

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 3

INQUIRY INTO POLICE RESOURCES IN CABRAMATTA

At Cabramatta High School on Tuesday 6 February 2001

The Committee met at 12.45 p.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. Helen Sham-Ho (Chair)

The Hon. R. H. Colless
The Hon. J. Hatzistergos
The Hon. G. S. Pearce
Ms Lee Rhiannon
The Hon. I. W. West

In attendance—

Senior Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Senior Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Senior Teacher Deputy Principal, Cabramatta Public School.

Senior Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Senior Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Staff member, Cabramatta High School.

Staff member, Cabramatta High School/Cabramatta Primary School.

Teacher, *Cabramatta High School.

Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Teacher, Cabramatta High School.

Student, Cabramatta High School.

Student, Cabramatta High School.

Student, Cabramatta High School.

Former Student, Cabramatta High School.

Senior Teacher A: First, on behalf of the school community, I welcome the Hon. Helen Sham-Ho and members of the Committee and thank them for coming to the school. In particular, I thank Senior Teacher B very strongly. She is a very good example of one who loves the Cabramatta district and the Cabramatta High School in particular. She feels very strongly about the matter of policing in Cabramatta. It is through her that the Parliamentary Committee is at the school. I hope that the Committee will find from the representations of students who are educated here, staff who work here and staff who live in the community a different perspective from one that the Committee probably has at this stage. I will leave my remarks at that because I am not one of the presenters. The Hon. Helen Sham-Ho will chair the meeting.

CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, I thank Senior Teacher A and the school community for that warm welcome and for the invitation to visit Cabramatta High School. The purpose of this Committee meeting is to enable the Committee members to hear at first hand the views of the Cabramatta High School. In relation to the Committee process and the Committee's terms of reference, which I hope people have in front of them, I note that Senior Teacher B has prepared an agenda for the meeting. Staff Member A, Senior Teacher C and Student A, a year 12 student, will each be making a brief presentation. This will be followed by questions from members of the Committee and by general discussion. The meeting will be recorded and a transcript will be produced.

I emphasise that the Committee is conducting an inquiry which focuses on the allocation of resources and other policies of the police. This meeting is not an appropriate forum for raising specific allegations of criminal activities. Each person speaking should state his or her name. In conclusion, I again thank the Cabramatta High School community for inviting the Committee to the school for this consultation.

Senior Teacher B: I am a head teacher of the Intensive English Centre [IEC] at Cabramatta and I have been at the school for 18 years. My experience and the views that I express relate to point 1

and to point 3 of the Committee's terms of reference. There is no doubt that the Committee is well aware that Cabramatta is an extraordinarily vibrant and dynamic multicultural community. It is also extraordinary in the sense that it is, at times, like a bad dream, surreal and quite outside what many people would consider normal. Cabramatta is not only multicultural in the conventional sense of the term but multicultural in the sense that there is a multilayer of cultures in which I would include a culture of fear, which is very genuine; a culture of frustration; and, perhaps, even one of despair. And the most deadening, deadening thing of all is the culture of acceptance—that this is simply the way things are, and nothing is going to change it.

I really believe that Cabramatta is blighted by heroin which is constant and which is intrusive. To illustrate this point, I simply want to outline some of my experiences very, very briefly. On any morning at the station—I travel, and have travelled for the last 18 years, by rail—there is a litter of bedding, cardboard mattresses, milk crates and comatose bodies. There is endemic loitering of dealers. They meet my train every morning: It leaves Central Station at 10 minutes to 7. At the station and in many surrounding streets, undoubtedly you are already aware of the activity. There is constant harassment.

There is overt injecting in the street, in the trains and even in cabs. In fact, what astonishes me is that cabbies actually know where things are happening. The other day I got into a cab and there was a needle on the floor. The cabbie and I had an interesting exchange. As far as our students are concerned, they often report comatose bodies in stairwells of their flats; addicts using water points in their front gardens; and 24-hour-a-day dealing in neighbouring houses and flats. So it is constant and it is intrusive: They live with it.

I want to outline very briefly a couple of rather sad, if not poignant, thing that happened to me last year. Recently, a home visit by a high school liaison officer revealed that the reason for a student who is in year 8 having poor attendance was due to the fact that the family lived in a well-known "notorious"—his words—street in the area. The student had been kept home, to quote him, "to mind the house". He also added that the family lived in absolute fear. The house was, to quote him again, "barricaded at the back". A family, a grandmother, a single mum and three children lived in two rooms at the front of the house. In that way, they felt they had some control over their environment. It really blew me away when I was told that because of constant drug dealings and activity all around them. But even more poignant is the fact that the parent was taking sleeping pills simply to get a good night's sleep and often did not wake up in time to bring the student to school. She would not trust that child out on her own in public transport within the area. Last year in another case, a parent apologised profusely to me because she had to withdraw her child from the school—and this is from the IEC. The child had been with us for only three months and had been coming to learn English, having come from Bosnia. She told me that the family had survived the Bosnian war and the subsequent to (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) NATO bombing of Belgrade, only to find themselves in yet another war zone in Cabramatta.

In the midst of what I see as an unrelenting assault on people's lives and the constant visual blight that we endure on a daily basis as well as the disturbing things we hear, the school is really an oasis. I would just like to mention a couple of things that I think are important. The school has an extraordinary tone: It is almost tangible and it is very positive. There is a stable staff and any number of educational and welfare programs which support students and contribute to the school culture which is rich in terms of "social capital"—one of Eva Cox's terms. I think that if we do nothing else at Cabramatta, these kids gain social capital and that is the stuff of society—the glue, if you like.

One is quite despairing of the fact that our students have to suffer because of the negative image, the negative media attention and the subsequent reputation that Cabramatta has acquired. Our students have to work so much harder socially and when competing for employment to break the stereotype and the suspicions that outsiders have when the students mention "Cabramatta". It is such a disadvantage and yet they are so loyal to the school and to the area. The most disturbing fact of all is that our students are incredibly vulnerable and more doubly at risk perhaps than are youth elsewhere because of the saturation of the drug culture. I think this is specially the case for students who have poor skills, a poor self-image and, really, few prospects for the future as well as any other number of affective reasons for their low functioning.

In summing up, my view is that heroin and related activities are so overt and so chronic that they must raise questions about current policing policies. They must also raise questions about the nature of policing. It is really quite sad that there is a common view which is often expressed in the community—over the last few days children have expressed this to me—that there really is nothing that people can do about it. Staff have the belief that there is an absolute lack of political will to change the situation: "Keep it in Cabramatta because we know where it is", and that is it. If that is the case, then I just think that that is an absolute tragedy.

CHAIR: You do not mind if members ask questions?

SENIOR TEACHER B: No.

CHAIR: Since our inquiry began several months ago, I have heard of very similar tragedies. I also have been around this area for a long time so I understand all that you are saying. But what is the school community's relationship with the police generally? Do you have one?

SENIOR TEACHER B: There are probably lots of people here who can comment more than I, but from my point of view there are strong links with the community in that people come in to do specialised programs, for example. There is a very strong police and community links program. We run one for the new arrival children. We do a lot of self-protective behaviour work. The police come in and we have interpreters for every language that we need to tell the students and work with the students. The school has a strong program for year 7 students. There was a youth liaison officer here and I think things were working well, but then that person mysteriously left.

SENIOR TEACHER A: She has come back, I think.

SENIOR TEACHER B: I think that Senior Teacher A, who will perhaps speak later, has a strong relationship with the local commander.

CHAIR: I understand your saying that the school is an oasis, but is there a suspicion that perhaps there are students who have some kind of drug dealings outside? Should you find this, how do you deal with that in terms of the police?

SENIOR TEACHER B: First of all, I think the school has a zero tolerance attitude to drugs. There is a strong drug policy. The school has counsellors and --- is the head teacher of personal development, health and physical education. [PDHPE]. Attention is given to sport and health programmes. Staff members A and B have run education programs with parents. Certainly I have not had any great dealings with actual suspicions of drug use but I know that our counsellors have. I think that is something that they, Senior Teacher A and others can perhaps comment on.

SENIOR TEACHER A: Do you want me to comment on that?

CHAIR: Yes.

SENIOR TEACHER A: I have been here for six years and in the six years in which I have been here, I can remember two instances in which students were suspected of drug taking. I am not aware—and I do not think that I walk around with my head in the sand—of any drug dealings within the school. I think that if the students in the school want access to drugs, it would be much easier for them to walk down to the shopping centre and obtain their drugs than it would be to deal with such places as the school toilets behind the buildings. The school is a lot more policed and the feeling within the school is a lot more anti-drugs than I think they would find outside in the community. I could be very naive, but I do not believe that drugs exist in the school.

I would not be naive enough to say that students within the school do not take drugs: I do not know and I cannot say. But the number of students that we find and who behave in a suspicious manner, as they would behave if they were on drugs, is virtually nil. The students might be able to answer that question more than I, but I think I would reflect most staff opinion that there would be very little, if any.

The Hon. G. S. PEARCE: What do the students say?

CHAIR: Does any student wish to make a comment?

STUDENT B: Personally, as a student, I have not encountered any in the school. I do not know anyone who has. The school is a friendly, vibrant community and that is about it. You do not really think about the drug problem but we probably tolerate it more than most in our community because of our so-called association with drugs. Cabramatta High School is a good school. But since it is Cabramatta, everyone understands "Cabramatta" means drugs, so we are more inclined to be associated with drugs, even though at the school we are not.

When people ask you where you are from, you are normally inclined not to say "Cabramatta". You normally say neighbouring communities because Cabramatta is associated with heroin and once they get the perception that Cabramatta is associated with drugs, then you are associated with drugs because you are associated with Cabramatta.

CHAIR: That is what Senior Teacher B was saying just now. You are afraid of being stereotyped.

STUDENT B: Yes, because if you say that you are from Cabramatta, you are going to be stereotyped as a drug user, or as a drug taker, or as a drug dealer, or any one of those because of the simple link with Cabramatta. But if you say you are from Liverpool or Parramatta, which is 10 or 20 minutes away, they say, "Oh, where is that?" You will not be saying, "It is near Cabramatta", you say, "It is out west" because they simply do not know those things. Or if you say you are from, "Canley Vale", they would say, "Where is that?". You will not be saying, "It is right next to Cabramatta". You will be saying, "It is near Liverpool." Then when they ask, "Where is Liverpool?", you say, "It is near Parramatta." You just keep going on from there. That is the beginning and the end of the story.

No-one wants any students from Cabramatta except in the Cabramatta community. They might see your resume which states "Cabramatta" and there might be somebody else who's resume shows "Fort Street" or "James Ruse" and they are more likely to go towards students from those areas simply because they are not Cabramatta.

SENIOR TEACHER A: Many staff would tell you if they are asked where they teach and they say Cabramatta High School people look in absolute shock and horror that you dare to work in a school which has drugs and gangs. The assumption is that we have drugs, gangs and violence. We have to live with that. All we can say, "No, it is not true."

CHAIR: Has the school thought of changing its name?

SENIOR TEACHER A: It has, yes, but we do not know whether that would solve the problem. It is something the department discourages nowadays anyhow.

The Hon. J. HATZISTERGOS: What are the academic and sporting outcomes of the school?

SENIOR TEACHER A: Very low sporting outcomes. Virtually our students participate in sport only at school. They are not weekend sporting people like other Australian communities. They would get sport only within the school. That is why we concentrate a lot on sport, that is their only avenue. In sports such as chess, volleyball and, believe it or not, men's netball we have had excellent success. In other sports very little. Academically we maintain a high percentage of students in the top 10 per cent UAI in the State. We only hold those because the students' literacy skills probably do not get them into a selective high school. When they do finally gain literacy skills through the support that we provide here, they absolutely go ahead in leaps and bounds. Our school certificate results do not reflect anywhere near the quality of our higher school certificate results. It is just in that gap that they achieve the literacy skills and they just bound ahead. Mind you, we do have a very big tail and you could probably put that down solely to literacy, certainly not through lack of endeavour.

The Hon. J. HATZISTERGOS: How do you view the police? Are they regarded as supportive?

SENIOR TEACHER A: The police are very supportive. If we fear that something is going to happen, erupt outside—we get visits from other parts of the community—we will notify the police and they will come down.

The Hon. J. HATZISTERGOS: Do you have any criticism of the police?

SENIOR TEACHER A: No, none at all. There was probably a time when our police links liaison officer did disappear but there is one back now who seems very keen. For years 7 and 10 the school holds an excellent school-police links program. I would say that most of these kids here would have been through it and they really enjoy the day. The police come down and the rapport that is developed is excellent.

The Hon. J. HATZISTERGOS: I am interested to hear from the students as to how they view their relationship with the police. It has been suggested to us elsewhere that there is a fear amongst people from non-English-speaking backgrounds of police officers. Is that the case or not? I want to know from the young people. How do you view the police? Do you fear the police? Do you have a good relationship with them? Do you respect them? Do you have no regard for them? What is your attitude towards the Police Service and how do you perceive the Police Service reacts to you?

STUDENT C: My name is Student C. Most of the students when we see the police we give them respect and say hello to them, and the police do the same thing to us. Also the school has provided, I think in year 10, the police link program. We spend one day for that and the police teach us how to get close to them and if we have some problem to report to them. They teach us how to report to the police and everything like that. I think that the relationship between the students and the police is normal as for other Australians.

CHAIR: What do you mean by normal?

STUDENT C: I mean we are not scared of the police and it is just normal. If we have something to ask we ask. We are not scared of the police at all.

STUDENT A: My name is student A. I am ----- . I have been living in Australia over the past three years. I have learned a lot about police in Cabramatta. One of my friends bought a computer and the dealer changed the promise. He says he is going to take this much requirement, how many gigabytes hard drive and how many RAMs, and when the students goes to pick up the computer the deal changes. They say they do not want to sell it. Being students we know some law and how we use our right to the police in the community, so one of my friends called the police. We have been waiting for three hours and we have not seen the police turn up. The question is why.

We do not fear the police. We do respect them and we do think that they might help us. But in the reality of life they help less. Over the last week I have done a replacement of a computer at Cabramatta east, the other side, and there has been a thief that has broken into the house. The house owner has called the police as well and the same thing happened—the police did not turn up. There is no choice. They have to let the thief go and they lost everything. They lost their money, jewellery and a lot of things. From that point of view they are the loser and they are helpless.

EX – STUDENT A: My name is Ex-student A. I am a former student at Cabramatta last year. In my opinion there is no interest from the police in that respect. I have lived in the community all my life. Most of us come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Obviously there is a barrier between the police and the community and a general fear in the community because of that barrier. My family rang the police a few times about junkies who slept under the front stairs. We have called the police and when they arrived they are all gone. They could not do anything about it. Obviously the community fears the police in some respects because of that barrier.

The Hon. G. S. PEARCE: What is the reason for that fear?

EX-STUDENT A: Mostly because they are afraid given the perception in the community and among the people that they are incapable. They are afraid to approach them because of their literacy and communication problems.

STUDENT A: The reason why they fear, Cabramatta is a multicultural location. Most of the residents come from a non-English speaking background. So language is the major problem. Most of them might not be able to communicate with the police. Let us say the story is short but because they cannot communicate well the story might take longer. Most of the people from Cabramatta do labour for a living. Most of them are not educated. They work as farmers and they do not have time to spend on that. That is the reason why. Of course, they do not fear the police but the way that they cannot communicate with the police is hard. If you know a lot of English that is perfect but if you do not know English that is it.

The Hon. I. W. WEST: How many of the students here were born in Australia and how many have come from overseas and English is not their first language?

SENIOR TEACHER A: I could give you a few statistics. I would say 97 per cent of our students come from a non-English speaking background. About one-third of the students who sat for the HSC last year have not had a full high school education in Australia. Only two-thirds would have gone right through the high school. Of those I do not know how many were born elsewhere, but I would think it would be a very high percentage. I do not know whether senior teacher B from the Intensive English Centre [IEC] would have any better figures. I would say probably 60 percent of our students were not born here; it could be even lower than that.

The Hon. I. W. WEST: Of the students who are present, who was born in Australia?

SENIOR TEACHER A: There are two students. So it might be higher than 60 per cent.

The Hon. J. HATZISTERGOS: What is the retention rate from year 10 to the senior years? How many drop out and how many go on?

SENIOR TEACHER B: I think Senior Teacher C could answer that.

SENIOR TEACHER C: We have had a fairly high retention rate. At this time of the year where students have done their school certificate and have gone on holidays, some of them might go off shopping around some of the other high schools and eventually make it back to us in a couple of weeks or we may get students from other high schools coming in. Our numbers stay fairly much the same between year 10 and year 11, a slight drop-off perhaps but not immense. There are a couple of reasons for that. Some students really should be leaving in year 10 and finding work. A lot of the problem is the current form of apprenticeships inasmuch as apprenticeships only pay a couple of hundred dollars a week in their first year. That is fine for year 10 students but they feel they can get more money by going on and doing their HSC, even if it is inappropriate in some cases. The problem is then that they finish the HSC, they go to look for apprenticeships and they are not even going to look at that \$200. Employers talk to me about the fact that they cannot get apprentices. I think a lot of it is tied up with the award that apprentices get. Now most of our students are leaving at the end of year 12. The retention rate between year 10 and year 11 is pretty reasonable.

CHAIR: I will ask Staff Member A to give her presentation.

STAFF MEMBER A: My name is Staff Member A. I have been a school counsellor at Cabramatta High School Intensive English Centre and Cabramatta primary school for 10 years. I have worked at a number of schools as a teacher and as a counsellor over 28 years and I would say that Cabramatta High and Cabramatta primary are the best schools I have worked in. They are safe and happy places and provide very good learning environments. School life is influenced in various ways, some obvious and some more subtle, by difficulties in the surrounding community. Some of these difficulties are criminal activity in the surrounding streets and on trains because of the drug problem, addicts coming into the school after hours, dangers from needles left in the school grounds and the need which parents clearly feel to protect their the children travelling to and from school from drug-related activities, including assault and theft.

In the wider community, problems include issues of public safety, especially drug-related assault and theft, the distress caused to children who witness drug dealing and taking, lack of freedom to walk about the streets because of personal danger, apprehension about train travel and health hazards from needles stick injury. The existence of these problems is clearly evident from personal

observation, incidents reported by students, parents and teachers and their levels of fear and anxiety. As a result many parents have become overprotective of their children and prohibit their involvement in beneficial activities. People can remain isolated and unstimulated because of fear. In counselling situations students frequently express fear and anxiety about the drug problem in Cabramatta. I hold quite a lot of groups with young people and we do quite a bit of artwork because at the new arrival stage they do not have a lot of English.

When asking students about things they like and do not like about their countries and Australia, there is a constant theme about not liking drugs in Cabramatta. So pictures come up all the time about the drug problem. These are not students in the same group, they are different groups, and it keeps coming up. They do not like the drugs and stealing, they do not like the heroin. Again, they do not like the drugs. So, it is a constant theme and I think it very much illustrates the high degree of anxiety and fear among the community.

I also believe that many of the students are suspicious of authority figures such as the police, and this is because in their experience in their countries of origin they have found authority figures to be untrustworthy and corrupt. When I came to Cabramatta in 1991 I was not aware that it was a great drug problem. Several years later it became obvious that there was a growing problem. The problem became steadily worse. Then there was a marked decrease at the time of the police task force. Since then, the problem has become worse again, and the reports of students and teachers to me, particularly in the latter part of this year, have indicated that that problem is getting worse again.

In view of the range of problems that I see in my work as a school counsellor, I think useful measures would include more effective policing to protect the community and to reduce the crime rate, especially by reducing the number of dealers and criminal activity by addicts. We need health measures for addicts, including rehabilitation, social support to reduce homelessness and increased employment opportunities. We need more recreational facilities for our young people in Cabramatta, such as expanded police youth club and other facilities. At present there are very few facilities. We need a greater police presence in the vicinity of schools, particularly as the students leave school in the afternoon, around the station and the trains. We need measures to break down cultural barriers between police and the community, including maintenance of our education programs by police in the schools. Finally, we need culturally sensitive policing, in view of cross-cultural problems and aspects of students' backgrounds that predispose them to be suspicious of authority figures. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Staff Member A. If we can move on to Senior Teacher D.

SENIOR TEACHER D: I am a resident and I am also a Senior Teacher at Cabramatta Public School. I am mainly here to talk in my resident's position. I would like to preface my presentation with a number of overall comments and observations. First of all, I do not come to this meeting with complaints or objections about the police—as a resident I have found and I know they do the best they can—but rather to comment on decisions made about policing at Cabramatta, such as the number of police in Cabramatta, the overwhelming duties they are given, the decision to put cameras into Cabramatta, and so on.

Second, it appears to me that the police have to deal primarily with drug-related crimes in Cabramatta and that this crime is so prevalent that they are unable to cover this let alone provide what I would call normal policing services to the rest of the community. When I talk about the rest of the community, I talk about the whole of the community of Cabramatta. It seems to me the limited policing resources are diverted largely to the CBD and drug-related crimes, and even there it is not safe. This seems to be further exaggerated by the media, who like to promote Cabramatta as a centre for drug use and dealing and paint a picture of what Cabramatta is all about and who lives there.

Third, when we talk about Cabramatta it needs to be said that it is a large diverse community which extends well beyond the boundaries of the CBD, made up of residences, schools, child care centres and clubs, et cetera, like a lot of suburbs in Australia. The effect of limited policing resources narrows the view of Cabramatta both demographically and geographically and reinforces those narrow views that people have about living in Cabramatta.

What I want to do now is briefly describe what living in Cabramatta is about. I have lived in Cabramatta for nearly 30 years with my husband and four children. My children are all adults now.

They came through the local schools and have gone on and all work. In those 30 years our sense of safety and freedom, hallmarks of the Australian community, has been clearly eroded. The ability to shop, socialise, use community services, even to travel, is all restricted. This is exemplified, for example, by my children and, I might add, very much reflects some of the comments you have heard from the students of the school. All four children work out of the area, all have an urgency to move out of the area and live elsewhere, and for my husband and I do the same. I know of many families who have taken this option to move out.

None of my children will get on or off a train at Cabramatta, opting for other stations deemed safer. All avoid any situation that requires them to walk near or through Cabramatta station. To do so subjects them to incredible intimidation because they will not succumb to the pressure to buy drugs. This has been the experience. When I put this together I talked to large number of my neighbours from many different backgrounds. We are even limited in driving our car—to drive down Railway Parade in front of Cabramatta station in fear of the junkies working out deals and jumping from one side of a road to the other. As they dive across the road they glare at you if you attempt to travel through the green light. Junkies stagger between buses and cars. You never know what is going to appear in front of you.

If you attempt to blow the horn to warn them, the experience of my next-door neighbour is he had his car windows smashed by the person, and he was merely trying to alert him to the fact that he was there. He drove his car straight home with his terrified 10-year-old son sitting in the back and locked himself in the house because he was afraid he was followed home. When I encouraged him to ring the police there were a number of comments, including that he felt that the police were too busy to come to what he thought was too menial a crime in Cabramatta. He also feared that people who smashed his window would follow it up and do something to him or his family or his house.

I am only going to comment on one example as a teacher. It is to say to you that I agree with Senior Teacher B that schools are oases for those kids. It is the walk between school and home that deeply concerns me. Recently I had the opportunity to walk a five year old home because he was sick. To walk them to the bowels of those flats was frightening experience. I consider myself quite assertive but the dealers were circling in curiosity and anticipation. They followed us. We used the electronic system to contact the parents, the parents came down, unchained, took the child in, and locked up and I walked back to school, watching over my shoulder the whole way. It describes what it must be like for children to leave school where it is safe and comfortable and go through this to their homes.

My concern is that it is not so much in the relationship between the police and us, it is the lack of a relationship. We do not see the police. I agree with Staff Member A that at certain periods of time—and usually they link up with when we do see the police around the station and in other areas of Cabramatta, and it is not a perception, I think it is genuine—that problem does not exist so much. So, what I am asking as a resident is that you not just look at the numbers of police—that is important, of course—but also what the duties are in Cabramatta. We heard described what we think are the overwhelming duties of police in Cabramatta, but you have to look at Cabramatta as a whole area. When they put cameras into Cabramatta, fine, but drug dealing, and so on, rippled down into areas where I live. I now have people shooting up beside my garage. I had not had that happen until the cameras went in. People are coming through my property at night. I have fought the temptation to do what other people do—lock up. If you look around Cabramatta you will see it locked up—bars on fences and windows. To me, that is not a safe and open community which is what I expect in terms of policing as well.

CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Jones.. May we now hear Student A's presentation, please?

STUDENT A: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Student A, and I am ----- of Cabramatta High School for 2001-02. I arrived in Australia in 1998 and today I am very happy to share my experience of life over the past three years in Cabramatta. Cabramatta is part of Fairfield council, the most multicultural local government in Australia, with more than half of the residents coming from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Most Cabramatta residents can speak more than one language other than English at home but unfortunately Cabramatta is regarded as the heroin capital of Australia. Death and violence are now the way of life in Cabramatta, and the business of drugs rules the streets. I am sure some of you may have heard from the news that New South Wales is the drug capital of Australia, and Cabramatta is the drug capital of New South Wales. That has hurt us and it

hurts especially young people like us. We are the people who are brought up in Cabramatta and we do not want to hear that.

In Cabramatta people look at drugs as if it is a normal thing. The reason is that it is not a big deal anymore. I see it every day and a lot of them are dealing in front of my face. They do not care about me as a student or a member of the community, they just do it. So what? Drug dealing has become part of the residents of Cabramatta. I think that is unfair to the residents of Cabramatta, especially young teenagers like us. Cabramatta residents and students are left to suffer the consequences. Needles are everywhere, including the children's playgrounds. Cars and homes are broken into. Community pride is destroyed, and what hurts us the most is the continued growth of the drug consumption.

At all levels of crime police are losing the war in Cabramatta and, as I said, they are the losers. They have defined a way to solve this problem in Cabramatta. The evidence is everywhere. Open dealing on the streets. Heroin that once ruled Cabramatta is virtually unchecked in towns and cities around the rest of Australia.

Finally, on behalf of Cabramatta students, I suggest to the State Government as well as to the Federal Government that they find the most effective way to get rid of drugs in Cabramatta. They must act as soon as possible because we are the students of Cabramatta and our families, as members of the community, can no longer accept the situation as it is at present time. We want it to be changed. We want to live in a safe environment. We do not want people from outside the community to treat the way they do. Cabramatta must become a better place for everyone.

CHAIR: Maybe we can start the forum again because I know that some people have to leave. If anybody here has any comment that must be made now because they have to leave, they should comment first.

SENIOR TEACHER E: I am one of the senior teachers at Cabramatta High School. I just want to reinforce some of the things I have heard here today, in particular from the families' perspective. I have strong contact with a particular family in the community. That level of acceptance that student A just spoke about has occurred over time, but whether it is because of not trusting the police to solve the problem—I do not know that to be so, necessarily. Families have just come to accept that they do not let their children walk to school and they do not let their children go downstairs to play after school. Therefore those children spend all their time after school inside the flat. At holiday time, they spent most of their time inside the flat. Their parents will not let them walk to and from school or within the community and they will not do that for their children's own safety. I think that is just not fair in this society.

Unfortunately that level of acceptance is not bubbling on the surface all the time. We walk around the school here and we do not hear kids talking about not being treated equally with the rest of society in Sydney or New South Wales, but the fact is that they are not. That level of acceptance has arisen only because this problem has gone on for too long. I know that members of the Committee are looking particularly at policing, but surely you must take back the message that these people deserve better and they demand better.

CHAIR: On behalf of the Committee, I must say that we have heard a lot of those sentiments, and that actually reinforces what we have heard so far. It is really nothing new in terms of the cry for change for the better. Maybe some of the students would like to say something from their perspective?

STUDENT B: As everyone has said, the drug problem exists in Cabramatta and we have come to accept it and all that, but we, as residents, should not accept it. Yet we do. We are not helped from outside and we as a community will never be able to get rid of it because, as a community, we have already accepted it, if you know what I mean. We have already accepted it, hence we do not care about it any more. We do to a certain extent, but not as much as we should. We have grown a tolerance to it. We just think it is everyday life. If the Premier were ever to walk down Cabramatta by himself and across the railway crossing, he would find that this is not acceptable for our society.

CHAIR: We understand that all the same, but perhaps I can ask students whether they have any bright ideas on how the Government can get rid of the drug problem or make the police were effective, as you are saying. Is there any way that you can suggest for that to be done?

STUDENT B: In relation to policing, probably 99.9 per cent of those in the Cabramatta police station are of Anglo origin. They are from Australia and they only speak Australian. The police station may have translators but they do not work 24-7. If someone comes at midnight, there may not be a translator there. They may need translating from Vietnamese or Chinese—we would never know because our community is so diverse—and they will not be able to provide it. Someone may take an hour and a half just to explain a story that might have taken one or two minutes had there been resources available.

With the drug problem, it is pretty hard to police because it is not only people from Cabramatta but also people from outside Cabramatta who buy it. You do not hear about them. You do not hear about people from the northern district or the southern districts who come up here purely to buy heroin and who then get back on the train. They go back there and they shoot up, or they come here and shoot up. When the effect has gone, they go back to their nice little home in the northern or southern district. You do not hear about that. You only hear about Cabramatta and drugs. If there was a drug incident on the Central Coast, you would not hear anything about it if it was minor. But if it happens in Cabramatta—if a minor drug incident happened here—it would be all over the newspapers.

A couple of years ago it was reported that some shop owners were paying protection money to drug dealers. I do not know whether that has changed but that was in the newspapers. You may say that newspapers manufacture news and that may or may not be; we will never know. The ever-growing drug problem has become worse because it has spread even with the cameras installed. They either vandalise the camera first or they just do drugs where there are no cameras at all which makes the drug problem spread. Firstly it was only around Cabramatta train station. Now it has gone into John Street. It has gone into back alleys and there is nothing we can do about it. But you may ask: What can we do? As residents, we not only do not see a solution; we do not see a problem. We have come to accept it.

CHAIR: That is why the Committee is here.

STUDENT C: I do not think that police alone will solve the problem, given the climate of the community at the moment. The junkies may be the problem but you also have to look at the drug dealers and why they have come to a decision to sell drugs. They may have employment or family problems. Maybe you should be looking at giving these people opportunities and figuring out why they are doing it because the drug problem derives from those people. If you do not have a demand, there will not be any supply for it. I think there should be more education and opportunities for people as well as recreational facilities—just more things so that the young people can become aware that there are things out there that exist besides drug dealing. At the moment, the place is disadvantaged by this lack. People are pretty much down, and there is no confidence in the place.

SENIOR TEACHER E: You asked the students whether they had any ideas about what the Government can do, and I have an idea. I do not know whether this currently exists, but the Education Department puts in practice a policy to staff difficult schools. My question is: Does the Police Service have practices, incentives or initiatives to staff places such as Cabramatta? I would imagine that the worst scenario for the Cabramatta police station would be a very high turnover of staff.

I know the skills involved in teaching students from a non-English-speaking background and that developing English language is a slow process. One of the qualities of the school and one of the reasons why it is so consistent and stable is that it has a very small staff turnover. People are happy to be here and that is entirely due to the quality of the students that we have. The fact that there is consistency means that we can make progress. Do you know the level of staff turnover at the Cabramatta police station? Is it higher than elsewhere? Why are there no incentives to attract people to Cabramatta and keep them there?

CHAIR: I am not going to answer the question, but I understand your problem.

SENIOR TEACHER A: I have just a couple of comments. First, I think I speak for a cross-section of staff and the community when I say that there is a perception—and I am not saying it is a fact—that the powers that be are more than happy for the drug problem to stay within Cabramatta. There seems to be a perception that you are asking for solutions and maybe the powers that be do not want solutions. I have heard this view from a number of people. That is the perception.

When there was a lot of undercover work—and that is another thing that I might mention in the sense that I do not think there is as much, or one does not hear about as much, undercover work now as one used to. When there was a tightening up about three or four years ago, the problems seemed to expand to other areas. There were complaints from other communities which had developed problems that the drug problem was getting out of Cabramatta. A certain number of people believe that there has been a withdrawal of program to allow the problem to stay within an area that is perhaps more controllable. I do not know, but that is the perception.

The other thing I might mention is in response to a question you asked about retention rates, et cetera. One of the burning desires I always see of people coming into this country—and Cabramatta is a place where people first come into this country—we have an Intensive English Centre [IEC] here that Senior Teacher B is head of, or is in charge of, and those students flow into our mainstream – Is to leave Cabramatta. Of the number of students who started in year 7, there would be very few families left by the time they reach year 12. The percentage would be something like 35 per cent of the original intake in year 7 or something of that order—35 per cent or 40 per cent. I suppose that people are not keen on solving the problem. They are keen on getting out of the Cabramatta area.

TEACHER A: In terms of practicalities, perhaps we should be looking at the role of the council and at empowering the council as well as looking at the role of the police. Certainly I had an experience where I needed some support from the council in terms of noise and other activities that were happening in the house that is next door to me. It took me quite a while to be able to work out who was going to do something about it. I might say that I do not generally have problems with the police. But the police said it was the council's role, and the council said it was the role of the police.

It came back down to be resolved by the council—and I must say that it did an excellent job—but it did place that council worker in an extremely precarious situation. He had to enter a house where the council new guns were kept and he could not go in except that he was going to serve a notice on this group of people. He did not know how they would react. That is one of the things that has crossed my mind. I wonder whether there are some roles that the council can play by empowering the council. I do not want to give councils a policing role as such, but perhaps we should be sorting some of the roles out as well.

CHAIR: We have heard from the council.

TEACHER B: I have lived and worked in the area for 40 years and I have been teaching at the school for 18 years. I am also an ex-student of the school. Up until June last year, I lived in the area but after three break-ins in two months, I had had enough and I moved out. My question is mainly: Are police response times to call-outs monitored? I know that for my first break-in, I waited two days for an officer to turn up and I had to phone the station twice to remind them. Maybe some monitoring of the police response times should be done.

CHAIR: That issue has also been discussed.

SENIOR TEACHER C: I am the head teacher (curriculum) and also the career adviser. From my point of view, one of the things that impacts on us was alluded to by some of the students. In terms of their employability outside our school and the name "Cabramatta", it does make things very difficult for them at times. As Senior Teacher A mentioned, we get excellent results here. Out of our year 12 students last year, 40 made it into university in the current year. Those students, when they put "Cabramatta" on a résumé, find that they have great difficulty.

I make the point that most of our families in the school—I also work very closely with our community and community groups—have come to this country certainly for something better. You do not move to something worse: You try to find something better. They have all encouraged their

students and supported them in education. This is one of the high schools where very seldom do you find parents not supporting teachers to any great extent.

I would also add, and I suppose it is a yardstick, that most of our parents pay their school fees. They see it as an obligation, a responsibility and a matter of honour. That shows a certain attitude by our parents and our community. Here they are attempting to make new lives, our students are attempting to progress and there is all this around them, which acts totally to the detriment of all concerned. I have had our students out at work placement. I go along to a chamber of commerce meeting and the employers will come up to me and say "We had such and such from your school. They were really terrific." Wherever our students go they always make a terrific impression. We get compliments about the way in which they present themselves. That is a very positive aspect of this whole argument. When you see that against what is actually happening out there in the community, I am always amazed at what we are able to preserve here within the school.

TEACHER C: My name is Teacher C. I have been living here for seven years and I have been working in the school for eight years. From my point of view of the drug situation in Cabramatta as well as in Australia, I think that the Australian Government needs to review the drugs law. Compared to the country I come from, Vietnam, and any other Asian countries, the law here is too easy. That is why it makes the police job even harder. That is why we cannot stop the drugs issue. If I were a police officer I would wonder what is the point of arresting somebody when you have to release them just a few days or a few weeks later. The law is too easy. We waste too much time and money to keep all the people in the prison for drug dealing. We cannot do anything because of the law. That is my point of view. It is not part of the police problem, it is a law problem. It is a social system problem. We are too generous here.

CHAIR: We have heard that mentioned before.

STAFF MEMBER A: I support teacher A's suggestion for incentives for police to work and stay in the area. I would also like to include the idea of special fitness so that people are selected to work in Cabramatta because they have a desire to do so and they have some special cultural sensitivity. In my position as counsellor I have been to the police station a lot of times with students. I have often sat there for a long time and I have observed. I have nothing but praise for the dealings I have had with the police, but I do recognise that being mature, middle-class and Anglo-celtic makes a very big difference. That is not always the case for non-English speaking background [NESB] people in the community.

TEACHER D: Are the people who front the desk at Cabramatta or answer the phones, for example, actually police officers? While I find I have admiration for the work that community liaison officers [CLOs] do, I often find trying to work through a CLO when I need to speak to a police officer is difficult. I sort of have a feeling, and this is a perception, that their role is to try to sort out what is important and what can be sidelined. That is one issue which I know a number of people have with ringing Cabramatta Police Station.

STAFF MEMBER B: My name is Staff member B. I am a school counsellor at Cabramatta high and Cabramatta primary schools. I have been here for five years and it is a wonderful school. The student body is excellent and the vast majority of parents are honest, hard-working and decent. I am not game to go down the street and make eye contact, especially on the eastern side. Any person here can take his coat and tie off, drive through and he would score within 60 seconds. More police are needed, without doubt. But I think what will happen then is the problem will move a little bit further down the track or elsewhere. The drug problem is synonymous with Cabramatta's problem.

The community is rather unique. I have noticed a mindset over the years I have been here. What has happened is the Asian families do not discuss their problems outside the family. You do not interfere in other people's problems, you do not become involved and you do not trust authority figures. That has been the traditional view that has come across. That can be seen in a number of instances and there are a number of exceptions too. The real exception is with their own children. There is a tremendous fear in the community. There is a fear of retaliation, and I have seen it. They will not say anything about anyone for fear of retaliation. They will move. Also, there is a fear for their own children. I can only illustrate it with cases.

One example, a year or so back a mother and father came up to me and they were rather desperate, which you could imagine. This happens far too often—not too often but far too often. The scenario was: "I've put bars on the window, I have locked door, we have chained her up and she still gets out. " I had to do a Department of Community Services [DOCs] notification from that naturally. But what do you do? And the sad thing is I would do the same. I would have a tremendous fear of my child, particularly my daughter, going off with the organised crime and the gangs that exist in Cabramatta. It is sad that we lose children to those groups. By the time they start to move into gangs they leave the school and the environment. The police and DOCs become involved. They are wonderful, they do a great job. They track the children and assist them, they try to get them back to school. But by that time it is too late. Sometimes they come back and visit me and it is appalling. It has made me an overprotective parent, which is not really the best thing.

I have seen the activities of the groups down there. They exist. There is a fear in the community and they fear those groups. I think that the solution in part is more police, sensitive police, police who are culturally sensitive to the population, but also more aware of the cultural issues within the population. A number of other things came up where the community do not like to trust authority figures. In a recent stabbing at a restaurant, an end of year thing for another school, virtually every person in the crowded restaurant said they were in the toilet at the time of the incident. Police have a rather difficult task as well. It is physically impossible for that group to be in the toilet but obviously they were not going to give information. Another example is the tragic and recent death of Leona Wynn. The car was just over there, lots of students saw the car and saw what happened. Yet you do not make contact out in the open.

They are only too willing to help but they would help individually. With each student who came forward individually we contacted their parents. Every parent said "Yes, you may help police, you may talk with police. You are not to bring the police home, you are not to go to the police station. We will not speak with police ourselves." So all of these beliefs and the fear of retaliation combine to isolate the police. One of the only things we can do to get rid of that fear and the isolation is to have programs such as the police links. Beliefs are hard to change. As you know, when a person migrates from a country he or she retains the beliefs of that country and those beliefs are extremely hard to change. They can only change by good experience. But they can also be altered by the influence of the children. We give the children positive influences in the school. The school is an oasis. I have never been in a happier school nor with a more contented staff. But the children have to leave the school.

We have the police come up as much as possible. The police links day is exceptional. I am amazed by the response every year, even from the year 10 children. I would recommend anyone to come and have a look at it. It is quite a full day. From that, they go back to the community. Hopefully with the youth liaison officer and with that intervention we can make a difference. But we need more time with the youth liaison officer. I understand there were problems in the station because of the Young Offenders Act not particularly being accepted by the police culture and with the problem raised here—junkies going into the station, taking up time and then just coming straight back out. Those problems exist. We need more resources and more assistance to overcome the problems.

SENIOR TEACHER C: I do not know what your impression of the school is going to be when you leave here. I do not know where your kids go to school. It is a pretty old school but I think we do a magnificent job. Perceptions are perceptions. I have been with some of our students to make statements at Cabramatta police station, so I am saying this in support of the police. The conditions down there are appalling. The detectives work out of demountables and they are living on each other's desks. When one of our students was almost killed I accompanied witnesses and I was amazed at the conditions that those detectives had to work under. It is totally against my perception.

CHAIR: We have seen it.

SENIOR TEACHER C: The second thing is totally unrelated. Again, moving around this community, if we are going on perceptions, I can drive around this community, as -- just said, and I know not to make eye contact with people on the footpath on particular corners because they will immediately motion as if I want to score. If I can see that day after day in the same spot with the same people, I can draw two conclusions: there are not enough police or the ones who are here are just not interested.

TEACHER E: My name is Teacher E. I grew up here and I am a teacher here. I no longer live here because my partner gets propositioned every time he walks down the street. He finds it intolerable. Speaking on the same note as Senior Teacher C, I feel sorry for the Cabramatta police. I think that they are trying to do their best but there are not enough of them. I think that they are probably a very disillusioned bunch as well. It seems that if anything is going to happen with the drug problem, not just in Cabramatta but in Australia, it has to go to legislation. It seems that the government would have to go either one way or the other. One way is to give the drug addicts their drugs for free. They might all go to one centre in one particular suburb and it becomes a wasteland. Nobody else is affected and the police get a break. The other solution perhaps would be to arrest every single drug dealer or every single drug taker, arrest anybody who looks even slightly suspicious. Give us our lives back.

TEACHER F: My name is Teacher F. I am a teacher here and I have been here for 18 years. I travel to work every day by train. I would like to suggest if you people could get out of your suits and take the journey here by train. I would like to support what Teacher E is saying. You people are legislators. We have a serious legislative problem. The law is being brought into disrepute. We have a situation where people can commit crime and get away with it. I do not blame the police for that. I think the problem has to do with the law and the law needs to be changed. That means that legislators need to throw away their prejudices and look at best practice in this area around the world. You can massively increase the police presence here, like a couple of years ago, and you disperse the problem away from the station and it will go elsewhere. That will not solve it. The only winners in this situation are the drug dealers. They are making a stack of money out of it and everybody else loses.

Every day I come to work here ear I leave home and I have to worry that when I go back home my house has been broken into by a drug addict in order to rip off my stuff and make money to pay for his habit. I am not in favour of giving drugs to everybody but there must be a more enlightened approach. It has to be regulated. It is a health problem. If people need the stuff give it to them. But destroy the black market because it is only the hose drug dealers who win. We all lose and we are locked into a no-win situation.

CHAIR: Before I ask Senior Teacher B to make a comment, a couple of you have talked about the law, that the law is a problem. Can anyone say what kind of law you would like to be legislated to help the situation?

SENIOR TEACHER B: I would like to see heroin legalised. I would like to see legalisation reviewed. I certainly would like to see zero tolerance—it works in New York—and I would really like to see a lot more police. What is policing? Policing is very complex but it has to be about catching criminals, law enforcement. Cabbies no where the depositories are, they know the distribution points. I often get a cab and the cabbies will often comment to me. I said there was a needle in the cab and I asked him whether he was aware. He said, "I have done my regular run this morning." The regular run means picking up a group of addicts at the railway station, running them off to Bonnyrigg Heights and waiting for them to get their heroin. They get back in the cab and they shoot up. He knows it. Bus drivers know it. For many months last year I could tell you the street in Cabramatta, I could tell you the house number. Every day when I sat in the bus the bus driver said, "Oh, you saw that." There was a chap at the back door and addicts would be parked in a parking lot and running across, running the gauntlet of the traffic, to pick up their drugs. That is local knowledge. Everyone has it.

TEACHER G: If the dealers are arrested, if they are not Australian citizens, why aren't they deported—to Thailand? Put some heroin in their pockets and get rid of them.

(The Committee adjourned at 2.02 p.m.)

