

**REPORT OF SEMINAR**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES**

**FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING: A NEW VISION FOR NSW?**

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**At Sydney on Wednesday, 13 March 2002**

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The Hon. Jan BURNSWOODS (Chair)

The Hon. Dr Arthur Chesterfield-Evans

The Hon. Amanda Fazio

The Hon. Doug Moppett

The Hon. Ian West

**CHAIR:** Good morning to everyone and welcome and thank you very much for coming. We do need to start because we have got a very busy program this morning. There are quite a few people we know are coming who have not made it but sometimes getting into the city by nine o'clock is awkward. Can I thank every one of you for being here and also because so many of you who are here made submissions or gave us evidence or talked to us when we visited various places. So many of you in this room have already made a major contribution to the inquiry.

Apart from welcoming you, I will explain a few things about what we are doing today. You should have on your seats the brief version of our issues paper and you will be able to collect the full one as you are leaving. You have also got the program. We are very fortunate to have the Minister for Education, John Watkins, to open our proceedings, the Chancellor of the University of New South Wales, John Yu, to officially do our launch, and then the other people over here, who I will introduce later, are our panel and they will be speaking from their various points of view between 10 and 11, and then we are hoping to have as much time as possible after that for questions and discussions.

I just want to say a couple of things briefly which many of you probably know, but possibly some of you do not, and that is that this inquiry was given to us by the previous Minister for Education, John Aquilina, late in 2000. Through our other inquiries and parliamentary sittings last year, we held our hearings and visited various places in Sydney and in the bush. We worked on the inquiry, but what we really found was that it is one of those inquiries where no-one is fighting anyone, but everyone agrees there are problems. There is not nearly as much agreement on the solutions as there is on the problems and the problems are essentially ones of system, of structure, of co-ordination. Everyone probably knows about the learning difficulties, the range of difficulties that children experience; parents know how hard it can be to work their way through a system which is often, as it keeps being described, a merry-go-round, being shuffled from here to there. Everyone has that same feeling that the system or the systems are not working, but there is not nearly the same push for particular sorts of solutions.

Some people think we should have a Minister for Childhood. We did once in New South Wales have a Minister for Motherhood back in the 1920s under a previous Labor Government. So I guess if we had a Minister for Motherhood, we could have a Minister for Childhood.

We decided to go for an issues paper rather than a report or rather even an interim report, because we felt we needed to basically hand it over to you and all the people like you to say: These are the issues. We have actually come up with 69 different questions, but we want people to tell us how they see those questions being answered, what the options are, do we go this way or do we go that way. So we thought the most useful thing we could do would be, instead of acting as if we had all knowledge and all wisdom, to say to the huge range of experience gathered in this room and elsewhere, whether in education, or health, or child care, the Department of Community Services, in early childhood centres, wherever it is, there is that huge range of knowledge, but there are problems in how that all fits together. That is why we have gone to the issues paper and it is why in launching it today, we have focused on our range of speakers and our panel, so that we can all hear from the different points of view and hopefully move forward and then you will help us shape our final report. That is a bit of an explanation of what we are doing and I guess an appeal to you to help us.

I should give a couple of apologies. Associate Professor June Langdon was to speak to us with all of her knowledge of the child care area, but unfortunately owing to a death in the family she is unable to be with us. Obviously, we have the Minister for Education, because he is going to open the proceedings when I finish, but we do have apologies from the Minister for Health, Craig Knowles, and the Acting Minister for Community Services, Carmel Tebbutt, and obviously both those Ministers also have responsibilities in the area we are looking at.

That is basically our introduction, and the next thing I should do is formally introduce the Minister for Education and Training, John Watkins. As most of you would know, John has been the Minister since November last year, so I guess he is also on a learning curve as all of us are, but he has taken over from his predecessor in welcoming this inquiry and in learning together with us about the issues we are talking about, and I think as Minister he has shown a great openness to talk to all of the different groups of people with an interest and an involvement in education. So we are very happy that he is able to be here this morning to help us launch our issues paper.

**The Hon. J. A. WATKINS:** Thank you, Jan. Dr John Yu, distinguished guests, parliamentary

colleagues - there are several here - ladies and gentlemen, this is a very appropriate place to launch this issues paper. This is your house, this is the Parliament House of New South Wales, it belongs to the people of New South Wales, and what could be more important to the people of New South Wales than some of the areas covered here? So you are very welcome here today. You are in fact welcome here at any time, though why you would want to come some days, I don't know.

I thank you for the opportunity to say a few words at the launch of this issues paper, "Foundations for Learning: A New Vision for New South Wales?" I note in the Chair's foreword that the Wran corporation's calculation is cited. \$1 spent on early childhood programs saves \$7 in later interventions, so a stitch in time saves nine, or at least seven. Of course, our interest in early childhood is not about saving money, it is about maximising each child's opportunities. As Minister for Education and Training I see that in every school that I visit.

Two weeks ago I was at Narromine Public School, a fine school, a lovely town in western New South Wales, and saw a reading recovery teacher working with a six year old Aboriginal boy who was itinerant at the school, he would come and go, and I saw passionate commitment from the teacher to help this child learn how to read properly because she knew - as we know - that it was critically important to his success at school and therefore his success in life.

We are trying to develop happy, fulfilled people who can take their rightful place in our community. Positive experiences at school and prior to school in education and care substantially increase the likelihood of success later in life and that is what we are talking about, human happiness, collective social wealth in our community. How do we maximise that? When you think how much of our community is about grasping for material possessions, or it seems to be, there is this great underlying desire for goodness in our community, about developing the collective social wealth of our society. That overwhelms, I believe, entirely the grasping material nature of our society, but it does not get, unfortunately, the good press that it deserves.

It is our responsibility - and it is a collective "our" - to ensure that no child is locked out of later learning and the lifelong benefits that this brings. Every child deserves the chance to develop both the skills and the disposition to learn. This is a basic role and this cannot be left to chance. This is an issue that requires direct and coordinated action and the onus must be on us to maintain the highest expectations for our children.

We know that all children can learn - all children can learn - and all should be supported to learn, to progress and to achieve. That will require a range of strategies, especially to assist children with learning difficulties, and support in this area will require coordinated action - that is what this issues paper points to - not only within agencies, but across a range of agencies and services. As well as looking at education, because we have to look across the range of services, we have to look at appropriate and effective health services. Early diagnosis and adequate assistance with health issues are a fundamental starting point.

From a school's perspective, each teacher should be aware of health issues that can affect a child's learning. They need to know that as professionals. We know that a relatively minor health issue can have a substantial effect on a child's ability to manage in a classroom. While education helps determine a child's future, health helps determine a child's educational opportunities and this paper provides an impetus for addressing these health issues. It identifies that perhaps the overarching and most significant issue for policy makers is coordination, and I was talking to some good people outside about that. Who is responsible? How do we coordinate services? Currently there are four State departments delivering or funding early childhood services and this can be complex and confusing. There is no single point of contact for parents to seek information and holistic support can be hard to obtain.

There has been discussion for a long time and a range of forums about the silo approach to policy making and it is the case that the least advantaged members of the community suffer most from the lack of clear links between services. Those people that are articulate and well-off generally are better able to access services - not always, but generally. Indigenous people, people from a non-English speaking background, especially recently arrived migrants and refugees, people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are the groups that are least able to negotiate their interests between sectors and agencies. We know that. This is an issue that is at the heart of effective modern and civilised government.

We know that early learning for all is about ensuring that structures are more flexible and able to respond, so "flexibility" is not just a word, or it is a word we banter about, but why? We have to have flexibility to be able to respond to where people live, where their needs are. It is about recognising that the boundaries between services are largely inherited artefacts which may not be useful to real people. There is nothing sacred about governmental demarcations. It is also about ensuring that the least advantaged are not left behind. There is no excuse for a government when those most in need of assistance are least able to access services. When services are not coordinated, that is the net result. The challenge is that government structure reflect the nature of people, that is, services must recognise the whole person, not just a part, so government must adopt strategies that ensure information sharing, cross-referrals, effective signposting of services between agencies. Until we do, the simple act of provision of a range of services cannot constitute a whole solution.

I note the degree of confidence that the paper expresses in the current range of targeted programs provided, for example, by my Department of Education and Training. That is encouraging, but I know there is always a way to go. A few weeks ago I announced that the Government will establish 21 new government preschools. That means we will have a total of 100 Department of Education and Training preschools operating by 2005. Even though that may not increase the number of places, it certainly means that at least another 21 communities around New South Wales - and it will be determined by the social need in those communities - will have access to a Department of Education and Training preschool, but I know there is debate about who should be responsible for this and I look forward to some of your conclusions.

We should never be satisfied in the delivery of educational services because we will always want it to be better. We always will. If we spend another \$5 billion in education this year, we double the budget, then you would say, well, that's fine, now there is still this unmet need. Let's move into that. That is the nature of us as a people, that is the nature of good and effective service to those most needy. We should never be satisfied with what we do in delivery of service. That does not apply just in education where you always need to push into new areas, to desire to improve. That also goes, because of the nature of government in Australia, beyond State boundaries. Building strong foundations for learning is an issue that has national significance. What else has? What is more important to this place, Australia, than education?

The issues paper notes that the Council of Education Ministers could play a greater role in national co-ordination and that is something that the council, "The Teacher" we call it for short, could look at. There should be recognition and commitment to the early years of schooling as a crucial time for support, diagnosis and action. Many of the issues that can make this happen go across all levels of Government.

Just with those comments I would like to conclude, but finally I would like to thank all those involved in the production of this issues paper by the Standing Committee on Social Issues, and particularly the Committee Chair, Jan Burnswoods, a great friend and colleague of mine, who is a passionate advocate for the needs of children and the value of education in our society, but also the members of her Committee, her parliamentary colleagues, who set aside political differences and work together on these most important matters. So thank you, Committee members, for your work.

The Secretariat for the Committee have worked so hard to present this issues paper and will have ongoing work, and all of those, and many of you here, who have made submissions or given advice to the Committee. I look forward to the issues paper, the response to the issues paper and your growing work in this area.

I would also, just for conclusion, apologise for my early departure. Today is also the launch of Motor Neurone Awareness Week, and you will see some people with the blue cornflower; that is their symbol. Motor neurone disease takes one Australian every day. It is a debilitating, awful disease. It is awareness week this week and I am going to launch awareness week. Thank you for your welcome here today. I wish you well in your deliberations and I look forward to further communication. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, John, and on behalf of the Committee thank you for being here and thank you for your work reflecting your understanding of the task I guess that faces us all. I was going to say that one reason why we sat the Minister down here is not because we feel there is some sort of hierarchy of height in this place, but because he has a number of other commitments today and that was to enable him to get away.

I should also mention that you will start hearing a lot of bells as we go along, because both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council are sitting, the lower house at ten and the upper house at 11, and we just hope that we do not have a lot of divisions which might cause the members to have to go, but certainly the Minister does.

I feel ashamed that in fact the Minister has thanked my fellow Committee members and I completely forgot that one of the things I should have done was to introduce them. We have down here our Deputy Chair, Doug Moppett. As John Watkins said, we are as a Committee, almost always able to put aside our party differences and work towards a unanimous report. Doug is a member of the National Party, and apart from being invaluable help on the Committee, he also in relation to this inquiry enabled us to go to Coonamble and Quambone where he lives and to see all kind of different programs operating in that part of New South Wales. It is one of the advantages for a Labor Party Chair having a National Party Deputy Chair. He knows those places. Our other members are Ian West, who is one of our Labor Party members; Amanda Fazio, another Labor Party member; and finally on our Committee is Dr Chesterfield-Evans, who is a Democrat. So we do certainly manage to cut across those boundaries and we produce much more influential and valuable reports by being able to bring the parties together. I am sorry I forgot that bit earlier.

It is now my great pleasure to introduce John Yu, who has so kindly offered to launch our issues paper for us. It is hard to know where to start in introducing John Yu. He was perhaps best known as the Chief Executive Officer of the Children's Hospital, first in Sydney and then at Westmead. Of all the people who cannot really be said to have retired, I think John Yu is the one that I know best. He formally retired in 1997, but he seems to have worked incredibly hard in a variety of areas since then. I knew him particularly as Deputy Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney. We were very sorry to lose him there. And he is now the Chancellor of the University of New South Wales. Of course, he has an enormous background in health, but he has been a passionate advocate for children in areas of health and education during his entire career. He also is at the moment the Inaugural Chair of the Special Advisory Committee that the New South Wales Commission on Children and Young People have, so he is playing an important role there. And he wears so many other hats, that it seemed to us that on this inquiry, on this issues paper, because it does range over so many different Government departments and non-Government organisations, State and Federal, we could not have asked for a better advocate or someone with a better breadth of knowledge than John Yu. So it is my great pleasure to ask him to launch our issues paper.

**Dr YU:** Thank you very much, Jan, for those kind words. Members of Jan's Committee and ladies and gentlemen, firstly may I say how delighted I am to be here, but especially to launch a paper such as this.

When you hear criticisms of our political system I think people often forget that especially in our upper houses of Parliament there is an awful lot of good work, an awful lot of thinking that goes on that may never reach legislation, but nonetheless it is work that ensures that our Members of Parliament are aware of a whole range of issues of which they may otherwise not be aware.

It is a great tribute to John Aquilina, the former Minister of Education, for referring this issue to the Committee, and not only in listening to Minister Watkins, but I think even before that all of us would have very great confidence in his willingness and in his determination to see through many of the recommendations that will undoubtedly arise from discussions of this issues paper. That is a very important part because I think it was very wise of the Committee to produce an issues paper and then see how you, the experts in the very many areas involved, would respond to those questions and provide answers which hopefully will be taken up over a period time. There is no doubt that we need to do something, but there is also no doubt that what needs to be done is going to be expensive and it will not happen overnight, but I think as long as we have them on our screen and we know what we are working towards, that is the important thing.

The Minister on several occasions talked about isolated areas, the silo phenomenon, the difficulty of moving from one agency to another. One of the things I would hope that your committee, Jan, might look at in the future is the way the Treasury deals with finances, and I am not saying that I think the Treasurer ought to provide more money for this project or that project, there is a defined limit as to how much money any Treasurer can allocate, but I think when Treasury - and the Cabinet - looks at expenditure, whether it be for early childhood, education or something else, on the positive income side they would be prepared to look at the consequences of what they are doing, the savings that they

will generate not only in community services, health, correctional services, but that imponderable, difficult area of the state, the happiness and the health of the community at large.

When I was in medicine, and I looked after a lot of children with chronic illnesses, I was involved a lot with skirmishes over isolated patient travel allowances and it always seemed extraordinary to me that such a narrow view was taken of travel allowances and that the failure of providing a mother and her child with an air ticket meant that she, the child and usually the father would need to drive down to Sydney, taking many, many hours; that somebody else would need to look after the other children at home; that usually the father had to take time off from work, occasionally meaning giving up pay or losing a day of recreation leave; that somebody else would need to look after the children after school; that these stresses would invariably result in some marriages being fractured and that the savings of providing a single airfare were far beyond anything any Treasury official might envisage. All they would ever look at is the monetary allocation to a particular budget of a particular department.

I think if we are going to do anything about the silo mentality of government, in trying to take that apart we particularly need to look at costings, the cost of any program to the community as a whole and especially the subsequent savings of a particular program to the community as a whole, and I think if we did that we may well find that governments would acknowledge that some programs needed to be implemented or expanded because of the savings that would result in the budget.

Now I think most of us here in this room do not think only in terms of money - we have a broader agenda - but I think we accept that Treasury is paid to do a job and that is the job as they see it. I do not know how you would go about doing that, but we have some very clever economists who seem to be able to potentially save money by writing debts in some foreign currency. Surely if they applied some of that economic thinking to how you might really cost many of the things that you and I have done and now do there may be a very different picture.

Jan has pointed out some of my earlier interests in my former life. I like to think that I am here as the head of a university, to emphasise not to you but to the community at large how what happens in early childhood determines what will happen in the rest of life. The kids that I have coming to our great university at Kensington have, I think, their entrance determined long before the higher school certificate. It happens in their early life. Being loved and having a feeling of being wanted I think enables people to withstand almost anything in life and for that reason early childhood intervention I believe should start during pregnancy.

It is not difficult for about 95 percent of newborn babies to have some assessment made of the risk that that mother, that baby, that family, are going to face when the baby is delivered, and I think pretty marginal intervention early on, before problems occur, could make a big difference. I was one of those funny physicians who always insisted that social workers saw all my patients and the reason for that was that if a social worker routinely saw all of my patients then those people who might otherwise be embarrassed or inhibited in asking for help or raising issues would feel much more comfortable talking to somebody whom they always saw rather than having to go, cap in hand, to a professional to bail them out in a time of difficulty.

If I could push two hobbyhorses of mine, one is that I believe that much more of our early childhood intervention should be done by nurses who have a broad understanding of life, who are generally accepted by the community and not seen in the same light as some other people from, for example, community services. Might I also say that whilst there may be financial gains in having generalist nurses, the gain is at the expense of the child, and I would hope that this trend of saving money and being more efficient by having generalists might be reversed as we understand more about how important early childhood - late pregnancy/early childhood - understanding and intervention is.

The other hobbyhorse, of course, relates to teaching, and I do not have any hesitation in saying that I believe that teaching is the highest profession in our community and if any of us is not prepared to teach then I do not think we deserve to be in whatever profession it is we practise.

If you look at those broad ramblings of mine I think you will see the direction I would like to see - discussion not only today but subsequent discussion - the issues paper might take, that we try and do something for all mothers, but especially for those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable for one reason or another - and, as I said before, they are not difficult to identify - and work from there putting all the resources that the Committee has suggested that we might need in early childhood and, by

doing that, ensure that children not only achieve age-related milestones but also achieve the optimal potential that they are able to achieve from their genetic and environmental upbringing. Until we do that I do not think we have done the right thing by kids and I would feel pretty confident that people like you in this room would join with me and the Committee members in supporting their work and ensuring that future increases in funding would be directed to children and families and that Families First would also be expanded to mean children first. Thank you.

**CHAIR:** I guess at this point we declare the issues paper well and truly launched, and can I thank again John Yu for launching it so well and for his remarks, showing us just how many different threads have to be brought together to deal, not only with children with learning difficulties, but with all of those other issues that, in looking at children with learning difficulties, have shown face children and face the system.

I might in thanking John Yu also say that apart from the breadth of thinking and the breadth of knowledge and experience he showed in talking to you, he also has this amazingly practical crusading sense, and I think it would be unfair if I did not mention that his latest crusade is to improve school toilets. In fact, he has already persuaded the Minister of the department to make the money available, but I have absolutely no doubt that Dr John Yu will get more money available and that school toilets in both primary and secondary schools will become much less hideous places than they have traditionally been. Thank you, John.

At this stage I think it is probably easier if I introduce the panel collectively and leave it to them also to decide whether they want to sit there with the microphone or come to the lectern. We are very lucky to have such a group of people and we have been very unfair to them in only giving them 10 minutes maximum to talk, and particularly when we look at the range of experience and knowledge they bring to us.

First we are going to have Professor Graham Vimpani, who as well as being Professor of Paediatrics of Child Health at the University of Newcastle, also is Director of the Child Adolescent and Family Health Service in the Hunter Area Health Service and he chairs the board of an organisation called NIFTY, the National Investment for the Early Years, which is an advocacy group which seeks to promote community awareness of the importance of the early years. So he is a very appropriate person to start off our panel presentation.

Warren Johnson is the CEO of Learning Links, which is a community based organisation committed to assisting children with learning difficulties. Warren, as many of you would know, previously spent a long period as Executive Officer of the Federation of Parents and Citizens Federations of New South Wales. So he has a long experience with the issues that confront our schools and children and parents.

Cathy Mullen is a parent of four children and has firsthand experience in fighting for the educational rights of each of her children, and we were very anxious to include a parent's perspective in what we are saying today, and we are very grateful to Cathy for offering to provide that.

Dr Alan Rice was until last year working in the Department of Education and Training and as the Executive Director of Early Childhood and Primary Education and was of invaluable assistance to our Committee when we first started our inquiry. Since then he has retired and he is now an Associate Professor at Macquarie University, but still keeping up all of his knowledge and activities in those early childhood issues.

Finally, our fifth panel member - as I said earlier unfortunately Associate Professor June Langdon could not be with us - we have Ms Tonia Godhard, who is the Chief Executive Officer of SDN Children's Services and a National President of the Australian Early Childhood Association and a member of the National Childcare Accreditation Council.

All of them five of them bring a huge range of knowledge and experience, and, as I said, I will hand over to them without keeping on hopping up and down here, unless one of them decides they just know so much they have to talk for half an hour, in which case we are going to have to do something about them, but we will leave it up to their good judgment I guess. As I said, if you are more comfortable here, this is probably a better microphone, and I know Professor Vimpani has a power point presentation.

Welcome, and thank you to all of you.

**Professor VIMPANI:** Thanks very much, Jan, and congratulations to you and members of the Committee for an excellent laying on the table of the really important issues that confront us as a community in crafting a set of services that are more responsive to the contemporary needs of young children, and I like particularly also the work that somebody has done around the walls of this theatre to remind us who we are talking about.

When I started thinking about why is it that our service system does seem to be in such a state of confusion, I realised that service systems actually have as much difficulty, probably more difficulty, responding to change than perhaps individuals and families do, and we know that the changes that our western societies have confronted in the last 20 to 40 years are such that we probably have not encountered since the move from agricultural to industrial society, except this change is one that has occurred over the course of 20 or 30 years, rather than one or two hundred years, as the earlier changes took place.

Francis Fukuyama, the American social policy professor at one of the Washington universities has called this change "The Great Disruption", and I think that our social systems and the structures that support our youngest citizens have really failed to respond adequately to the changes that we have encountered as part of this disruption in the roles of family members and also the loss of parenting capacity that I think has been brought about by social change and change within families, the loss of the extended family and smaller nuclear families.

One of our other problems is, I think, we do not have relevant outcome data to guide us and to tell us how well we are doing with the services that we have in place for children in the early years and I think a number of people noted that what we really need in this country is some kind of university applied to readiness to learn instruments, such as the Canadians have developed recently with their early development index.

What are some of these changes? Obviously one of the largest is the changing workforce participation of mothers in our society, and our response to that I think has been to end up with a hotch potch of under-resourced, low status, fragmented and isolated early childhood and care services. The Committee draws our attention to that and the Committee also highlights the fact that what medical people have called the inverse care law, that is those who need services most have least access to them, is well and truly alive, that there are around a third of three and four-year-old children in New South Wales who do not access preschool education, and I draw your attention to the fact that in some other States, in South Australia and I think Victoria, that number is around about five percent of the population. So that is a major issue for us.

Secondly, we need to recognise that the focus of early care and education is not on child minding. We need to regard it as a program to enhance early human development and, although a lot of the child care services that have developed in our community have been seen as programs to enable workforce participation, we really do need to reconceptualise them as programs to enhance early human development.

The other problem that we have I think is the lack of linkages between that group of services. I have called it a poorly networked system of cottage industries and I think we could perhaps take a leaf out of the book of what has actually happened in general practice where the same criticism could well have applied, a group of isolated practitioners all doing their own thing with very little communication between them, and one of the moves that the Commonwealth Government funded was the move towards establishing divisions of general practice that enabled general practitioner groups that were working in a community area to come together and work more effectively as a collective. I think that is one of the things, that we need to look at ways in which workers at a local level might be encouraged and fostered to come together, whatever form of care and education service they are providing.

The other thing that I think we need to look at developing is the notion that Canadians have fostered, this idea of a one-stop shop, early childhood development and parenting centres, where a range of services are provided: Care, preschool education and also health services. Frank Oberklaid, my colleague in Victoria, has been active in promoting this concept of child care and early education centres providing a platform from which a range of other services can be offered.



The other major concern around this system of services is the lack of status of the workforce and that really does need to be addressed. It does not seem to say very much about what we value about the work that they are doing if they are paid less than checkout operators are at Woolworths.

If we move on to the issue of reduced parenting capacity, I have termed what has actually happened as a loss of a corporate memory of parenting whereby people who enter their experience as parents are very inexperienced in caring for younger children, they have come from smaller families themselves so they have not had the opportunity for nurturing their younger siblings or, if they were the younger siblings in a large family, looking after the first of their older siblings' children in the next generation. I think we have seen a range of problems that have arisen to which inexperienced parenting is a significant contributor and lack of support for parents with young children is also a feature. There is a range of conditions that one can identify that are linked to this and one of the important things to recognise is that there are socioeconomic gradients in the prevalence of all of these conditions with the exception of autistic spectrum disorder.

Just to give us some indication of the reality of the problems that we are confronting, we might argue about child maltreatment, whether it is going up or down depending on changes in administrative procedures that welfare departments use for recording it, but some of the hardest and best data where we are actually seeing a real increase relates to data from a Western Australian cerebral palsy register which shows post-natal causes of cerebral palsy, the contribution of non-accidental injury, predominantly shaken baby syndrome, to that condition has increased markedly over the period between 1956-75 and 1980-92.

To bring home again the points that John made earlier about the early years being so crucial, the gradients in educational outcomes are existing at the time children start school and when one does an analysis across States in the United States, comparing the percentage of children who enter kindergarten in those States who are regarded as ready to learn with, in the same States, mathematical performance in year 8, you can see a very clear gradient. The States whose children are most ready to learn when they start kindergarten are the same States that do well in their maths score, and the converse obviously also applies. Within our education system, these are Australian data, there is a gradient that exists across socioeconomic groups. The gradient is there in year 3 and you can see that it actually gets wider by the time children are in year 5.

I think the Committee has rightly raised the issue of silos and what we need to think about doing with respect to that. Should we, for example, have an early childhood department? I will come to that in a moment, just before I finish. I think at a time when there is growing national and international recognition of the lifelong importance of the early years that John Yu has alluded to, the silo structure of many of our departments, and particularly New South Wales Health, seems to me to be particularly ill-equipped to deliver joined-up policy making to undergird joined-up services for joined-up problems. There is no overall coordinating unit within New South Wales Health for child health policy, and I make reference to the fact that within the Queensland Health Department there is one with a staff of around 20 people. I think that is something that we really do need to address, as is the issue of having preschool education and care responsibilities split between two government departments and NGOs and between three levels of government, and, whilst one would welcome the initiative of Families First as a necessary step towards integration, we need to go much further than that.

I think the idea of a single department for early childhood which the Committee addresses is, in some sense, simplistic because I think it would not address all of the problems that we have where Commonwealth, State and local government responsibilities interact and we would also need to recognise the fact that professional linkages within most of the disciplines that would work in such a department would need to be maintained. Nevertheless, there is a case for some rationalisation of State services and I think bringing together early care and education into one department, as it happened in at least one other State, is worth looking at and that should be a department that I think has a capacity building approach to early human development. You can read whatever you like into that.

The issue of Families First being moved to Department of Community Services was raised by the Committee and I think I would have the same concerns about Families First being moved to any department. The issues might be different with DOCS or health or education, but the real risk is that it will lead to a break-out again of turf and silo wars and I think there is a real risk in losing the potential of Families First to achieve cross-departmental collaboration in an endeavour to rehabilitate the image and reorient the dimension of a department that has had its troubles and that the public sees as dealing with a problematic minority. There is real risk that Families First will then become seen as a deficit

correction rather than a strength building program and I think that policy decision really does need to be thought through very carefully.

Why the frog? You know the old story of frogs that are dropped into boiling water jumping out straight away whereas frogs that are put into a kettle of cold water and slowly brought to boiling temperature stay there and perish. Well, I think we have seen in Australia the response that we can make to cataclysmic change as evidenced by what has happened since September 11. We need to recognise that we are not facing the same cataclysm with what is happening as a result of social changes in our community, but we are facing a slow burn as we have a growing number of aged that we cannot do much about, but a real risk that we will have a growing number of welfare-dependent young people, and the aim of early childhood services should be to flatten that line and make it horizontal.

I think we have got a real opportunity for radical reform. The Committee asks whether we should tinker or engage in just better co-ordination, whether we should engage in better co-ordination of services or whether a more radical approach is required. I think we have got an opportunity for perhaps some parallel for a more radical approach. And why do I say that?

I think the Prime Minister is committed to the importance of early childhood. He has signalled that on several occasions, most notably I think in the interview he gave to Piers Akerman in the Telegraph just before Christmas, but also I think that was signalled in the appointment of Larry Anthony as the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs for the first time, and we can go on down.

I think that the problem is that the slow burn of deteriorating developmental health and wellbeing is no less threatening to our national future in the information age, and what we need to do is actually recognise that because of this slow burn, which really is a burn that reflects blighted lives and lost opportunities, we really do need to mobilise as a nation for a war on this.

We need to recognise that other countries are committing significantly more resources: 1.2 billion pounds sterling in the United Kingdom for Sure Start; 2.2 billion Canadian dollars for their early childhood initiative from the federal government; California 700 million dollars through the tobacco tax. I think what we need is a COAG led process of policy and service reform for the early childhood years which will engage both Commonwealth, State and local governments in addressing the problems that we face. The future of our children and our nation really requires a radical rethink of the current service system.

Within New South Wales I think this process could well be led by a ministerial council on early human development and I think we should take a leaf out of what has happened in the health sector with the Government Action Plan for Health, which merely within the health system in the acute hospital system has achieved a number of significant changes. The same sort of process, I think, is required for early childhood.

If our children are going to learn well, to play well, to love well and to care well throughout their lives, we really do need to give more attention to laying the foundation for those attributes than we currently are. Thank you.

**Mr JOHNSON:** Jan Burnswoods, Dr Yu, members of the Social Issues Committee, ladies and gentlemen, as Jan Burnswoods pointed out when she introduced the panel, my name is Warren Johnson and I am the CEO of Learning Links. I am also aware that there would be a number of people in the room who may only partially know or not know at all what or who Learning Links is and what its work involves, so I would like to speak a little about that before touching on some of the aspects of the issues paper.

Learning Links is a community based organisation committed to engendering a love of learning in children who have difficulty learning, whether it is because of a disability, a learning difficulty or a developmental delay or a combination. Learning Links was established 30 years ago by parents and health professionals who were concerned and frustrated that children were falling through the gaps of service provision. Learning Links is very much about closing those gaps and breaking the fall of children so that they can achieve their highest potential.

The every day work of Learning Links anticipates many of the issues in today's excellent issues paper. Our work with children with learning difficulties emphasises families and the priorities of

families; collaboration between families, professionals and relevant agencies; children and the birth right of every child to receive an education that will maximise life potential opportunities; early identification and intervention to ensure positive outcomes for children; access to a diverse range of trained professionals; the promotion of a better understanding in the community of the importance of the early formative years of life; and the rights of families and children.

Our approach is family centred and child focused. Our partnership with parents acknowledges them as the first and continuing educators of their children. The family is the key decision maker in a child's life and we collaborate with families to identify their priorities for their children. We provide ongoing support in terms of information and services to enable those priorities to be realised. Under our constitution parent members must nominate over half of those nominated to serve on our governing body.

Collaboration between families, professionals and relevant agencies is at the heart of our work. Learning Links employs early childhood and school teachers, psychologists, family counsellors, occupational therapists, speech pathologists and physiotherapists, who work together to support the priorities of families and the individual learning program of each child.

Our multi-disciplinary team embraces a holistic approach and liaises with other agencies and services, including the child's school or early childhood setting. Identifying and meeting the needs of the individual child are crucial. We ensure through a process of comprehensive assessment that a child's individual needs are clearly identified and described. Comprehensive assessment entails working with the child's family and the child's school or early childhood setting.

Our approach to assessment emphasises what the child can do and our programs and service is built on that. We stress achievement not difficulty, ability not disability. We provide access to services in accordance with the assessed needs of each child. We deal with children with diagnosed disabilities, we deal with children who have conditions that lend themselves to ready classification and we deal with children who have learning difficulties that evade simple and convenient labels.

While it is important for children to learn together, that learning will be most effective when the learning space is not over crowded. Our babies' groups, play groups and inclusive preschool have strictly observed ceilings on numbers. The maximum class size in our services for school children is one teacher to four students.

Early identification and intervention are essential. Learning Links works with babies through to students in Year 12. We accept that learning difficulties can emerge at any point in the education continuum, but we recognise that the earlier the intervention, the better the outcomes for the child. We understand that the needs of children and the priorities of families change and all programs must be reviewed and evaluated on an ongoing basis to ensure the mix of services and programs provided remains appropriate to those needs and priorities.

Learning Links employs professionals who have attained the necessary qualifications and expertise that pertain to their own field or discipline, but, more than that, our professional staff understands the crucial role of a preventative and holistic response to learning difficulties. They recognise the benefit for the child of working collaboratively with other professionals and they accept that the family is the linchpin in all decisions relating to the services and programs accessed for the child. We are committed to promoting a better understanding of the crucial formative years, the provision of inclusive services and our belief that every child has the capacity to learn and the right to participate fully in their community.

Learning Links welcomes the issues paper and applauds the Social Issues Committee on its inquiry and its continuing deliberations. We call for an across the board acknowledgment by government that a sound social and economic future depends on an understanding and acceptance of the importance of the early formative years, properly resourced early childhood settings and early intervention.

We call for a significantly greater funding contribution from government for organisations like our own to enable them to increase their capacity to provide community based family centred programs for children with learning difficulties and to assist them in keeping costs to families to a minimum.

We call for improved partnerships between Government and non-Government agencies.

Learning Links, for example, is seeking enhanced alliances with the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, the Department of Community Services and the Department of Health.

We call for Government departments to meet the real needs of children, certainly those with diagnosed disabilities, but equally those with learning difficulties that may or may not readily lend themselves to a convenient label.

We call for a general community awareness campaign to highlight the importance of the early years and to feature the stories of families and children. Such a campaign would also target those who routinely come into contact with babies, toddlers, children and young people as part of their routine professional lives and stress the importance of early identification, intervention and professional collaboration. A further target group would be employers. Here the emphasis would be on the importance of employers fostering family-friendly policies and practices in the workplace.

We call for a far greater emphasis on early childhood education and learning difficulties in pre-service teacher training and in-service professional development for teachers. Further, the provision of appropriate resources - try smaller class sizes for a start - to enable teachers to more effectively address learning difficulties.

Finally, we call for access for all families to inclusive preschools in the year prior to their children enrolling in kindergarten.

In the first few weeks of taking up the position of CEO with Learning Links I met Tim, a parent of one of our school age children. His daughter, Alex, had painted a wonderful picture which received very warm, extended and public acknowledgment from one of our corporate sponsors. I remember well both Alex and Tim beaming at the public event which was held to honour Alex and her art. Alex had experienced success. Tim observed quietly to me that his little girl no longer woke every morning in tears at the prospect of yet another day. Another day of feeling the loneliness and the frustration of failure. No child of 10, no child of any age, should ever have to wake as a matter of routine to such a dismal daily prospect, yet that is the current reality for thousands of children with learning difficulties because those difficulties evade easy labels and all too often intervention services hinge on a label or a medical diagnosis.

We have the ability to ensure that our children do not fall between the gaps of service provision. We have the ability to raise our children to the light, the light of self-confidence, of personal happiness and of friendship. Our ability, however, will count for nothing unless it is backed up by an increased determination to understand our kids, to celebrate rather than be fearful of their individuality and to ensure that the necessary resources are made available to help them enjoy all that life has to offer. Thank you.

**Ms MULLEN:** Hi, I am Cathy Mullen and very nervous. Not often is a parent asked to come up here and talk in front of all these people and my first reaction was that I was terrified and said "No way", until I read the issues paper and I saw how important it was. I have seen all the issues that I have fought over twelve long years written in this paper and if I can help by getting something done it would be wonderful.

I have four lovely children - I am not biased at all - Lauren, 12, Chris, 10, Damien, 8 and Emily, 4. They all have special needs and major medical problems. It is difficult trying to find the special assistance they need. Learning Links has rescued me from the daily struggle to help my children.

I currently have two children enrolled in Learning Links. Chris is in a school aged program and Emily is at preschool. Chris has learning difficulties, Asperger's syndrome, asthma, allergies and hearing, sight and speech problems. Because of various health issues in the last two years he has missed two terms of school. Emily has speech and gross motor difficulties that stem from an illness she had in her first nine months.

In the early years when I was worried about my children I was told to wait so many times, that they will catch up, but I learned that you do not wait. We spent years on a merry-go-round trying to get family, friends and doctors to listen to us when we knew that there was a problem. We were constantly asked why the kids needed speech, physio and occupational therapy. We were told to just let them get on with being a kid.

I found an early intervention service by luck. No doctor or community health nurse had ever mentioned it, despite Chris having a severe problem with food allergies that prevented his normal growth and development. Finally we were getting somewhere. An assessment discovered that Chris had a global delay and required intervention. Therapy started and was fantastic as they would come to the house if I could not get to them, particularly when Damien, my third child, was born and he was in and out of hospital from the age of six weeks with severe asthma.

I spent many weeks trying to find a preschool that would take a child not only with massive food allergies but also a global delay. Finally I found Learning Links, who opened their arms and accepted Chris into preschool. They went to remarkable lengths to provide a safe and accepting environment for him. Never did they question me on the severity of his allergies. They adjusted learning activities so that he could be involved and not feel left out. For example, Chris was getting severe stomach aches after most days he was at preschool. We finally discovered it was from the playdough - he was putting his hands in his mouth after playing with it - so they made special playdough for him and the reaction stopped. When they were not sure how different paints and materials would be they would put gloves on Chris and they would also wear them so that he did not feel different. How many places would do this?

Learning Links also accepted Damien into preschool without any second thoughts, as he had a physical disability. Damien has brittle bones and fractured very easily in the younger days during outside play and structured indoor activities around what he was allowed to do. He only had one fracture at preschool, which was amazing. They saw he had accepted his disability and carried on a normal life.

The dedication of the Learning Links staff is inspiring. They spend many hours formulating reports and programs from their daily observations. They also stress the importance of the family in marking goals about what they would like their child to achieve during the year. We have regular individual family service meetings to point out our children's goals and Learning Links are happy to involve outside therapists working with our child.

Most of Chris' early diagnostic assessments were in an artificial environment and did not take into account his family and friends at home and at preschool. The tests did not rely on any verbal conversation and it was conversation that he could not carry out. Even now he performs well in a speech assessment on a one-to-one basis, but put him in a real life situation and his conversation is a series of disconnected statements on totally unrelated subjects.

There was a time when I questioned the importance of early intervention. Treatment so much helped that he improved greatly and knew how to perform in a formal test situation. He was progressing so well that the system finally told me that he did not need any more special help. Intervention was fantastic, but I had to fight to get more help for him. What a Catch 22.

I was originally told, after applying for classroom assistance, that Chris would have to wait, even though I put together all his test results and listed his multiple health problems. They said he could settle into school for a year and be re-assessed in Year 1. I did not accept this and continued to fight until I was satisfied that he was going to get the assistance that he needed to keep him being a happy child with positive self-esteem.

We then had to find a label, as if this was the only way Chris would receive any assistance in primary education. We were lucky, as after another search I finally found a paediatrician who listened and correctly diagnosed his problem. We then received funding. Learning Links then met with the school teachers and special needs teacher and we were able to ease Chris into school life. Not only did Learning Links provide Chris with educational support to get him ready for school, but by holding him back for a year, they were able to get him emotionally ready to confront school life as a relatively normal six-year-old.

What is the use of all this intervention if it is not going to be followed on in primary school? The problem does not go away because he goes to school. These are children who with continuing help will flourish rather than drop out. Intervention is really great, but I had to fight to get more help. This is a side that you never realise. You end up fighting for help because you know that if intervention does not continue he will not learn.

Another problem arises for Chris' therapy. How can the community health centres tell you

that at the magic age of seven you no longer need speech therapy and all your problems will go away. Community health tell you they have to put all their energy into early intervention and are not seven-year-old boys part of our community? I feel sorry for the children out there who do not have a label and have learning difficulties as they get no support. The help has decreased so much that all children with speech problems have lost funding at school. Intervention has got to continue into school age.

Learning Links tries to provide for these children through a fantastic enhanced learning program. We found Chris was falling further behind in his school because he was missing so much through illness. The enhanced learning program provided the extra educational support he needed. At the beginning of Year 3 Chris had a reading age of five. At the end of Year 3, thanks to Learning Links, Chris had a reading age of 8.5.

Amazingly, so many years down the track I was told by health care professionals that Emily did not have a problem with her speech and we had to just wait for her to develop. At the age of two she only had five words. Again, intervention started and a year later, with Learning Links' support, she performed to the normal age limit for speech. If it was not for the high teacher ratios and speech physiotherapist and occupational therapist at Learning Links, Emily would not have achieved this.

I once had a little boy who would sit in a house and cover his ears and rock. I now have a little boy who has many friends, plays cricket, is so proud of himself as he has just completed reading the four Harry Potter books. Thank you.

**Dr RICE:** Jan Burnswoods, Chair of the Social Issues Committee, Dr John Yu, friends and colleagues, this is an important occasion. Like you, I am committed to doing as much as can be done to prevent the incidence of learning difficulties and to identify and assist children with learning difficulties as early as possible. The issues papers presents wide-ranging proposals, some quite radical, that demand our consideration, and certainly this audience, which comprises parents, administrators, policy makers, academics and advocates for families and young children, has the passion to take the debate forward and the capacity to nominate priorities for action.

A useful way to distinguish between learning difficulties and specific learning difficulties is to look at the type of teaching interventions required by schools to assist children with their learning. I am indebted to Professor Dame Marie-Clay for this analysis. The essential ingredient is quality classroom teaching.

First wave teaching refers to the regular classroom program which will help most children to become literate and numerate. A proportion of children, between 10 and 15 percent, will struggle with a regular program and will require a second wave, or early intervention teaching, through programs such as Reading Recovery or some other intensive individual or group instruction. The third wave refers to sustained interventions with children who are still experiencing difficulties, even after the second wave interventions. Quality teaching, or the first wave, in the first years of schooling is crucial in establishing foundations on which students will build their lives. In the early years, and particularly in kindergarten and Year 1, students acquire concepts, develop attitudes towards themselves and others and achieve key learnings in literacy and numeracy that form the basis for future learning.

The Department of Education and Training provides a range of services for students with learning difficulties. These include Reading Recovery, Support Teachers Learning Difficulties and special education teachers. The Reading Recovery program, which is an important component of the Government's literacy plan, is designed for the lowest achieving students after one year of school. As stated in the issues paper, it currently operates in 825 of the 1709 Government primary schools in the State. Its focus is reading and writing. Students do not need to have a disability diagnosis to enter Reading Recovery. It is a second wave intervention from which extensive gains have been shown. However, it is acknowledged that some students, two to three percent, require a further sustained intervention. Students are referred from Reading Recovery for sustained or third wave teaching support.

In every school district one or more Support Teachers Learning Difficulties have been appointed to work with students with specific learning difficulties and their teachers. For students with specific learning difficulties who have a diagnosed disability, additional support is available through State integration funding. School counsellors are also available to assist in the identification of students' individual learning strengths and to identify inhibitors to learning. Palm Avenue School is

a State facility that works in conjunction with New South Wales Health and provides specialist assessments and develops remediation programs for students with specific learning difficulties from rural districts.

The goal of the Department of Education and Training is to provide equitable and effective programs, strategies and services to meet the learning needs of students experiencing difficulties. Comments within the Social Issues paper make it clear that the expectations of parents for this support are not always fulfilled. Successful as it is, there are students who are experiencing difficulties in literacy who are not able to access Reading Recovery. In some cases where students require the sustained assistance of a support teacher learning difficulties access is problematic.

What is needed, in my view, is a reassessment of the resources allocated to second and third wave interventions. In addition, we need to look closely at the methodologies being used in sustained interventions. Further research is required in this area. Research evidence from New Zealand's Third Chance project would suggest that there are strategies that would enable this small but special group of students to become successful learners.

I wish to comment on several important initiatives that have been addressed in the issues paper. The Committee seeks comment on whether universal preschool is the best way to assist three and four year olds and, if not, what are the preferred initiatives. Major arguments in support of and against universal preschool provision are presented quite clearly. The OECD report notes that in other States this issue appears to have been resolved leaving New South Wales as the only State without universal preschool provision for four year olds. In South Australia, for example, children are attending four half-day sessions a week at preschool on a fee free basis.

The benefits of preschool attendance have been demonstrated in research. In addition to well-known American research, a German study covering 203 elementary schools was reported in an OECD paper in 1998. This suggested that attending preschool was a major factor in promoting children's later educational success and noted that fewer special interventions were necessary.

My observation is that extended transition programs that are conducted in departmental primary and central schools for indigenous children who have not accessed preschool programs have greatly enhanced the preparation of these children for school entry and have enabled earlier identification of the need for additional support. The benefits of this experience, which was usually two days per week, for indigenous children in kindergarten and beyond is reported in What Works, an evaluative report of the 1998-99 strategic results projects. Over 90 percent of the indigenous children attending that program became school ready. These programs also included the parents of the children; they also focused on overall language development and on the acquisition of social and behavioural skills that allow a child to function as part of the group. Teachers were able to observe children and they concentrated on the identification of general factors that placed children at risk. Such factors include cognitive, medical, socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics of young children.

Whilst recognising the huge financial commitment required for the provision of a universal preschool program in New South Wales similar to that available in South Australia, I consider that this commitment will provide a cohesive and qualitative approach to levelling the playing field for all children and strengthen our efforts to meet children's needs in health, education and care. Adopting this commitment should not be at the expense of services for younger children, the fear of some educators. A staged approach to the implementation of such a major initiative would allow priority to be given to children in disadvantaged communities and I should add that the local primary school may provide the most convenient location for preschool services in communities where such services are not currently accessible.

I would like also to comment on staff-student ratios in schooling. Chapter 6 of the issues paper contains a summary of advice given to the Committee and requests comment. In New South Wales staffing formulas require one adult for each 10 children in preschools. However, in kindergarten this ratio becomes one adult for 25 students. The first year of school is recognised as being significant for students who are learning how to cope well with a new environment and learning to develop effective habits and positive self-concepts that will assist them throughout schooling. In some situations a reduced ratio in kindergarten would be beneficial in assisting disadvantaged students to achieve the educational outcomes of their peers, particularly if they are less well-prepared for school entry or have specific learning needs.

The issue of class size is addressed in the February 2002 edition of Educational Leadership. Again the conclusions of the articles in this journal tend to add to the confusion on this subject. Policy analyst, Kirk Johnson, concludes that, in terms of raising achievement, reducing class size does not guarantee success. He also states that if billions of dollars are to be spent on reducing class sizes, tangible evidence should exist that students benefit academically from such initiatives.

However, in the same publication, an article by Professors Biddle and Berliner present research findings which they consider demonstrate the benefits of smaller classes in the early grades. They indicate that with significant reductions in class numbers all students would reap sizeable education benefits and long lasting advantages while students from educationally disadvantaged groups would benefit even further. They also provide advice to systems that programs to reduce class size are complex as class size is just one of a number of factors to be considered in increasing student achievement.

To add to the range of views on this subject, last year in Canada advice was given to a provincial minister for education that the cost of reducing class sizes to make a significant improvement in learning in the early years would far outweigh the benefits. The minister was advised to consider targeted initiatives to assist students with special learning needs and to strengthen programs supporting educationally disadvantaged communities.

In striving to improve learning outcomes for young students in New South Wales I believe emphasis should be given to the following ideas: Target initiatives to those groups and students where the need is greatest; expand the benefits from specialist intervention programs to include students who are not currently able to access but who do require second and third wave assistance; identify strategies, including reduced staff-student ratios, to strength kindergarten and year 1 programs in the most educationally disadvantaged communities and ensure rigorous professional development for teachers engaged in initiatives to assist students with specific learning difficulties.

Finally, I wish to express a view about the integration of children's services in New South Wales. First should I say in recent years there has been exceptional collaboration between government agencies with responsibilities for children's services. New South Wales early childhood services policy, interdepartmental literacy initiatives and jointly sponsored transition programs, among others, have benefited professionals, providers and parents with children from 0 to 8 years. The managers in the relevant government departments have endeavoured at the policy level to make the area less complex and confusing for families and service providers. However, the issues paper suggests that on the ground fragmentation appears evident and this is constraining practice. It also reports professional issues. People who work in the early childhood sector are often constrained by the beliefs and practices of their particular professional background or institution.

A recent OECD report noted that from a pedagogical perspective more integration of education and care is necessary. The desire of early childhood professionals is to achieve continuity of programs and closer articulation with school; to build a shared understanding of pedagogical practice; to facilitate the exchange of information and to develop a more cohesive approach to assisting children experiencing problems in their learning. Now to achieve these functions I believe that the Department of Education and Training must be involved and should play a key role.

Whilst each of the models to achieve improved coordination and provide a more integrated system requires - and will receive - close examination, I consider that the allocation of responsibility for education and care to one department would be an innovative approach and so I would like to join my colleague, Professor Hayes, who is reported in the social issues paper as the only participant thus far to offer an opinion, lending support to the notion that the Department of Education and Training should be considered the most suitable agency for the role.

In conclusion, may I commend the Committee for this issues paper and I look forward to the consolidated responses to the 69 questions it raises.

**Ms GODHARD:** Thank you for the opportunity to talk, and I realise we are running behind time, so I feel under a fair degree of pressure. I have been asked to talk particularly about two things that I talked about as the CEO of SDN Children's Services in our evidence to the hearing, in particular about the role of children's services, but how important the quality of that service is and also a little bit about a pilot project that we have at Waterloo.



It was interesting to me outside before we came in talking to both Jan and the Minister that the comment was made that no-one is fighting and I have been thinking about that ever since. I think often we have a lot of debate in the children's services sector, but we do not move that debate out into other areas and I think there is a challenge for us to do so, and I think having an issues paper such as this is a challenge to all of us to go away, to have that debate and to talk to other silos, if you like, and to come back to the Committee with very concrete suggestions. Alan Hayes and now Alan Rice have given one and I will provide an account of that later.

The issues paper talks about the very beginning, the American research that refers to every dollar invested in early childhood programs is a seven dollar saving to the community, and that would probably be found to be true in Australia, and I do believe that. We have had a lot of rhetoric about the importance of the early years and a lot more since the brain research has been done, but I do not believe that we have seen a commitment in policy, funding or just virtually in society to the early years. But it is not programs alone that matter; they must be quality programs. The American research has shown that just having a program does not necessarily mean gains, or certainly does not mean sustained gains for these children.

I just want to talk about some of the quality indicators and talk about some ways that we are doing quite well in areas, but about areas that I think need improvement for these children. Every piece of research you read about children's services will stress the importance of adult/child ratios and group size and the qualifications of staff to start with. Increasingly now also they talk about the importance of the leadership position in children's services, often the person we call the director of the service and therefore the person with firsthand experience.

The other points mentioned, and I am just going to refer to a few of them, are the importance of the consistency in the carers and educators of the children. Issues like staff turnover are of significant detriment to the quality of the program. But it is important that there is a planned development program in place, that it is not respite care or just care, and that children are learning through play, and, finally, the importance of the partnership with the parents. Again, we may go to child centre programs, but given the age of these children, it is extremely important that we have a very close relationship with their families.

So what are our strengths and what are our weaknesses in terms of the issues that arose? We do have a regulation base for children's services in this State, except for outside school hours care, and there is not time to go into that today, but I believe it is an issue for this inquiry because children are moving from a school setting into outside school hours care where there is no base, no standard, no quality that is in force, and that is a problem. These children are often doing their homework and other things in that setting, and I believe we do need a regulations base across the lot. We have a quality in improvement in an accreditation system, currently for long day care centres, about to be introduced for family day care and at a later date for outside school hours care, but, again, no suggestion that we will have one for State funded services.

The problem I think is, and the issues paper raises this, are the regulations adequate, and in my view they are not. In particular, if I had one thing that I would probably improve in terms of the adequacy of ratios, it would be to improve the ratios for babies. If you are a parent and you think that you could look after five little babies on a daily basis, I think it is naive, and that is the current regulation base we have, one to five for children under two and one to eight for the two-year-olds, and the reality of that is that ratio is often not maintained because during that time staff were on a break, and if you look at the reality it probably becomes closer to one to six. What therefore happens is that you tend to have staff who are forced into spending a lot of time on supervision and the quality and sustained interactions that are necessary for a quality program are compromised. Staff do the best they can, but it is almost impossible for them to do it. So I guess I would be voting strongly for an improvement in the ratio first of all for the babies and then for the two-year-olds.

Secondly, I do not believe the qualifications are adequate in our regulations. They require an early childhood specialist teacher when you get to 30 children. I cannot understand what is magical that suddenly for 30 children you need a teacher and at 40 you need two. I believe given the research, we need an early childhood trained teacher in charge of every early childhood children's service.

We have a highly committed staff and I think the quality of the program is based on a lot of goodwill, hard work and commitment to those programs, but at the moment we have a severe shortage

in children's services of qualified staff, and that is compromising quality. The Department of Community Services is looking at ways to address this, but I do not believe it is possible to solve it unless we are prepared to pay staff in these services more money. For instance, a teacher in a school gets a lot more money than a teacher in a children's service, despite the fact they have the same qualifications, and I would argue teachers in long day care deserve to be paid more, purely because they actually work more hours across the year with children.

We also have to change the conditions. We will never keep staff and be able to provide quality programs for these children unless we make it possible. For instance, there is no guaranteed provision in either our regulations or our award that the staff will have child free time to do programming that is supposed to happen I am not sure where. So it is basically up to management to decide whether staff get that, and it costs money, so it is always a question in low income areas of how much you can afford to do that.

We need time to link to other services. There is a lot of talk about our need to link with Health or with schools, but certainly in the long day care sector, staff have to be given child free time to be able to do that. If they are counted in primary contact ratios, it is not possible for them to go to the school, to go to the health centre, so we have to enable that.

One of our strengths is, I think, that we have specialist qualifications and in those qualifications we have teachers trained for working with children nought to eight, and I believe those graduates are welcome in the school sector, as they are very appropriate people to work with the younger children. The base of that training comes from child development, and I think that is a strength in working again with these children. The staff are trained in observational skills and so they are particularly good at identifying learning difficulties; they know how to plan and carry through programs, even when the child cannot get to the therapy, and that is becoming increasingly common for these children. You need to them to go to see a speech pathologist but they cannot. There is one interesting suggestion in the issues paper that because our staff have that child development knowledge, if they could have just a bit of a link with speech pathologists, they would be able to go ahead and interlink, so it does not necessarily mean that it is a very expensive program, and I think there are innovative ways that we can enhance the resources there and use the staff and children's services in a better way. I think we have a strength in that we are committed to inclusion and anti-bias programs and value diversities, so I think we are proud of the attitudes we have around those and I think there is strength.

Special education is a part of every training course that I know of, whether it be at TAFE level or at university, but, of course, that is only a beginning and we need continuing education that takes staff on from there.

There has been reference to the complexity of the sector. We have a mass of different service types; we have a mass of different government departments regulating, funding, providing policy; we have the community based and private sector divides; we have the anomalies with the Department of Education where their preschools have not been licensed in the past and are virtually free, while we heard at a summit on preschool funding the other day that a common fee is \$20 to \$26 a day in the community based preschool sector. Obviously these have to be addressed. They are patently unfair and they are not targeted to the children that are most in need. How we do that is not quite so simple.

I would like to see a community campaign that, firstly, informs parents on the choices in children's services and really makes it clear what those services offer, the advantages of those services, so they can make an informed choice. At the moment there is a proliferation of home based and centre based and I do not think most parents would know what is the strength of that to make a choice for their child. Secondly, to make a choice, they have to be affordable, and particularly again in disadvantaged areas they are not affordable. Finally, I guess in planning for the future, I think we need to think more of co-location, which is a bit about what Alan spoke about. I am a bit tentative about the one-stop shop. If the one-stop shop always keeps the child's best interests at the centre, it is okay. If it comes away that this service becomes all things to all people so that children are coming and going all through the day, I do not believe we get a quality program, so we have to use the concept carefully, but it is obviously sensible to have children's services, schools and health, located in a very close proximity because that is where families with young children go.

We have seen developments, positive ones. We have an early childhood policy developed by the Department of Community Services - Alan referred to it - but again it tends to become a piece of

paper and we need to look at ways that it actually comes into practice because I think it addresses a number of issues raised by the inquiry.

We have a danger of an education and care divide and it is a thing that is often talked about. This comes even from our language. We talk about family day care, long day care and preschool. I would like to urge that in our looking at preschool we are very clear: Are we talking about the preschool year or are we talking about the service type preschool? I would like to urge that it is not about the service type preschool that we would look for as a universal provision, it would be the right for the four year old to have access to a quality early childhood program. That could occur in a range of service types and we need to sort out our thinking and be clear what that means. That is not the case at the moment. They cannot access programs and they are not affordable for many of the families we are talking about.

I think we do need to do a lot of work around links to health. I remember when early childhood nurses used to come when I was a teacher to meet with families and the staff and I think there is great potential to do that. We used to have dental people coming in as well. I think if we can just have a lot more dialogue together we can probably work more closely together. Also links to school. There is increasing recognition of the importance of transition, but again I think often there is an assumption that families can go to a transition program. The reality is that the majority of families with young children now work, so they cannot go up to the school for five weeks between nine and whatever with their child to do that. Part of that is a sensitivity at the school level, but part of it is about our employment conditions which are not family friendly in the work environment.

One thing I feel very strongly about, and I had this debate with Graham Vimpani the other day, the report uses the language "ready to learn" and "school readiness" and I guess I take great exception to it and I think that it gets misused. We could all be sitting here agreeing about what we mean by that, but when you go into the community it gets interpreted as something else, which I think is dangerous. It becomes competitive and it becomes, oh, I need to get my child reading, writing and doing everything else before it gets to school because that is how success will be measured, so I think in the language we have to be a lot more careful. I do not use "ready to learn" or "school readiness" at all because I think schools have to be prepared for children and we have to value childhood in its own right, so I would urge the Committee to not use that at all if they can possibly avoid it.

**Question from the floor:** Do you have a substitute term?

**Ms GODHARD:** I just think that you are going on to school and there is a transition to school and there are certain things. In the past it used to be getting ready to unwrap your lunch and all that sort of stuff, or line up, and hopefully we have moved on from that, but certainly we have parents saying, you know, I really need my child to - and it is often inappropriate things that schools don't expect, but that is what happens - learn the alphabet, perhaps; learn to do up shoelaces, which is not a task that children at five years of age can do so you watch parents buy velcro fittings because then the child can be independent, and that is sensible because a teacher with 25 children cannot do 25 sets of shoelaces.

A little bit about the Waterloo parenting program. It is a pilot project based at Waterloo. It came about because the Minister of Family and Community Services at the time, Jocelyn Newman, came to open a unit of ours and in discussions we were talking about the fact that, at that time, childcare assistance meant that many families could not access Commonwealth funded children's services and in the past SDN had carried a number of those children and families, and, what is more, the director had gone out into the local environment and collected the children and brought them into the service, but we could no longer do that. A little while later the Minister for the department came to visit me from Canberra and asked me what sort of ideas I had. What we ended up with was a project based in a long day care centre, and it happens to be in the Housing Commission area of Waterloo. They have now run a number of pilots around Australia. Each one is different, but ours was about vulnerable families with a child or children under school age who was not currently attending a children's service, and again I think that is a challenge for us. There are a lot of families who are not accessing children's services and they are probably the children who, in many ways, need to be there the most. I think also other referral agencies do not know about children's services, so we need to have discussions with Health so the GP knows what role children's services can play.

We have a project officer who works with the families. It is two-pronged, it is to work with both the parents and with the children, because we found again that family support services are not

resourced to work with the child. They are often working with the parents and the children are there with some toys, but there is no actual intervention with the child, and it became apparent that we need both those things, so the project officer does home visits, offers a drop-in centre, parent education groups, et cetera. Most importantly, what the program also has is subsidised childcare. The gap fee is available to be paid from the program for up to 20 hours.

The families we particularly looked at came from the report, Pathways to Prevention, and I would recommend that to you, so most of our families are in poverty situations, long-term unemployment; many are in substance abuse - we have a very close relationship with Langton, the methadone clinic; domestic violence; parents in and out of gaol and child abuse and neglect.

We have worked very hard with the children and I think often, again with an emphasis on cognition, but we know that for these children it is about their self-esteem and their social interaction. They will never see themselves, or their families will not see them, as competent learners if in their self-esteem they do not have a good view of themselves. So we spend a lot of time on that and their ability to interact with trust with the staff, because a lot of their environment so lacks stability they do not have good trusting relationships with other people.

We have a rich language environment, and you will see in the report there is a reference to one child who is very similar to some children we have, a four-year-old who is still in nappies. If he does not get toilet trained by the time he gets to school, and there is no medical reason why that should not happen, obviously that child is in trouble before he starts. Also, he is still on bottles and he does not chew, so the muscle tone in his mouth and tongue is almost non-existent, so he cannot articulate sounds. A lot of families seem to do this, give bottles that have things like Coca Cola or diluted juices, so what happens of course now is dental decay to a significant degree, so the child cannot tongue the sounds because there are no teeth there. Again, these parents love their children, there is no doubt about that, they want to do the best for their children, but we seem to assume that child rearing practices are instinctive and we all know how to do it, and families have lost contact with extended families and do not necessarily have any good models on which to base their child rearing practices. So again, you are working with a family over time to change that practice whilst you are working with the child.

Some things that we learnt from this are that we should not have all the children in one centre; children's services are a non-stigmatised centre, and that was a mistake and we now have them spread in a number of children's services. That has a detriment because the project officer is there every morning talking to the parents, and we found these parents are particularly sensitive. Where you might raise something about a child's behaviour, these parents take it as an insult or they are terrified in many cases that they will lose their children to DOCS. So you need a one-on-one sensitive person who is helping them through that, and that takes a lot of time that the children's services staff do not have.

We believe that early childhood staff need a lot more training in working with adults, and particularly these sort of vulnerable families, because again it is fairly threatening and they do not have the skills for it. We know Macquarie University has been looking, as is mentioned in the report, at a community connected course, which is skills at another level.

We also know that a lot of these families are unable to access the resources available to them, so we have been working closely with Government departments. For instance, just to go to the family assistance office to get the Childcare benefit, something will be said and they will be told to ring back or something. They do not have a telephone. So bureaucratic systems are not very friendly to these sorts of families and that means they give up and do not persevere. So again we have been able to work with both the Department of Community Services and with FACS about improving those systems. I do not want to suggest that this is a model that would be replicated everywhere. I think one needs models that are sensitive to different environments and that are developed in consultation with those families who design the program with you.

So what would I say to the questions about child care and children's services? I cannot see a solution easily. COAG has talked about overcoming the problems of the Commonwealth/State divide; a number of times it has failed. So I am hoping the Committee can do that. I do not know how to do that, but I do think we could look at a universal provision, and I would start with the four-year-old, and it is not because I think the four-year-old is the most important, I actually think we have to start a lot younger, but you have to start somewhere and that is where I would start, and it would not be through

school, but it would be a provision that is a quality program for the child and their family.

I would try to extend the links with GPs and other service types to break down the silos, but importantly I would try to get some consistency for these children. They do not fit into the additional needs or special needs category of either the Commonwealth or the State, where you are required to have a diagnosed disability, so they fall outside the loop and do not get resourced in any way, and we have total inconsistency between Commonwealth and State programs in this area. We could just say this is the child that needs resources. That also would be a start for me.

Why do we have two different preschool programs? I do not know, but I think in the solution, what I want to most do is avoid an education care divide, and in this State having the same regulation base is a great start. So I do not want to divide it and I think we have to be careful in our language.

For rural areas, they are a challenge. I think we could be much more innovative in using mobile services. This State developed mobile services, but if you look where they are now, many of them are sitting in major cities like Campbelltown and have not moved on to areas where they are most needed, and we need support of organisations - and I can see Sue Kingwall here - who are supporting those families with innovative ways in rural areas.

So improving quality for me is about paying our staff and keeping our staff, otherwise we cannot guarantee quality at all, and I think we have to recognise that working in an under five service is equally as important. If we could be paid like professors, because we think education is the most important, we could do a reversal maybe, but if we just make the job impossible, we are never going to be able to provide for the children.

Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much to all five of our panel, to Graham and Warren and Cathy - I don't know why you were nervous, Cathy - to Allen and to Tonia. You have provided us, not only with your own range of expertise but you have all very carefully gone outside the silos and you have all made a number of suggestions and been very positive, and we appreciate that very much. In other words, already our issues paper is producing responses and suggestions and things we have not done. It is now our job to take up your suggestions and the others. So thank you to the panel.

The Social Issues Committee is notorious for always running late. We say it is not really our fault as a Committee; it is because every issue we deal with and everyone we talk to is always so engaged and so passionate about the issues, that we can never stick to our time limit. That gives me a bit of a problem because we were supposed to start questions at 11 and we were supposed to have refreshments, for those of you who can stay, starting at 11.30. So I don't know quite where we go now. For those of you who do want to raise particular things, unless you really feel you need to raise them in front of the whole audience here, the Committee members and the staff will certainly be here for the next hour or so, so that it is quite easy for you to find us and raise things with us. We have probably got a little bit of time for questions from any of you to the panel, if you think there is something that was really overlooked or you think there is something which needs to be shared amongst the range of people here, but as I said, I can only point out it is now 20 to 12, so we need to do that fairly quickly, but certainly if you feel that you can make a point to either the Committee members or the staff as we are outside having a sandwich and a cup of tea or coffee, that would probably make it a lot easier.

Could I have an indication of whether there are any people who really feel the need to make a point or ask a question? Is there anybody here who really wants to raise something now?

**Ms Christine FLYNN,** Community Services Commission: This is probably more for the Committee, Jan, than the panel. Just reading the summary, and not reading the full issues paper, I notice that you say obviously some low income families are disadvantaged in their use of early childhood services. An area of concern for us is children in care and protection matters or proceedings and in out of home care, and I guess there is a lot of evidence of very poor educational outcomes for those children and young people as they go through the school system and a much lower level of educational achievement than children who are in intact families, so I just wondered if the issues paper does address the needs of children in out of home care?

**CHAIR:** It does not specifically that I remember, but I guess we struggled to fit everything in.

I suppose when we talk, for instance, about socially isolated children or disadvantaged children we hope to suggest that that covers a range. The other great thing about this place is that we can put on hats and take off hats at the drop of a hat. I am also a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Children and Young People and in fact we have just decided to do an inquiry into the education of children in out of home care and so the interrelationship between committee members and staff here often means that groups that might otherwise be overlooked can be picked up and a cross-fertilisation occurs.

**Ms Judy KINNISTER**, Country Children's Services: While I agree with a lot of things raised by the panel, one thing that I think has not actually been raised is that whenever we look at developing new programs or look at changing or look at some future direction, we forget about building on or pre-existing community infrastructure, and particularly in rural areas this often causes huge divide and often does not help further what everybody really agrees needs to happen, but we must take into account what infrastructure and community infrastructure is already in place whenever we are looking at changing or providing a new direction or doing anything in terms of furthering what we plan to do.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. Is there anything else? Please don't feel that you don't have a chance, either today or later, to make your contribution, but we can do it more informally outside.

Can I very briefly again thank our panel for their contribution and also thank Dr John Yu, who is still here, which is great for us; John Watkins, the current Minister, and I would also like to thank the former Minister, John Aquilina, for giving us this inquiry. There have been times when we have thought he has given us something that is far too hard for us, but there have also been many other times when we have thought that it is a most worthwhile inquiry to be doing.

I would like to thank the artists and teachers from the kindergarten to year 2 classes at Carlton Public School and Elanora Heights Public School who are responsible for the great artwork that we were able to get hold of to brighten up this incredibly dreary brown, late '70s theatre, and also the people in the Department of Education and Training who made it possible for us to work with those schools to get the artwork.

Thank you to all of you. It is now over to you, I guess. We need your contribution because we certainly do not feel that the Committee members or the staff have all the wisdom on this and we have already heard things today that we obviously had not thought of. There are more copies of the full issues paper outside, the audio cassette, and it is on our website. We are asking for responses by 19 April so that we can move forward because these issues are too important to delay.

Could I also particularly thank the Committee staff. As a standing committee we are most fortunate to have a permanent secretariat of the Committee and certainly it has struck me and the other Committee members that to produce an issues paper ranging over such an enormous diversity of government and service areas and to produce such brief, to the point discussions of all of the issues almost, every issue that has been raised today, has been a superhuman effort on the part of the staff, as well as all the other things they have to do, and particularly Beverley Duffy who has taken the main carriage of this. May I thank you and the other staff, Beverley, for all of the work you have put in. We could never do it without you. We get the credit and they are behind the scenes. We will, as far as we can, I guess, hopefully later this year produce a final report with recommendations.

I think all that remains is to say thank you for coming, thank you for sharing all your wisdom with us now and later, and do come and join us for lunch and a cup of tea or coffee.

**(Seminar concluded at 11.45 a.m.)**