terms.

Be in there, become part of the team, be really effective, not in our itinerant—I have done the itinerant and that is not, in my opinion, a successful program. It is certainly not cost efficient—but be in there and part of the team. I am accepted as a member of the staff. I also have accountability. If I come in with some great ideas I cannot walk out and say, "Well, I hope that worked". I actually have to make it work. If it has not worked then I have to adapt and change things so that it does. In that I have been able to equip the school staff, teacher's aides, with new skills, which they did not have before so that when I leave those skills remain, and the school does truly have their capacity built to meet the needs of special needs children.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You made some remarks about the inappropriateness of using NAPLAN in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 literacy, numeracy, et cetera, tests as a measure of success for a school support learning coordinator. Will you expand on those briefly for the Committee please?

Ms RALSTON: I certainly can. I was hoping you would ask that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That was not a dorothy dixer, by the way. I truly am interested in this, as the Committee would know.

Ms RALSTON: I work with two schools as the school learning support coordinator. I am not going to name them but I am going to refer to them as the NAPLAN school and the inclusion school. The first school, the inclusion school, has a large proportion of children with autism spectrum and emotional disorders and the ratio is, in fact 1 in 15. Approximately half of those children are diagnosed. The assumed ratio under the current pilot program is 1 in 100 so our school currently presents with six times the national average. In addition, there are other children with other needs such as hydrocephaly, cerebral palsy, et cetera. In that school my role was defined as it is stated in the SLSC statement. In consultation with the learning support team I worked toward building the school capacity to meet the needs of children with disabilities and special needs.

For example, I have been involved in training parents, teachers and school learning support officers across the local management group targeting specific areas of identified need. I have facilitated change in school practise and structures, revising healthcare plans and procedures, implementing supported play programs so that at break times children with special needs learn the social and physical skill to play with their peers in the playground, not just watched as another witness mentioned today. I have provided professional advice, support and mentoring in classrooms so that inclusive practises have been employed. I have some additional work in more detail, which I have here to table, about what I have achieved in that particular school. In short, children

with disabilities have had the opportunity to truly be included in their local school as skills and structures have been developed across the community, school and in the classroom.

The second school that I worked with I will refer to as the NAPLAN school. The ratio of children with autism spectrum and emotional disorders, clusters of behaviours, is probably 1 in 100, so the schools are clearly different. However, they are within one kilometre of each other. They have the same socio-economic background and they both have a population of approximately 440. There are children at the school with other disabilities such as cerebral palsy, hearing loss, moderate intellectual disability and dyspraxia.

As the school learning support coordinator at this school I was specifically told that it was not my role to assist with students with disabilities or to train the school learning support officer so that she is better equipped to support teachers and students. My main focus was specifically to improve NAPLAN writing results for 2009. This year I have been given the specific task of improving NAPLAN reading comprehension scores for the school. In addition to NAPLAN, I was also allowed to work with three students in their classroom with their teachers, and that was three hours total. The rest of my time was NAPLAN writing. I say this not to criticise the executive at the school but to emphasise that the broad role description is open hugely to varying interpretation. Technically speaking the executive was completely within its rights to deploy me in those roles.

In my opinion NAPLAN should be the role of the literacy Committee at the school, and part of the whole school budget, not the role of the school learning support coordinator whose position is made available through special education funds. NAPLAN basic resources such as laminating sheets and overhead projectors, which I was chasing all the time, should not be the focus of special education teachers at schools. Special education students and their teachers are missing out on essential support because of the way the documentation is written and because of the emphasis on NAPLAN for funding, for evidence to show effective school programs, and my-school type comparisons.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Ashby, would you please elaborate on two things in your submission. You made the observation that kindergarten class sizes were reduced in recent years. The number of students in supported classes was increased. You are principal of an SSP. Have classes in SSPs been increased? I was aware of the IM increase in support classes in the mainstream settings.

Ms ASHBY: The answer is, in effect, no. However, that is something that was not communicated to me. It was something I stumbled upon by chance which is one of my issues with how things operate. The class sizes went from 9 to 10 for a moderate intellectually disabled. However, what was also factored was in an SSP the factor of need for a student with a moderate intellectual disability became 1.111 rather than 1. So, in effect, no; I guess my concern is that the factors of need for students are not widely known and not well communicated, and not that easy to extract, so therefore, I believe that there may be cases where the numbers have increased in classes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The other observation you make is in respect to students with multiple special needs. Will you explain how that interacts with the operations of an SSP, and the funding of an SSP?

Ms ASHBY: If there was one thing I would like to change it is to acknowledge that the students in special settings have a primary disability that they are funded on but they come often with multiple disabilities. That is the case in my school, and has been the case throughout my whole time there and it makes it extremely challenging. I think we need to acknowledge that we have a continuum of placements and it is not my view that special schools are a last resort but some people view as that, and therefore having that view, you might realise that we often get students whose needs are considerably more than those in mainstream settings, and they get the same level of funding. We get students with very high medical needs and behavioural needs, communication needs. We can have students who are funded as a student with a moderate intellectual disability who can also have autism, who can also be physically disabled, who can also be sensory impaired, and the challenge is enormous.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That child will be resourced and funded in the school as if they only have the least expensive and resource intensive of those special needs?

Ms ASHBY: At 1.111, absolutely their primary disability. They will be resourced on their primary disability and that is determined to be their intellectual disability if they come to my school.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Who determines that is the primary disability?

Mr JOHNSON: Usually the DGO, district guidance officer, in consultation with the bosses above them. The welfare section of the department decides which disability is the principal disability. My understanding was that autism, for example, often got higher funding or higher support than some other conditions, such as, language and what have you.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: It is the flavour of the month. I can remember when it was not.

Ms ASHBY: However, if a child's primary disability is intellectual, whether they have autism or not, it does not increase the factor of need.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Do you ever see those categories change?

Ms ASHBY: Do you mean an individual moving from one to another?

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Yes.

Ms ASHBY: Rarely. We can apply special considerations. For instance, for a student with a moderate intellectual disability, we can put in a submission through the counsellors to have the student considered as having a severe intellectual disability. It is not guaranteed, it is a lot of hard work, but that can happen. A student who is assessed as their intellectual disability is varying from moderate to severe or the other way, not often, rarely.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You are a very highly skilled group of people with lots of experience. It is important for us to get a handle on what you think of the process of moving from the clinical labelling of initiative functional assessments. I understand that the issue of functional assessments is very complex and there is considerable debate and concern about how it should operate. Some places are using a document that has not necessarily been endorsed across the board yet and the department is trying to work on something in relation to a functional assessment. Would that remove a lot of your trouble with the one clinical label being utilised?

Ms ASHBY: I believe so.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Have any of you participated in that process at all?

Ms ASHBY: Are you referring to the Comino review?

Dr JOHN KAYE: No.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I do not know these names at all. The department has talked about it in its submission and we have had many witnesses talking about functional assessments.

Ms ASHBY: Are you referring to the one that is used for placing children with disabilities in mainstream classes?

Dr JOHN KAYE: No. I do not think it has been used anywhere.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: No, but it is being trialled and worked through.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In very few places. It is still with EMSAD [Educational Measurement and School Accountability Directorate]. So it has not got out into the real world.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: They are investigating and the department has made a commitment to work towards it but because of the complexity they are still working on it. I am not saying, "Here comes this new thing, bang, bang, bang." I am asking you if that were able to be developed and could be utilised, would that process address some of the problems with having the one clinical label? Are you comfortable with the labelling process?

Ms ASHBY: I am not at all comfortable with the labelling process. In fact, the labelling process is just a means to an end to get the placement.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: It is financial.

Ms ASHBY: Yes, that is all it is. I would be very happy to see that labelling removed and actually look at the needs of that student and what support does that student need. I do not know where the formula came from. I do not know what that was based on. I do not know how we can say that six students with severe needs can be met by one teacher and one school learning support officer. I believe that removing the labels and looking at the needs of the students—what do they need, what level of funding do they need to support them to deliver a quality education, not just to have them sitting in a room—that would go a long way towards helping.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The group before you were happy to use labelling to get the funding. They said it is easy to get the funding as a result.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I think you have misquoted them slightly.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The National Independent Special Schools Association said because they used that it was easier to get the funding.

CHAIR: No.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: We should not be fighting. We want to hear what the witnesses say.

Mr JOHNSON: Currently in western Sydney the practice has become not only do we now do IQ assessments for determining labels, when we are talking about intellectual disabilities at least, we also have to provide functional assessments. The functional assessments we are currently using are questionnaires that are largely derived from American studies and norms. We do not seem to have anything in Australia just yet. But I do believe that you were saying earlier that they are working on something for the Australian situation.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Do you think that would be useful?

Mr JOHNSON: I think functional assessments can be excellent and they can provide a lot of help for programming for particular needs for kids. But one of the things I have noticed about it is that there is a bit of a negative perception in mainstream high school where I currently am, mainly because it is seen as being another barrier to getting services. Now not only do you need to do the test but you also have to show that you are behaving like a person that would have that label under the old system. While it is fair enough for some kids who, for example, might get an IM classification from the IQ test but they are functioning well outside the IM range for lots of different reasons—family supporting community support—the reverse does not seem to apply for kids who are not functioning as well as the IQ might suggest but are functioning actually like an IM or an IO student. So it only seems to work one way and that is the way where it costs less money.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So you have another issue in relation to those persons?

Mr JOHNSON: It is a double-edged sword. It seems to reduce the number of kids who receive funding because they are now not functioning like you might expect them to based on their IQ test or other objective-type tests.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So the functional analysis is essential for balance?

Mr JOHNSON: The functional assessment is very useful and I totally support it because it has lots of value. But it needs to cut both ways. At the end of the day teachers are still dealing with kids who are not coping in the classroom, whether they are labelled as IM or IO or any other label.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You need both?

Mr JOHNSON: You need both and you need to be able to have it swing both ways. For example, if a kid is marginally over IM and is classed as a borderline-type of kid but his functional assessment says he is functioning like an IM student we can still provide that extra service for those kids.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It is a balance of both. Over the last two days a lot of the evidence has been about disease process. I am getting a perception that perhaps as educators you have been pushed into clinical disease management. What do you think of that?

Ms RALSTON: I do not understand really what you mean by that.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: We have been hearing a great deal about disease labels and clinical medical disease processes.

Ms RALSTON: Do you mean mental health diagnoses?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It is not necessarily about educative processes. My question is not supposed to be challenging, except it is. It is about moving the emphasis from educative processes, which I think some of you say happens with the national testing programs, into labels for clinical disease. I do not say it has happened on purpose or you have moved towards it, but the funding process could be tangled with clinical disease.

Ms RALSTON: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I am just opening up the question. I am not asking you to tell me this.

Ms RALSTON: For example, we have a child who is in year 6 transitioning to year 7. He has a mild intellectual disability. He used to have a moderate intellectual disability but our educational program is so successful that we have moved him up so he is now technically two scores above IO range, that is, moderate intellectual disability.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Two IQ points?

Ms RALSTON: Yes. Therefore, he had to move out of the support class and into the mainstream class because he no longer met the criteria. He has other disabilities as well, so it is more complex than just an intellectual disability. One of those things is that his fine motor skills are very, very delayed. To get a laptop computer to assist with this transition into high school we have to do a referral to DADHC [Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care] for an appointment with an occupational therapist. The occupational therapist has to give us a piece of paper to say that this boy has this degree of fine motor difficulty and, therefore, as he moves into high school to expect him to keep up with handwriting the notes is impossible. Within the primary school system we have had access to computers but not laptops and he is extremely efficient on the computer. But to get that piece of physical technology in the classroom and get it set up for him now will be virtually impossible. We have put in the referral. We have to wait for DADHC to finally have time to see the child. Then it will be a first year out OT [occupational therapist] coming out and I will tell her what we need.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Do you live in the country?

Ms RALSTON: No. She will write a report and then the Department of Education will allow us to put in an application, which then takes time to be processed. We are reliant on these physical pieces of paper that talk about deficits all the time when it is blatantly obvious that the child has those needs, it is part of his disability. Let's get him the equipment so that he can start using it now.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Hear! Hear!

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Could you clarify something for me along the same lines? On my reading, if you lift the ability of one of those students above the line you actually take him out of the funding?

Ms RALSTON: He can no longer access a support class. So we are taking away one of the options for his family. That is a major issue in transition to high school because we have to look at where does he go. He is clearly not going to cope in the mainstream high school. So now we can only look at classes in the mild intellectual disability. His local school down the road from where he lives has an IO class and he cannot access that because he is two scores too high.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: What gets taken away is the very thing that made him successful?

Ms RALSTON: Exactly, yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: As a result of your good work you get less?

Ms RALSTON: Correct.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I want to ask a question of Mr Johnson.

CHAIR: Your time is up.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I have not asked any questions.

CHAIR: We were going to go around again, but you can continue.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Mr Johnson, I want to ask you a couple of questions on the counselling service. You have done a lot of work both in country and city areas?

Mr JOHNSON: Not as a counsellor. As a teacher in the country and as a counsellor in the city.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You have done a fair bit of counselling?

Mr JOHNSON: Yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: It is becoming a very important role in assisting students, we have understood from the evidence over the last couple of days. Is there anything you think counsellors should have to improve the service they provide? Is there anything that can be done to help you or do you think where you are at the moment is sufficient?

Mr JOHNSON: As I said earlier, apart from the excesses of paperwork that are required by the department and normal documentation purposes, it is the lack of control over caseloads. I can be in the middle of doing one thing and I can have two other people dropped in at my door. I get a phone call from one deputy, then another deputy, both not talking to each other, saying, "I have got a kid crying" and "I have got this kid whose father is just about to jump off a bridge. Can you come and talk to this kid?" You have these conflicting interests quite often. This is in a high school setting. Primary school is a little bit more civilised, I suppose, more managed.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Could you amend the fact that your time as a counsellor is constantly demanded?

Mr JOHNSON: I think you could do some things towards it. One of the main things is the need for us as school counsellors to focus and be trained in particular areas. In the last few years we have found ourselves moving away from what we were trained in, which is assessments. I primarily was trained in assessments, IQ testing, behaviour assessments, that sort of thing, and putting together reports for medical people and other specialists. Now there is more demand on us for actual counselling. They want us to do the work because the services outside are stretched beyond capacity and people do not want wait a month to see somebody, so they want us to do what we can and sometimes that is just too spread. I think we need to get people to become more expert in particular areas and trained in particular areas of greatest need to leave the other things to other more specialised people.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you have a role, as a counsellor, to try to teach the teachers to do some of that work?

Mr JOHNSON: I do. Most counsellors are part of these support teams and I have always been part of the learning support team. As I said earlier, I have worked to make short documents for teachers to read about particular kids, how they might best support them in the classes, but in reality at times there are things I do not know about or do not know enough about and I cannot read fast enough to become expert enough to give them

the best quality information. I think with the Internet now we could do a lot better by using outside services to provide us with guidelines and work from there.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Do all counsellors have a masters degree?

Mr JOHNSON: No.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Comment has been made that they ought to have a masters degree?

Mr JOHNSON: They used to. I was one of the last years that went through where they had to have a masters degree. Now they can have post-graduate diplomas, I believe. It is a slightly shorter course. They are trying to get people out there on the ground now. You used to have two years teaching experience plus your three or four years of undergraduate psychology and then you did a masters degree, but now they have other programs. There are a lot more younger counsellors coming in who have a lot less teaching experience. That is good in some ways because we need some younger people coming into the service but, on the other hand, they really do not have all that much experience in the classroom and understanding how school systems work and the like, so that is probably one of the downsides to it, but it is generally seen to be a good move. They are enthusiastic and willing to learn like everyone else, I suppose.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: In this report, I think it is Michelle's, it states, "University training in special education is inadequate"—that is a strong comment—and "Online training courses are great, certainly not sufficient though". Can you give us a snapshot of what you mean, briefly?

Ms RALSTON: Yes. I think that the education of teachers needs a three-pronged approach. One of them is the pre-service teacher training, and I am involved in doing that at one of the universities. One subject over one semester is not enough. We give them an overview, we talk about a few strategies generally and we wish them luck. It is not good enough. There needs to be a mandatory at least two subjects on special education so that we can get in-depth information, skills and knowledge for our undergraduate teachers because once they come out, the reality is they will have at least two or three children with complex learning disabilities in their classroom.

The next part of the education and training is ongoing education on the school site. Now that needs to be provided by the school by a qualified post-graduate assistant principal. You will find that there are probably almost none out there. There will be assistant principals who have got their jobs because they were good at sport, organisation or they are very good with band and music. They never advertise for a special education specialist as an assistant principal at the school. So who is supporting these kids on an ongoing basis and who is leading with knowledge and skill the staff? No-one. We need our school learning support coordinators or our assistant principals—we need a mandatory position where there is an assistant principal who can give real guidance and training in an ongoing way at the forefront in the classroom.

The online training is a good move. It is getting education and new ideas on track and making it part of the classroom. The other thing that impacts on the education site is accountability. The State, region and local priorities and plans need to include a mandatory priority target area of inclusion, the provision of programs to support children with disabilities. The target priority areas guide resource allocation, school management and staff development over a three-year period. It is a mandatory part of Department of Education and Training policy. The school priority areas in relation to children with disabilities should be driven then by the learning support team. NAPLAN is driving our school priorities at State, regional and local priorities and until we can get special education and inclusion in those mandatory priorities and plans, then we will never see inclusion in classrooms.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I think you will find that in a couple of speeches that have been made by people on this side in the upper House.

CHAIR: Ms Barker, I want to ask a couple of questions about what you put in your submission. You are currently a learning support coordinator?

Ms BARKER: Yes.

CHAIR: One of the things you are talking about is a relevant and suitable curriculum. Do you have a view that there needs to be a specific curriculum for children with particular intellectual issues?

Ms BARKER: What concerns me is the inflexibility of what happens. It is fine if the student just has one disability but the problem you probably have heard here in a different guise in a number of conversations is that there is rarely a student who turns up with just one disability. Where you have multiple disabilities or a learning problem on top of a disability, the level of flexibility to make the program as flexible as it needs to be for each child is actually quite difficult. I think also the delivery of that is quite difficult in a classroom setting because you are talking about a classroom teacher with a number of teachers in their class trying to adapt to multiple levels of difficulty for any one student.

It is good to have something that is laid down in a format; the ability to actually look at the child and look at their function and then say, "This actually will not work with that child. We need to do something". I will take the issue of having a child with a laptop because there is a known problem, which is known right from the beginning. They are only at school a year or so before you can already predict that the child is really going to struggle, both with frustration as well as the physical problems that they might have. The obvious thing to do with that is to change the way you deliver a number of things. I will just take off the top of my head mathematics, for example. For a primary school student who cannot write particularly well, it is quite difficult for them to learn to operate on a laptop in high school to do mathematics if they have not learnt to actually do that when they younger in a classroom setting so they can actually apply it where they have still got a stable environment.

One of the problems with a laptop is that in high school you have to pack up your desk every half hour and move it somewhere else, unpack it—and you have books as well as laptops. That is quite a difficult thing, but you can actually identify that quite early in the piece. Then saying, "All right, if I look at that child and I see the level of difficulty that particular child has, even though it is not their primary disability but the level of functioning in hands and fingers is going to be a long-term problem", you make the decision earlier on to deliver mathematics in a digital way and that can much more easily be applied in the primary setting where the classroom teacher does not have to move equipment and the child is trained to use a different way of doing mathematics does not present the same kind of frustration as a child who cannot write and cannot perform.

CHAIR: Some of our submissions talk about the United Kingdom model where basically a contract is undertaken with parents in terms of the provision of education to that child, so there is a commitment that education will be provided and there is a contract system and it is up to the local authority as to how that is delivered. Do you think that is a better way of going about it?

Ms BARKER: There are pluses and minuses to that. Firstly, because of the Internet, our parents are actually quite well informed.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Some.

Ms BARKER: So usually they come to a conference like that with fairly fixed ideas about what could be done for their child. But of course a parent has three children in a family or a number similar to that. Working through what could be done in a small setting where you have an assistant is quite different to what might actually be able to be achieved in the classroom. I think it is good to have parents involved in it. They are much more likely to be supportive of the school and the child and that is a good thing, but if you are going to do that, one of the things we have had to do in our setting is to allow parents to have a look at—if you can arrange it—how the child is actually functioning.

It does help to give them a snapshot of what it looks like to do this particular thing in a classroom because quite often they will find information that they will get online and think, "This would work with my child" and it may if we had enough resources to make that happen within a classroom, but you have to remember that the classroom teacher has a lot of other things and a lot of other students to take care of. To modify what a parent is expecting or thinks may work needs to be done if you are going to have parents involved in it. Our parents are actually involved in a collaborative way but it is quite difficult to give them a snapshot really of what that looks like in the classroom and how that will be.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: I am interested in your thoughts on the value of preschool early intervention programs. My impression is that we do not have enough early intervention, enough assessment and enough resources devoted to it? Would anyone like to step up to the mark on that?

Ms RALSTON: Yes, I did early intervention for 10 years. We definitely need more early intervention support classes. There are children coming into kindergarten having received no additional support. Many of them have not been identified as having additional needs but they present at the orientations and they clearly have very special needs. For the early intervention programs, the classrooms need to be set up so that they meet basic preschool standards. At the moment they are seen by the department of education as a special education class, so they do not have to be preschool specific classrooms. Things that are required for the registration of other preschools and child-care centres as minimum standards are not required nor seen in those early intervention centres.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Can you give us some examples of what is missing?

Ms RALSTON: Toilets being the right size.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: General physical stuff?

Ms RALSTON: Physical stuff.

Dr JOHN KAYE: PAPDs.

Ms RALSTON: The other thing, too, is that the qualifications for special education positions need to reflect the needs of the students. At the moment early intervention support classes can be staffed by teachers without early childhood qualifications or without special education qualifications. It is against childcare best practice, which is a requirement for the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care but for some reason the department of education can be a law unto itself. Children with special needs and the preschool childcare services these children attend require appropriately trained department of education staff to train them and advise them, but that is not the case. The current status quo is that anyone can teach early intervention. I strongly disagree. It is a very specialist area. All the goodwill in the world to do the best they can does not equate with quality teaching.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I ask a highly relevant question directed to Peter, possibly Michelle and maybe Julie. Do you have difficulty, once you have identified a need for a placement, in finding a place for that placement? We had evidence before that suggested there are plenty of placements out there.

Mr JOHNSON: It largely depends on what you are talking about, what disability. In the western suburbs of Sydney, for example in our area, we have had this belief that a student who is diagnosed as having a moderate learning disability would be placed very rapidly, when there are vacancies. It may not be the ideal choice for the parent, but they will find somewhere for them and then move the child closer to home later on, perhaps in other areas—

Dr John Kaye: You mean other types of disability?

Mr JOHNSON: Yes, for example mild learning disability, combinations of mild learning disability and behaviour problems, language support classes and reading classes. I would describe them as hopelessly undersupplied. We could have a language class at our school staffed at the same level that services our entire region. Because language difficulties are so prominent, delays in younger children are so prominent, that at that early stage those kids need help. Unfortunately, by the time counsellors often find them, or discover them in the classroom, the kids cannot get into them, because they go up to grade 2 only, in our area anyway, except for one area, and the rest I believe go up to grade 5 or grade 6. Those areas are definitely understaffed. Also for mental health issues, there is a shortage of that as well. We applied for months for some kids, and did not get places for them.

Dr John Kaye: What about behaviour?

Mr JOHNSON: Hopeless, in the sense that we would have a number of kids who were placed on long suspensions, threatened with expulsions. This is my experience over the past 15 years. They are looking for places for them. They cannot find permanent places for them, but recently they set up an American model in our area. It looks like an in-school suspension where they have a teacher supervising a small group of students at another high school. They teach them appropriate behaviour in the week or so that they are there while they are

on suspension. Then they return with support to the main school. That is the extent of it, I guess. They have some ongoing support, but I would not say that necessarily leads to permanent change for those kids.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: The kids find their own place, and it is usually in Juvenile Justice.

Ms RALSTON: That is right.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I address this question to Julie Ashby and Michelle Ralston. Does your experience mirror Peter Johnson's. Julie, you may not need placements.

Ms ASHBY: It varies. My school is currently full, but I am not aware of any students who are currently waiting to get in. There have been some multi-categorical classes, two new ones opened in a school that is very close to me. Some of our students have moved into there. We are looking to that concept of the learning community, which I think is the way to go. But we need to look at a group of schools supporting each other with expertise and with the best placement for students and helping them to transition from one setting to another, depending on their need.

I know that I have asked for support in terms of behaviour, but because the waiting lists are so big we have not received a great deal of support, because there is such a strong demand for the itinerant teachers' behaviour. It does fluctuate. I know that the special school that is about 40 kilometres up the road is also full. I know that the school that is 40 kilometres the other way is almost full. There are certainly plenty of students needing placements, and it varies from time to time whether some students are asked to wait.

Ms RALSTON: I have been involved in referring two children to a behaviour class. Neither of them was offered a position because the classes were full.

CHAIR: The Committee could ask a lot more questions, but we have run out of time today. The Committee appreciates you giving you time today. As I said at the outset, we appreciate what you do day by day, let alone battling in presenting information to the Committee. We look forward to keeping this conversation going and hopefully we will come up with some good recommendations. The Committee will now adjourn for a short deliberative meeting.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 4.49 p.m.)