REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

INQUIRY INTO TRANSITION SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH ADDITIONAL OR COMPLEX NEEDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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At Dubbo on Monday 5 December 2011

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The Committee met at 11.00 a.m.

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PRESENT

The Hon. N. Blair (Chair)

The Hon. G. J. Donnelly
The Hon. Cate Faehrmann
The Hon. N. Maclaren-Jones
The Hon. H. M. Westwood (Deputy Chair)

WENDY ENGLISH, Assistant Principal Outreach, New South Wales Department of Education and Communities,

MELISSA McWILLIAM, Parent and member of Guiding Hands Autism Support Group,

JOHN BETTS, Parent and President, Orange Autism Support Group,

TOBY BETTS, Student, and

TONI DALY, Welfare Adviser—Autism, Dubbo School of Distance Education, before the Committee:

CHAIR: I thank everyone for attending today's roundtable hearing for the Social Issues Committee inquiry into transition support for students with additional or complex needs and their families. Before we commence I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the Tubbagah people of the Wiradjuri Nation, who are the traditional owners of the land on which we meet. I also pay respect to the elders, past and present, of the Tubbagah people and extend that respect to other Aborigines present.

The Committee is eager to hear your stories, and while we have provided you with some proposed questions we intend for this to be a fairly informal and free-flowing discussion. I remind participants of the gravity of today's proceedings. Although the Committee will not be asking you to take an oath or an affirmation to tell the truth we expect that you will speak truthfully, and I remind you of the responsibilities that accompany the opportunity to speak on the public record. We will begin and I will ask you to please introduce yourself by stating your name and occupation. You are also welcome to make a short opening statement if you wish. Who would like to start?

Ms DALY: I work at Dubbo School of Distance Education. We have a lot of students who have come to us who have autism or Asperger's syndrome. I am the welfare officer for these students as from next year because it has become such a large number of our enrolments.

Ms McWILLIAM: I am a parent of two beautiful children; one of them is Jack, who has Asperger's syndrome. We have been through quite a journey together so far in his almost 14 years. Obviously we still have quite a long way to go. Apart from being a parent of a child with a disability I have also worked in the school system both as a teacher's aide and as a school assistant.

Mr John BETTS: I am Toby's dad and I am also President of the Orange Autism/Asperger's Support Group. I have had a lot of personal experiences with Toby's transition to school and through different classes from primary school to high school. I have also discussed transitions and have given advice to parents who have come to our support group who have had lots of problems with their children with autism and Asperger's.

CHAIR: Toby, would you like to say anything?

Mr Toby BETTS: Yes. My name is Toby Betts, and I would say "student" but I do not really consider that a job. As you all may know, I suffer from—I do not really call it "suffer"—I have a high-functioning autistic spectrum and I have to live with it every day, but I do not really see it as a burden; I just see it as something that is just about me, because I do not think there would be another version of me where I do not have high-functioning autism. I just think that is just who I am and I accept it. If there was a cure for autism I would say no way, I am happy being me.

Ms ENGLISH: I am Assistant Principal Outreach for the New South Wales Department of Education and Training and Communities. I basically run a caseload of about seven students with complex needs, including autism, Asperger's and there can be other challenging behaviours. Part of my role is to provide professional learning to staff in both mainstream and support classes and to liaise with as many family groups and supports as I can to make sure that we have the best possible support and care for our students.

CHAIR: Members of the Committee, we will not split the time up; we will keep this informal and as members have questions we will go from there.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: John, the group that you represent—obviously you would have many parents—is there a similar theme that they raise with you or a similar concern they raise with you in terms of their experience of their child's transition?

Mr John BETTS: Yes. The problems that kids have, and parents as well, generally relate to how people with autism think or how they cope with it; so, the big problems are unexpected things and change and the breaking of routines. As parents a lot of them try to prepare their kids as best they can, and usually the best way to do that is to familiarise the children before they get to the new setting so that there is minimum stress and so on. Quite a lot of the stress then leads to a lot of anxiety and then a lot of anxiety can lead to aggression; so you have got behavior problems, and that can be misinterpreted, and you have got a whole gambit of things.

The problem I see with autistic spectrum disorder, unlike—we do not like to say it is a disability—but unlike a lot of other disabilities in that rigid term it is not as visible to people, particularly at school, and more so now because teachers and schools are getting more aware, but that creates additional problems because the kids do not look like they have special needs but they really do because, as I said, the big thing is change. The biggest hurdle of having a good transition is making the change as comfortable as we can, and then the problems change as the children get older. When they are little we can take pictures and do storybooks and read to the kids and they can get familiar through pictures but as they get older that does not work as well and then they need to get more into the detail of what it is like when they progress into the next setting. So that is the core of the problem I guess.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Toby, how old are you now?

Mr Toby BETTS: Fourteen.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: How was your transition? Were there any problems? How did you feel going from primary school into high school?

Mr Toby BETTS: You mean actually going into high school or just the transitioning stage?

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Maybe the transitioning stage and how comfortable you felt when you started and whether there were supports in place?

Mr Toby BETTS: I did feel pretty comfortable. I have done transitions before. I did like a lot of the teachers there and things did not really seem that much different from public school and I thought, "I am pretty sure I can do it. How hard could it be?" Things are a little bit different now. I am not hit at like Bathurst school or anything but it is just that not a lot of support was put in place. They did expect me to put in a bit too much. I did try but it was really hard.

Mr John BETTS: What happened there was—I guess Wendy's equivalent in Orange—she did a very good transition. It took over a term for him to get familiar with the school; so he knew the location and he had met some of the people, but the change between primary school and high school is so different that it just became so overwhelming. It is just that the change was so great—that was the problem, and Toby mentioned it. To me, in a nutshell, with transition you can have the best preparation you can have but unless the place they are going to—the receiving school—really wants to work hard to make it work it just will not work, and that is what happened with Toby. A lot of schools expect the kids to adapt and change and fit into the mould of that school and they will not change the school to suit the kids, so that causes lots of problems.

Mr John BETTS: And sometimes kids like me do not exactly want to be part of the mould; they want to stand out.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Melissa, how has your experience been? Is it similar?

Ms McWILLIAM: I am sure you can all see me nodding as John talks. There is probably no need for me to say a lot, but one thought that I did have with an issue John raised—and this is not necessarily from my personal experience; I need you all to remember that I have worked in several schools—there is a feeling that schools want children to fit into the mould. That is a very key issue, I think, that John has raised. Sometimes, not necessarily across the board with all staff, but sometimes even key staff may feel that the child does not belong in school. They will not come out and say that specifically but that is the overall feeling that you get and that is

just a huge mountain to climb in itself before you can even make progress with your own child, or with any child, overcoming that barrier.

Within the last two years—and this is not regarding my own son; this is within other school situations—I have heard teachers specifically say, "The child doesn't belong here. What is he doing here?" That is how forward they will be in expressing that sort of view. These were my superiors saying that, and as someone who was trying to support an individual within the school system that can be very disheartening and something that is difficult to overcome.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Mr Betts, going back to the point you made earlier about how you perceived Toby to be received at the school. Do you think that was because the school was setting out to maintain an attitude towards mainstreaming and wanted Toby to be accepted into the school culture as another student and that was the overarching, dare I say, philosophy applying at the school, or was it something else?

Mr John BETTS: Probably both. Yes, they did want him to fit in. For the smooth running of a school it is good if every kid does everything that they want and they fit into the mould really well, but that is very difficult for children on the autistic spectrum. I should also explain that Toby went to Canobolas high school at Orange and he went into a multi-categorical [MC] class within a support unit. We chose that situation because I was under the impression that multi-categorical classes are a place where children with Asperger's or autism can go.

They are bright enough to go into mainstream but they are not comfortable out there in the big wide thing where all those sensory inputs can cause anxiety. My impression was that if they were to go into the MC class then they would be looked after, six kids in the class, a teacher and a teacher's aide, then as they got more familiar with the system of school they then would mainstream out and transition out into mainstream classes. That is really what happened to Toby. He was going out to mainstream English, Maths and Japanese but unfortunately the—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That was in primary school?

Mr John BETTS: No, this was in high school. Unfortunately the MC class was located within a support unit that had IM classes and ED classes—emotionally disturbed or whatever that stands for—and they are the kids that like to pick on the targets and like to do the bullying more than in mainstream. There was that problem as well. Really the system in the school is not geared up for kids that find it difficult to cope with change. They expect they have got to change and you have got to put up with a bit of bullying too because when you get into life later on you have got to get used to people pushing your buttons. That is really hard for kids with autism to cope with that.

I have read some of the principals association's submission to this inquiry and a lot of it stems from "throw us some resources and we will make it better" but I know what it is like—I used to work for the Government too—and there may not be the resources available. I think we can overcome the problems with transition with overcoming the situations within schools and not necessarily employing more people and spending more money. It is really a change of attitude: let's adapt the systems within the schools to suit the kids rather than the other way around.

Just speaking on behalf of Wendy English a bit I think, but what I see as a parent is that you have really good people who have trained and who have the right idea of training teachers and introducing strategies for individual teachers to make it easy for the teacher and the kid but they do not have any teeth, you know. If the principal does not want to adopt it or the teacher does not want to take any notice of it then nothing happens. It seems to be a big problem within the school system, not just for transitions as well but also for the kids schooling.

CHAIR: Are you talking around individual transition plans?

Mr John BETTS: Individual transition plans are the way to go but they are only as good as the people who agree to do them.

CHAIR: Are you suggesting that if an individual plan is developed then there needs to be some way to give that plan some teeth within the system to get the attention it deserves at the high school or the primary school that it goes to?

Mr John BETTS: That is exactly right. I prepared some notes for today—I actually e-mailed them to Theresa and now she has included them as part of the submission—but what I am proposing is that there would be an agreed transition manager for a kid. That can be someone within the school, either the sending school or the receiving school or whatever it may be; it does not have to be a specially employed person. That person would then run the show. They would develop a transition plan where the parents and everyone involved would signoff to make it really formal. Then the transition manager would follow-up to make sure that whatever is agreed to in the transition plan is happening.

If they sign-off to say that during the transition they will get the kid to sit in to really see what it is like to sit in a class, then that should happen. At the moment you go along to a meeting and everyone says, "Yes, we will do that" and then they do not do it. It just does not happen or, as Melissa McWilliam alluded to, they go, "It is not going to happen. That is never going to happen in our school. That is not the way we do it." I think if people do not do what they sign up to do there should be some kind of negative consequence. But put some teeth in it!

Ms McWILLIAM: I am really hearing John and I feel the need—in my submission I sort of discuss things along those lines. On paper all schools will have a philosophy that is empowering and really promotes inclusion and that sort of thing for any person with a disability, but often this just does not translate into the real world. As John is sort of raising it boils down to personal accountability sometimes. It is not always every single team member, but at certain times people's philosophies are exactly opposite to what is trying to be achieved. Also, I am so interested in what John mentioned about appointing a case manager or a transition case manager. A thought that came to me when John raised it was that I am really interested and pushing for a more collaborative approach so that at the end of the day the Department of Education staff are not solely responsible for the welfare of the children who are undertaking transitions.

Often a lot of people will have a teaching degree but no in-depth knowledge into disability, regardless of what that disability is and what issues that may raise within the school setting. I am listening to John and thinking, you know, a case manager—provided other departments jumped on board—I cannot talk enough about that actually. They would be a key sort of person in pulling everything together for the child so that all team members would be on the same page, as John is saying. If it boiled down to a child was getting cognitive behavioural therapy through a psychologist to lower their anxiety levels and to raise their coping skills, I think it is so important that there is really open and clear communication between school staff working with the child and people with expertise like psychologists so that everyone is following the best-practice approach really to managing issues within schools.

CHAIR: In that scenario the psychologist then would have an instrumental role in the development of the transition plan?

Ms McWILLIAM: I think so. I think the expertise that someone like a psychologist has would probably match the expertise that someone like Wendy English and Toni Daly have. But the problem is that staff with expertise like Tony and Wendy are perhaps stretched—I am speaking for you now—and that might be an understatement. They can't be everywhere at the same time stamping out fires—metaphorical fires—that occur or crisis moments—

Ms ENGLISH: We cannot do the following up.

Ms McWILLIAM: —which comes back to John's brilliant suggestion of a case manager. I am here speaking not just as a parent and not just for the children that we are trying to empower but also for the staff who are trying to juggle so many issues. It is almost an impossible task to be honest—that is a big statement.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If I understand you correctly, Mr Betts, you said you did not think it mattered whether they were from the sending school or receiving school, but surely the case manager or the person who manages the student needs to be present as the student progresses?

Mr John BETTS: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: For example, a child might have a case manager in primary school, but then, under your proposition, there would be a need for that child to have a case manager in their new high school, would there not?

Mr John BETTS: Yes. I actually have in mind a different case manager for the same child at every transition, so, if the child is at preschool, for instance, and they are entering infants school, it could be someone from an early intervention service or someone from preschool or even someone from infants school, but as the child goes from infants to primary, and into each class, it could be the teacher they had last year who got on really well and knew the best way to teach that child and get the best out of them. They would then be an expert, in a way, because they could pass on. I cannot help thinking of one transition that Toby did from year 1 to year 2 in primary school. They knew nothing about autism, but they just happened to get it, so when it came time for transition, mid fourth term, they developed an ad hoc transition plan.

Then we had a meeting with the principal and the teacher that was going to teach him next year, and just said, "This is what you should do." It took five minutes. As a transition, it was not very long, but it was good because they had worked out what worked and what did not, and they just handed it over to the next teacher and said, "If you do this, you will not have any problems." It was a good transition, although it only took 10 minutes. The next year when Toby went into year 2 he had a teacher that knew nothing about autism, but her teaching style was really good because she did not have—in infants school they have lots of dingle-dangles hanging from the ceiling, which are supposed to be good for kids.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Because they stimulate them?

Mr John BETTS: Yes, that is right, but that is hard for a kid with autism because there is too much sensory input coming in. It confuses them and causes anxiety.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When Toby transitioned from primary school to secondary school, did he take with him what was, in your view, quite a robust and comprehensive file on his situation, so that when he moved to high school there was a consolidated case?

Mr John BETTS: Yes, what happened was that he started the transition at the end of the third term, so we had over 10 weeks in which to visit the school and meet the people. Not only that, the deputy from the primary school and his year 6 teacher went to the school and said, "We are here to talk with the staff", and had a staff meeting to say this is what works and this is what does not work, and, "This is what you should look out for; these are the triggers for sensory problems that could cause a meltdown." That was ignored, so he had lots of problems. Within the first few weeks, he had a huge meltdown at school. We were called in and we had to calm him down, despite the fact that the principal, the deputy principal and the head teacher and everyone else was there. The point I am making is that, unless the receiving schools have really got their heart in doing it properly, they will all fail. You can have the best preparation and it will all fall over if the suggestions about what works and what does not are not taken up.

Ms DALY: I agree totally with what John is saying. In our school, some of the students that we have come from fairly isolated areas. For example, we have a young man at Jerilderie and we have another young man at Parkes, of similar ages to Toby and Jack. The problem with transition plans—and this is where I think we need to look at the big picture—is that a lot of these children were not diagnosed until they were of an older age and there are no facilities, none of the counselling that Melissa is talking about, nobody in those country areas who is experienced with autism. Those children's parents have really battled with that because not only have they had to overcome the local community's opinions and thoughts about this particular child who does not fit the mould, but also convince the school.

Some of the teachers have been there for many, many years, they are very devoted but have no understanding of the autism spectrum disorder [ASD], have no understanding of even the way things can work for them, and a lot of these children become extremely anxious. They become angels at school and demons at home. We are dealing with a couple of children at the moment who had been locked up, because the school was only small with low numbers, so they could control their anxiety, but as soon as they got home they would demolish their rooms or whatever, do self-harm and things like that. A lot of these people do not have access to working in a group community, so they end up in distance education where we devise our own programs and do things, and the anxiety is removed. Suddenly they discover—and John has been very good in talking to parents—they are not alone.

There is someone else with a child with this condition and there is hope for them. One mother told me her son had been so much trouble, and he is the sweetest young man now that the anxiety is removed. She said, "I just told him that ASD is what makes you do all these bad things", because that is what the local community had said to her. That attitude is reflected in the schools, so in bigger communities there can be support, but, as John said, it has to be the attitude, and that has to start from within the country town. I know that is huge and is beyond your committee, but what I am saying is that there are a lot of kids with autism spectrum disorder who are in remote country areas who have no support mechanism whatsoever.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Ms Daly, can I ask you about training for teachers?

Ms DALY: Wendy is the person to talk to about that.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: The scenario that John gave us I assume involved a teacher and principal who had been trained long ago and lacked awareness. Are there any ongoing education or awareness programs for principals in particular, or senior management within schools, that can help to create a school environment that is far more flexible and understanding of kids with special needs?

Ms ENGLISH: I think that is something that I have come to, and we were talking about my difficulties with this earlier. The common thread through this conversation I think is the fear factor for staff around children with autism, and in particular Asperger's, who are very capable and intelligent young people that are coming into mainstream classrooms and have an invisible disability, because they certainly do not look like they have disability, so you do not get immediate empathy for them. With children with Down syndrome, or some kind of visible disability, people are naturally more empathic, but the fear factor about the unknown is really worrying. Some staff make comments—and unfortunately I hear it in my work too—that, "They should be somewhere else." I would love to challenge them and say, "That would be lovely; could you tell me where that would be?"

Where is it? We want these children to obtain the best possible education they can, so where would that be? If it is going to be in our mainstream settings, how can we make those mainstream settings a lot more autism friendly, Asperger's friendly or disability friendly? To do that, I really believe that our staff need more training. They certainly need more understanding because with understanding and knowledge I think you become more empathetic, and you gain the skills and strategies to be able to accommodate, adjust your curriculum and adjust your learning so that the students are more easily able to access learning. I would love the opportunity.

If you think about my position, I do not really know now how many schools I work across because our regions have just changed and I can only take a caseload of up to seven children, so if you scatter them, there might be one in Dubbo and six others in outlying areas. Each high school could have one of these positions and to be able to follow through with a student—we would love that opportunity. You can go and do the professional learning, offer the professional training you are talking about online, but that is just a part of it, just the surface. You give them an awareness of what autism is. In Toni's school now—distance education—we have trained almost half the staff in understanding autism. That is one part of it.

The next part of it is what is that in reality? How does that look in a school? These students will not always want to go to your class, day after day. Some days they will come to your class and they actually might work really well, but the next day they may not be able to repeat that for whatever emotional reason or temperament reason, or the weather or whatever. How do we build into teachers having some kind of understanding that that is typical because, as Melissa once told me a long time ago, if you have met one student with autism, you have met one student with autism.

It is very challenging to try to educate our staff, to give them skills, and then get their empathy and understanding about how that will actually look. I think John's point was very valuable, being able to go into the high school setting and follow up, make sure that every single classroom teacher who was having that student got a package, got the paperwork, and follow up saying, "When you read that package, this is what this part translates to". The paperwork is a requirement, it is the document, but the actual is that happening. Then have regular meetings with parents saying, "We are getting one view at school; what are you hearing at home from the student? How are they perceiving the transition? We have done everything that we think is great." My biggest criticism of all of the adults that I work with, including organisations, is that we have to give children more voice. We have to give children more say in how they like to be at school, and listen, and get that into their learning plans.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What do you mean by that, about hearing more from the children?

Ms ENGLISH: Did Toby ever attend meetings?

Mr Toby BETTS: What do you mean by meetings?

Mr John BETTS: No, he did not.

Ms ENGLISH: It is part of Asperger's too. We do not have the children at meetings, but there has to be some other mechanism for us to utilise what the child is telling us about how comfortable they are. We make assumptions—we commit assumicide all the time in what we think might be. Jack was the first student that I worked with and I can remember making a terrible mistake, which is a really good example. We had done a transition plan. He was going into another classroom and he was doing sewing. He had a very big meltdown and

I made the assumption that it was because the fine motor program was too hard for him and he was not able to use the cotton. Another teacher said, "No, I am sure the colours we chose were wrong." Another teacher said, "I am sure it was the fabric." Jack said, "I didn't want to get pricked by the pin. Why did you give me a pin?" We have to get our little people to tell us, and that needs time and it needs trained adults.

Mr John BETTS: That just prompted me to remember one of Toby's experiences. He did actually attend one transition meeting. What happened was he was going from year 4 to year 5 in primary school and, for whatever reason, the principal could not tell us who the teacher was going to be the next year. Part of the problem was that there were five or six temporary teachers in the school and he did not know whether he would get a teacher transferred from another school. Anyway, to make a long story short, we did not know until the last day of school who his teacher was going to be the next year. You would think that is a formula for disaster. We went to a meeting with his teacher, and Toby came, and we chatted to her and she said to Toby, "Do you like music or will you play music?"

He was a bit reluctant, and she said, "In my class, everyone learns the recorder." He said, "I'm not. What sort of bitch are you?" There was a huge tantrum and he left the room. He does not like music and noise. She looked at me and she must have read my body language. She said, "I've stuffed it, haven't I?" I said, "You have. You will never get him back in this classroom again." But what happened was, through the holidays, she swotted up on how to teach kids with autism and had several meetings with us and Toby. He came to year 5 and she was the best teacher he had ever had. It was the most pleasant year he had ever had because she wanted to make it right.

Mr Toby BETTS: Yes, she was one of the best teachers I ever had.

Mr John BETTS: The whole classroom adapted to Toby. Then she took on a boy with hearing difficulty. She was one of the few teachers that would wear the special microphone, because he had whatever he had in his ear. She wanted to change to make it work, and that is the key to good transition. Quite often I am talking to principals and teachers and I use the analogy of a physical disability for a kid with autism. I can remember saying to the principal at Toby's high school that if you had a kid who was in a wheelchair and you expected this kid to go from this level to this level and there is no wheelchair access and he took his wheelchair on the lawn he would get into trouble, but what you are saying to a kid with autism is if you punch another kid because you have been bullied there is not a lot of difference.

The kid with autism has all these problems that they cannot cope with. People set barriers up because they cannot see that they cannot cope with those problems, whereas if you are in a wheelchair they can say okay you will need a smooth path to take your wheels on and steps are a problem, but a kid with autism they cannot see what the problems are, and that is part of the problem. I am not trying to put down teachers and principals, I am just saying that is what part of the problem is; it is an invisible problem.

Ms ENGLISH: And that is very important. One of the analogies on a similar level today is diabetes. If you had a student with diabetes would you make them eat sugar? Another issue we have often is with teachers wanting to have students with Asperger's going into social environments like assemblies. Do you make them do the thing that is primarily part of their disability? I go back to that lack of understanding or awareness of the impact of, in particular, Asperger's disability on a child. The other thing that comes out really strongly for me, and Melissa would have experienced this too, we did, I think, beautiful plans to transition—they were lovely—but the orientations, they are not transition plans, they are orienting our students to year 7, they orient them to where things are.

We do a lovely job of saying here is the canteen, here are the facilities, here are these things. That orients them to a place, and that is valuable, I do not discount that, and we can generally do a very good job of that; but it is that real transition for them to experience and feel, and Toby said it himself: You do not feel what it is like to be somewhere until you are in it, and that is very hard for us to do without support and without the support of the receiving environment.

Mr Toby BETTS: Another thing about transitions is certain individuals, like a few teachers at the school some of them are—I would not really call it a power trip—but it is a little bit like they know they are in authority and they say it a lot. Whenever I would have problems or if I was about to have a meltdown I would mostly ask their assistance and ask them to make exceptions, but they were not prepared to do that because of the school customs or whatever.

Ms ENGLISH: That is the nature of teachers too.

CHAIR: One of the things we have been told—and Greg touched on it earlier—is that parents have to retell their same story over and over and over. As parents, what have you used to assist you to tell that story, be it to a medical practitioner or to a different teacher or a school? Do you have a folder with everything in it or what do you use?

Ms McWILLIAM: I have a folder with everything and I also have a great big box that everything has been thrown in and not even sorted chronologically or anything. I think when Jack first enrolled in a school in Dubbo I bought the folder as it was at that stage. Other schools—I was fortunate in that Wendy was very instrumental in any transitions that my son had to undertake and, thankfully for me, Wendy acted as the folder. But in saying that, I am really interested and listening very carefully at the moment to the national disability insurance scheme. I see where even from across States they are going to make it a nationwide organised system so that people are not continually repeating their story.

It is a good question because the truth is yes you have to repeat this story all the time, despite Wendy's good work in doing transitions. I think people have a natural curiosity sometimes, and as a responsible parent I like to inform people anyway about my son's history and what therapies he has had, what things work for him, what reinforces good behaviour, what things might instigate a meltdown.

Ms ENGLISH: Learning styles—all those things: how do they learn? Can I just tap into this? Melissa and I shared this because it was a very bad experience for both of us sitting in a meeting trying to go back to a situation where we had new people involved and we were trying to get some respite support arranged and we both sat in the meeting and I got a lecture—and thank goodness Melissa and I have worked together for a long time—I got a lecture from a support teacher or an aide, maybe a support learning officer, who said, "Why haven't you tried visuals? You need to go back and put visuals in" and I was thinking, "We are so far past anything you are talking about".

I am meeting next Friday with my equivalent in Orange and we are going to look at how we in our positions can package something together that is like—we are calling it the charter, jokingly—but something that we can package together that is a document that can move with the student, observing confidentiality, observing respect for their privacy, but a negotiated document that we can have as a department, and perhaps that is what we need for parents to have as well. My families frequently try things. We have a family that I am working with who are trying Queensland—the Hearts and Minds and Tony Attwood. They have got to start again, and when that new person comes in they go back to baseline, and we are way past baseline. We need that extra support.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Continuity and to find information as a child progresses?

Ms McWILLIAM: From a parent's point of view as well, having to go over the story many times, I will be very honest, there is a large degree of a feeling that you are judged at times or that assumptions are made about your family or about the morals and values that you may have or that you are trying to instil into your child. Sometimes it feels as though you are having to justify yourself.

Ms ENGLISH: Before you even get to the real work.

Ms McWILLIAM: Yes. That takes an emotional toll on the family before you are even getting to the heart of the matter.

Mr John BETTS: I see an improvement in transition and an improvement in kids coping in school as an investment in our society. Particularly high-functioning kids with autism, they can contribute a lot to our society. It is not like the State has to support them forever. All you have got to do is get them through school and get them a good education, make sure they are well-balanced and they can contribute enormously in our society. I used to work in agricultural science and I would say three-quarters of the vets I worked with and all of the taxonomists—all undiagnosed Asperger's—are really clever people contributing enormously to our society.

Ms ENGLISH: We mention that with engineers too.

Mr John BETTS: Engineers as well, that is right, exactly. So please take it on board. What you are doing is improving our society; it is not just us whingeing parents in your ear. These people can contribute a lot.

Ms DALY: Whatever plan you come up with for transition it cannot be done just by a group of academics, it has to be done in conjunction with the parents and practitioners. I have learned so much from parents, it is huge. I feel sorry for Melissa when she says how often she has to recount stories, because I am always bagging her out for information and she has taught me so much. And John and other parents I have got, they have to be part of that transition; it is not just a form that the principal peels off the top of the cupboard and says, "Right, we have got to do this for this kid". It is useless without them because every autism spectrum disorder [ASD] kid is different.

Mr Toby BETTS: Similar to dad's last comment, again I do not want to present autism as a serious problem. I feel that people with ASD and Asperger's it should not be that big of a deal; we just help them out and, again, they can be a huge contribution to society. Albert Einstein was actually supposedly diagnosed with ASD or something.

Ms ENGLISH: And Bill Gates and Van Gogh.

Mr Toby BETTS: Bill Gates and Van Gogh, yes, Leonardo da Vinci—all of them. I just think that a lot of people can really contribute and everyone here can make a huge contribution to the earth and we can all move forward.

CHAIR: Unfortunately we have run out of time. On behalf of the Committee I thank you for coming along this morning and for the submissions you have made as well. Toby, the best thing I have heard today is that you are happy being you. Just keep that up. Hopefully we will come up with some recommendations that, with your input, will make a difference.

Ms McWILLIAM: It means a lot to have you out here, listening to us and interested in our thoughts. Thank you so much.

(The witnesses withdrew)

DELMA HAIDLE, Case Manager, the Westhaven Association,

MASON ANDERSON, Client, the Westhaven Association,

JUSTIN FETTELL, Client, the Westhaven Association,

RUTH MOODY, Client, the Westhaven Association, and

CHRIS MARSHALL, Client, the Westhaven Association, before the Committee:

CHAIR: We are going to have a bit of a chat today and maybe ask some questions. Delma, would you give us an overview of some of the services that you offer?

Ms HAIDLE: We are a work placement place, a workshop. We make Ugg boots, which is our main product. We also do collating, we mow lawns. At the moment we are assembling blocks to put into the new water sort of filtration plastic things.

Mr FETTELL: In six.

Ms HAIDLE: In lots of six, yes.

Ms HAIDLE: We also do woodwork.

Mr FETTELL: Painting.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You also do painting?

Ms HAIDLE: Paint pegs in woodwork.

CHAIR: Committee members will now ask you some questions and you can tell us about some of the work that you do.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Any of you can answer this question, if you like. We are particularly interested in how you were placed after you finished school—for example, the transitioning from school to work. Do any of you want to talk about how you found that? What preparation was involved in leaving school and going to where you are now? Was there support in place for that? Delma, perhaps you might answer that question?

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Were there good things or bad things about it? Maybe you can tell us what the good things were?

Ms HAIDLE: Ruth did not come out of school to our service. She moved to Dubbo.

Mr FETTELL: Come from Break Thru.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Was it good? What did you like about it?

Mr FETTELL: Doing for new jobs.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Did you learn new things?

Mr FETTELL: How to use the skills for the job. They helped us with training.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What sort of training did you do? Did you learn things?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes. Work in the canteen—me.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You had someone teach you and show you how to do things?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Can you do some of those things at home too now?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

Ms HAIDLE: Mason actually goes out mowing.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Do you like working outside?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When you are doing your work do you have some helping you?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Someone looks after you while you are doing your work?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes, the boss does.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When you are doing your work and it gets a bit hard or you are just not sure what to do does someone help you work out what to do next?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Who is that?

Mr ANDERSON: The boss.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: If you have any problems—

Mr ANDERSON: I go and ask him what job to do next and that.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do you get some pay for that?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Is that good?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When you are working during the day do you work for a lot of the day or just in the morning or the afternoon? How is your work spread out?

Mr MARSHALL: In the morning.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You do some in the morning?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Then you have a bit of a break?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

Ms HAIDLE: Chris does morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea in the canteen. We also supply the coffee and milk and they set all that up.

CHAIR: Delma, do you offer work experience for some of the kids that are still at school as well? How do kids get from school into your organisation?

Ms HAIDLE: We do have work experience and the kids come. We have had kids from other schools come.

Mr FETTELL: Willow school.

Ms HAIDLE: We have had, yes, and Buninyong school.

Mr FETTELL: Delroy campus and Dubbo high.

CHAIR: Which school was that?

Ms HAIDLE: Buninyong.

Mr FETTELL: Delroy campus.

Ms HAIDLE: Mainly they apply through the normal process: go through Centrelink. But they can apply directly, yes.

CHAIR: They do not come directly from school to you. They must go through—

Ms HAIDLE: In the past we have; that was the procedure. A lot of our older people went directly—because they used to have a Westhaven school—from Westhaven school into the workplace.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do any of your younger people—

Ms HAIDLE: None of these young guys went that way, no.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: So they had a gap. Do they often have a gap between leaving school and coming to work with you?

Ms HAIDLE: Nowadays we have not had—these are the youngest guys we have at the moment.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Is it through Centrelink that they will come to you?

Ms HAIDLE: They can, yes, through Centrelink or from a referral through Break Thru. You know, normally how anybody else gets a job really.

CHAIR: Can I ask everyone how old they are? Chris, how old are you?

Mr MARSHALL: 27.

CHAIR: Ruth, how old are you?

Ms MOODY: I am 24.

CHAIR: Justin, how old are you?

Mr FETTELL: 26.

CHAIR: Mason, how old are you?

Mr ANDERSON: I am 31.

Ms HAIDLE: It is a while since we have been to school. These are your youngest guys at the moment.

CHAIR: Where would those from 18 to the mid 20s be?

Ms HAIDLE: A lot of them go through Break Thru.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Can we find out a bit about the services offered by Break Thru?

Ms HAIDLE: These guys all go to Break Thru. Oh, Mason does not but the others do.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES: I am not sure what Break Thru is.

Ms HAIDLE: It is people solutions.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Ruth, what do you do at Break Thru?

Ms MOODY: I am in transition to work.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What do you do there?

Ms MOODY: I work there for two days: Mondays and Wednesdays, and I do Blockbusters on a Wednesday.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Is Blockbusters the video store?

Ms MOODY: Yes. I have a job there.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: What sort of work do you do there, Ruth?

Ms MOODY: I log all the DVDs for customers.
The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do you enjoy that work?

Ms MOODY: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Where did you move to Dubbo from?

Ms MOODY: From Brisbane.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: That is a long way?

Ms MOODY: My dad had an old parish in Brisbane so we moved to Dubbo for a new parish. My dad is a minister-priest.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Do you do your work Monday to Friday? Do you work on the weekends?

Ms HAIDLE: No.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Just Monday to Friday?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What time would you start work in the morning?

Mr ANDERSON: 8 o'clock.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When do you finish?

Mr ANDERSON: 4 o'clock on Friday, 4.20 p.m. on Thursdays and 4 o'clock on Fridays.

Ms HAIDLE: They have a half hour break on Fridays.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: How many lawns do you mow each week?

Mr ANDERSON: About 11.

Ms HAIDLE: Each day.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That is a lot of lawns?

Mr ANDERSON: At Wellington, Gilgandra and Narromine.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You keep everything nice and tidy?

Mr ANDERSON: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Who drives the truck?

Mr ANDERSON: The boss.

Ms HAIDLE: Who is the boss?

Mr ANDERSON: Anton, Mark, Jarrod and the other Mark—two Marks.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Chris, do you work each day?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

Ms HAIDLE: No. You work two days.

Mr MARSHALL: Two days.

Ms HAIDLE: Then he goes to Break Thru for how many days?

Mr MARSHALL: Two days.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Do you enjoy going to Break Thru?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

Mr FETTELL: Delma, he goes to Break Thru for three days.

Ms HAIDLE: Okay, sorry. He goes three days. Justin knows.

Mr FETTELL: That is why Charlie calls me the Liberal.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Are you living in shared living arrangements or with families?

Ms HAIDLE: Ruth lives at home with family, Chris lives in shared accommodation and both these guys live at home. Chris lives at the Westhaven village complex.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: How many people live at Westhaven?

Ms HAIDLE: I have no idea but a lot.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Did most of the residents at Westhaven grow up in Dubbo?

Ms HAIDLE: Most of them did but we have got outside people. We have got people from Bourke and Broken Hill.

Mr FETTELL: And Cobar where the nickel is.

Ms HAIDLE: Lightning Ridge.

Mr FETTELL: And from Goodooga.

Mr ANDERSON: That is where I am from.

Mr FETTELL: I am a Dubbo boy—west side.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Within Dubbo is there awareness amongst the employer community that there are people who would like opportunites—

Ms HAIDLE: There would be.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: —and that is promoted somehow in the community?

Ms HAIDLE: I would say, yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I am wondering how Ruth would have found out about Blockbusters.

Ms HAIDLE: Through Break Thru.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Are you finding that employers in the local area are supportive of the program you are running?

Ms HAIDLE: A lot of people are but because we are an actual workplace we do not source work outside. Well, we do—we have ones who have worked at the hospital and we have ones who have worked at Fletchers, the abattoirs. We are an employment—

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: You are carrying the work out yourselves?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you have to tender for jobs? For example, the water filtration job you referred to earlier?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes. Otherwise it is word of mouth. Some people are really good and think of us. It is hard to source work in Dubbo.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: What about the local council?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, we do work for them.

Mr FETTELL: Stakes, for all councils anywhere.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, we do surveying stakes for all over.

Mr FETTELL: Heaps of shires.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, heaps of shires buy them. We actually sell too. We have a little shop.

Mr FETTELL: Tables and chairs, the ones that Mark made.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Are you doing furniture as well?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, wooden tables and chairs.

Mr FETTELL: They get the timber from my cousin's place for the frame trusses.

CHAIR: How do you all get to work? Do you walk? Do you get a lift?

Mr FETTELL: My carer drops me at work except Thursdays—one of my friends drops me then.

CHAIR: What about you, Mason?

Mr ANDERSON: I get the town buses and taxis on the Thursdays of pension week.

Ms HAIDLE: Mason gets himself to work.

CHAIR: Ruth, how do you get to work?

Ms MOODY: My parents. My mum goes to school and she takes me to work.

CHAIR: Chris, how do you get to work?

Mr MARSHALL: I walk from the village or catch the bus.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Are there other opportunities for training?

Ms HAIDLE: We run a program at work called Life Skills—I had to think of it. What is it?

Mr FETTELL: Life Skills. Even Break Thru do Life Skills too.

Ms HAIDLE: Work Skills for Life. Everybody has an hour a week.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: So, in that, there are skills that they could use in a work environment and skills they could use at home each day?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, and skills if they wanted to go and work out in the community as well.

Mr FETTELL: I do work in the community.

CHAIR: What do you do in the community?

Mr FETTELL: Meals on Wheels every Friday.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do you deliver them or cook them?

Mr FETTELL: Deliver them.

Ms HAIDLE: He also works at the Forestry Commission.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: In the nursery?

Mr FETTELL: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: What do you do there?

Mr FETTELL: Sometimes we count the fertiliser tablets for plants into bags.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: And then they sell them, do they?

Mr FETTELL: Yes, in the green sack bag, count them in twenties and tens.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Very busy.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, he is. Chris does not actually go out and do work.

Mr FETTELL: Yes, he does, in Myers.

Ms HAIDLE: That is not with us; that is with Break Thru.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: What do you do at Myers, Chris?

Mr MARSHALL: Mopping the floor, the chairs and things.

Mr FETTELL: Give the food out, take the meals out to the tables and serve them.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Serve the customers? You take the tray out with the food, do you?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

Ms HAIDLE: So all three go out and work in the community.

Mr FETTELL: Rose got the job before Chris.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: You are the font of all knowledge, Justin.

Ms HAIDLE: He certainly is. That is why they call him the liberal.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: That is right.

Ms HAIDLE: I do not know what they do out, other than at work.

Mr FETTELL: I am the team leader and service representative at Break Thru.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I can imagine you would be a good representative.

Mr FETTELL: I actually speak for other people. One of them cannot—

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: So you help them out—that is good.

Ms HAIDLE: He is very good.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: They are very lucky to have you there.

Ms HAIDLE: I am very lucky to have him.

CHAIR: How many people do you have?

Ms HAIDLE: At the workshop there are 65.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: What level of staffing do you have, support workers or caseworkers such as yourself?

Ms HAIDLE: We have two caseworkers.

Mr FETTELL: Greg and Delma.

Ms HAIDLE: And how many other staff have we got?

Mr FETTELL: The big manager, Dave Martin.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, but staff on the floor?

Mr FETTELL: Tracy, Mark, Jarrod, the other Mark, Anton, Jenny, Rose and Lisa, and Pete and Ellen.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, Ellen is there two days.

Mr FETTELL: In the canteen.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: That is not a large staff for the number of clients.

Ms HAIDLE: No, it is not. Greg and I are the case managers. We are actually responsible for 30.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: So you have that load each?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

Mr FETTELL: And Linda.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, Linda works in the front office.

Mr FETTELL: And Bill and Jim O'Donnell.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

CHAIR: Do you try to find jobs to fit the abilities of the workers?

Ms HAIDLE: What jobs we get in, yes. Some we get in and some people cannot do it.

Mr FETTELL: I give them a try.

CHAIR: Justin will give them a try.

Ms HAIDLE: He will do anything, give anything a try. We have a production coordinator who is responsible for bringing work in, but it is very hard in Dubbo.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do you have to go out and look for jobs?

Ms HAIDLE: Yes.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Ruth, what do you do on the other days when you are not at Blockbuster?

Ms MOODY: From Blockbuster I work at home by myself. I design things as well.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: At home?

Ms MOODY: At home. I am the new fashion designer in 2012.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: That is great.

Ms MOODY: It is.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: It is exciting.

Ms MOODY: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Do you use a computer and design on the computer or do you draw?

Ms MOODY: I first design, design and do sketches of fashion, because I want a job in fashion.

Ms HAIDLE: She would love a job in fashion.

Ms MOODY: Yes.

Ms HAIDLE: But, Ruth, how many days did you go to Break Thru?

Ms MOODY: Two, but I am going to Break Thru tomorrow because there is no TAFE.

Ms HAIDLE: What do you normally do?

Ms MOODY: I should have TAFE, but TAFE has finished.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Are you doing fashion design at TAFE?

Ms MOODY: Yes, and I passed.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Congratulations, that is wonderful. We might see some designer labels with your name on them.

Ms MOODY: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: We will be looking for Ruth Moody on the label, will we?

Ms MOODY: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Have you finished your TAFE course?

Ms MOODY: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Or do you have some more to do next year?

Ms MOODY: I have finished TAFE.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: How many years at TAFE?

Ms MOODY: Every Tuesday.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, for how long?

Ms HAIDLE: Twelve months.

Ms MOODY: Twelve months.

Ms HAIDLE: Because you have only lived here for a little while, haven't you?

Ms MOODY: Yes.

CHAIR: How many people were in your class at TAFE?

Ms MOODY: Fifteen students.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Did you have someone working just with you at TAFE? Did you have a carer?

Mr FETTELL: Break Thru carer.

Ms MOODY: We had two people, Barbara and Frank, and we had Tara as well.

Ms HAIDLE: So one of the staff from Break Thru went with you?

Ms MOODY: They didn't come.

Ms HAIDLE: They did not go?

Ms MOODY: No.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Chris, next year are you going to be doing the same work, doing the same things?

Mr MARSHALL: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Do you get a chance to do different things? Do they change the work you do or are you doing the same thing basically?

Mr MARSHALL: Canteen.

CHAIR: Justin, what are you going to do next year, the same job—Meals on Wheels?

Mr FETTELL: Yes.

Ms HAIDLE: He has been doing it for a while now.

Mr FETTELL: Five years, and I just got a big award from Break Thru for it.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What was that—a Break Thru award?

Ms HAIDLE: An award for doing Meals on Wheels.

Mr FETTELL: Every Friday, and two people do it on Thursdays, Nathan and Kim Bolton.

CHAIR: Through Westhaven and Break Thru, have there been many stories of workers being offered full-time or semi full-time work, or do they continually work between those host employers and Westhaven?

Ms HAIDLE: Mostly they continue to work through.

CHAIR: It sounds like a pretty good arrangement, so you obviously then talk a lot with Break Thru?

Ms HAIDLE: I do not particularly, but obviously the organisation does, yes.

CHAIR: Do they structure some of their training programs to suit the types of work and skills that are required?

Ms HAIDLE: I really do not know.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES: What is your role as a case manager? You said you have 30 clients.

Ms HAIDLE: Yes, I have behavioural management and I pay them, do their time sheets.

Mr FETTELL: You are my favourite case manager.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: You are a smoothie, Justin.

Mr FETTELL: No wonder they call me Romeo.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming today. I am glad I met the daily liberal from Dubbo. We think what you are doing is fantastic and you do a wonderful job. Well done on the awards, on graduating and on working in the canteen. Mason, I wish I lived in Dubbo so you could mow my lawns. I am sure you would be pretty good at it. Delma, thank you very much for coming. Are you going shopping now or going home?

Mr FETTELL: No, back to work.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

DALE TOWNS, Service Manager, Mission Australia,

ELIZABETH JOHNSTONE, Service Manager, Mission Australia,

CATHY LAMBERT, Manager, Child and Family Team, UnitingCare Burnside,

DAVE RYAN, Operations Manager, Orana Far West, UnitingCare Burnside, and

IRENE HAN, General Manager Operations—New South Wales/Victoria/Tasmania, Lifestyle Solutions, before the Committee:

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming along this afternoon. We will try and keep this relatively informal. I invite each of you to introduce yourself and give us a very quick rundown on what you do and you can make a very short statement. We will then open it up for members to ask questions.

Ms TOWNS: I am a Service Manager for Central and Far West for Mission Australia. I manage most of our families programs, but I have a school retention program in Dubbo that I manage. The programs that I cover are from Dubbo to Coonamble out to Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Bourke and I manage some programs in Broken Hill down to Wentworth, Dareton, Menindee and Wilcannia. That is kind of my area.

Ms JOHNSTONE: I am acting Service Manager for Mission Australia, Central and Far West. My areas are Bathurst, Orange, Parkes, Forbes, Cowra, Leeton/Narrandera, Moss Vale and Dubbo. I manage some mental health programs and some youth programs—so assisting people with mental health issues to live independently in the community. One of those programs has a major educational and employment component to it, which is the Resource and Recovery Program, and we also have Orange youth accommodation support services for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, and also family case management in Orange and Leeton/Narrandera.

Ms LAMBERT: I am the Manager for Burnside's Child and Family Team here in Dubbo. That team comprises seven programs and those programs deliver services to Aboriginal families with children with disabilities, to the children with disabilities, their peers, siblings and parents as well, in a support-type program that offers supportive groups and activities that are not offered anywhere else; so it fills the gaps. We also have Bright Futures, which you are probably familiar with, which delivers in-home case management for families with children up to nine years of age.

We have Family Options, which is a free relationship counselling service, and an extended family support program, which has packages up to $50,000 for families that have children with a disability that feel that they are at crisis point and are wanting to relinquish children. That helps give them a break and keeps them as a family. We also have the Bring Them Home counselling service, which provides counselling for members of the stolen generation up to four generations subsequent from that. The area we cover across those programs is from Dubbo out to Wellington, Coonamble, right up to west of the Queensland border, Lightning Ridge, out to Broken Hill—similar to the area that Dale explained.

Mr RYAN: I am the Operations Manager for UnitingCare Burnside. Some of you may be aware that UnitingCare Burnside is part of the UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families Services group, and that is part of UnitingCare New South Wales/ACT. Cathy is one of the program managers we have got for sites in Dubbo—the Youth Services Team, which is over in the west, which delivers four programs mainly around homelessness and tenancy support, the programs that Cathy mentioned, and we have the family referral service, which came out of the Keep Them Safe initiative, and that is a referral service that works in similar areas of the State that Dale talked about, but we do not go down into the Riverina area or down that part of the State, the south-western area. We also have an out-of-home care service that at this stage is providing out-of-home care for around 35 children and young people—mainly children and young people—with high-support needs. A significant number of those children are Aboriginal and a high proportion of our carers are also Aboriginal. My role is to oversee those programs and to guide the strategic direction of Burnside in the region.

Ms HAN: I am the General Manager Operations for New South Wales for Lifestyle Solutions. We have services right across New South Wales. My operational role is for the group homes. We have 75 group homes; we have 220 self-managed packages; we have services for children that have come under the care of the Minister and are now living in out-of-home accommodation plus foster care—or alternate family care as we

called it; we also support people through the criminal justice program and the juvenile justice program, a range of those services. It is probably hard to capture all of that in numbers but, just to give you a general view, it is the operations of all of the disability types of services including children and involuntary out-of-home care as well as under the care of the Minister. I may have capped it very briefly but that is New South Wales in total.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I was interested in your perspectives about the differences for those living outside of the major towns of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong. I know that some of you only provide services personally in those areas but your organisations go beyond that. What are you finding are the major differences for people outside of Sydney in terms of their experience at those transition points?

Mr RYAN: You mean the transition point in terms of education?

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Yes.

Mr RYAN: Lack of services to support transition.

Ms HAN: There is lack of communication. There are so many people involved in their lives: you have education, you have case workers, you have Community Services—there are so many people involved in their lives that with the actual coordination of all of those people together and to come to that coordination role, which is so crucial to making it work, you find that miscommunication creates major gaps in how things eventuate or happen, such as the transport does not line up with accommodation, all of those things. So one of the things we need is coordination.

Mr RYAN: We also hear from the school principals that they do not have the services in the small towns to support children and young people with disabilities or behavioural concerns, so they do the risk assessment on an enrolment and they will say, "No, we don't have the services in this town. We don't have police. We don't have adequate medical support or disability services".

Ms JOHNSTONE: And with the services that are available, the length of time that it takes before assessment and treatment can be provided is quite lengthy as well. Often, because it is a smaller area, there is some cost involved. So with lower income families it is quite difficult to access the support even if it is available.

Ms TOWNS: In some of our regions we have had a waiting period of up to nine months for services like the Royal Far West and that can be quite difficult for families.

Mr RYAN: Childcare services are also difficult to find in smaller communities as well.

Ms LAMBERT: Small communities out west sometimes do not have any child care at all, not even family day care.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Earlier this morning a father made the suggestion of a case manager for students with complex needs transitioning from one part of education to another. Have you come across that idea before? Do you think that would work in transition situations?

Mr RYAN: Out-of-home care has a coordinator; education has out-of-home care coordinators, which would fulfil some of that role—that is for children and young people in out-of-home care. If that works for that group of children then it might work, because they coordinate those responses between the carers and education and any other services that need to be provide. They are a common link as you are moving through education so that if you are transferring from primary into secondary the out-of-home care coordinator can source the correct class or the correct school that that child or young person could go to with the right supports. That is a common link that I presume others might have.

Ms HAN: I absolutely agree. We have just put together a submission in relation to that to the departments of Aging, Disability and Home Care and Community Services combined saying that as a coordination role, because that is imperative to the linkages and that is where the actual failing points are. It is a pretty high-ratio basis. I think it is crucial that someone is there coordinating. It is good to hear that that is a family view because it is actually a service view too.

Ms TOWNS: We actually do work with a coordination model with the family case management program in Orange, Leeton and Narrandera. Under that program the coordinator literally does link all the services together. So every month we have a management meeting where the senior managers from government agencies do sit around the table—they are managers who do have delegation responsibility—and they make recommendations with regards to the needs of families and, as you can imagine, they range. It is the coordinators responsibility to follow up after that meeting to make sure that the recommendations are acted on. So it is a really great model.

Ms JOHNSTONE: There have been very positive outcomes with that program because of that integrated approach as well. The senior managers are overseeing every step of the way—right from nomination and assessment to developing family plans—ensuring that all of the parties are actually coming together to work towards that main outcome. Education has played an important role in part of those groups as well.

Ms TOWNS: That is a whole-of- family management program. We are not just focusing on the children; we are focused on the family as a whole.

CHAIR: The Committee has heard about families having to tell their stories over and again. Do you have any ideas as to how we can easily transport the information about a person's story with them as they move through agencies or different phases of education?

Ms TOWNS: The family case management model actually is set up so that agencies are notified of nominations prior to meeting. They are then required to research within their agency to find out if their agency has had any contact with a family. When we have our first meeting to discuss the nomination those managers are then able to literally talk around the table about what the issues are for the family as a whole, prior to even making contact with the family. So someone is nominated at that meeting—the best person in the room who has the best relationship with the family—to make initial contact with a family. At that stage they then have a full report on all the issues that are happening with the family so the family does not have to go through and tell its story again.

Mr RYAN: The family referral service is also helping with that. It is a single point of contact for families and then the family referral service can contact services—with permission from the people who have contacted them—and let them know of the particular issues and get the clients in contact with the appropriate services so that those who are approaching the family referral service do not have to tell their story to housing and then to health and then to whoever else is providing services.

Ms LAMBERT: I think there are a number of case management programs that do that. But I think that we all have different eligibility criteria and we all service families for a limited amount of time. We are looking after families for perhaps a few years and then they get passed onto whoever they fit next. So the ongoing longevity of following a child from when they start in an early childhood service right through their school career, we do not have the capacity to do that anywhere—whether it is through a non-government organisation or through the education department. The other impacting thing around that too is that out here with all the schools with their special needs classes the extra help you can get in schools is divided up between all the extra schools in the extra areas.

Particularly when a child is first starting out, you have to try and pinpoint what is going to be the best class for the child and the Department of Education person that you need to coordinate your schooling with will change depending on which service you need. So you even need fairly talented and knowledgeable people in the non-government organisation sector to know what is available across the community, to then liaise with the family and education so that starts off well before progressing further through school. For instance, Tiny Towns out west may really have nothing much to offer at all and when you come into Dubbo all the schools offer something slightly different. You might want the special education class at Orana Heights but that is full, so the next best class is one of the classes at Buninyong.

Mr RYAN: Or it might be an autism class or it might be a multi-categorical class. You have to find the best fit.

CHAIR: As a non-government organisation where does one go to get that information first up? Do you have a local contact in the education department that you can then turn to for advice?

Ms LAMBERT: It is all about developing relationship—you know the people within the western area, within Dubbo, and you know where that they may fit. It even depends on which class you are going into in kindergarten as to which education department person you need to coordinate that with.

CHAIR: But if you are covering one-third of the State do you need to then have a relationship in every one of those towns?

Ms LAMBERT: Yes, a local contact within the school.

Mr RYAN: In every school.

CHAIR: Is there any gateway into the department where you can go and then be referred to the right person rather than having to go and form relationships in 170 towns across a huge area? Is there a point of contact that then directs you from here or is this about feeling your way through the system and forming those relationships? Again, thinking about it from a parent's point of view, where does a parent go for that one point of contact?

Mr RYAN: I am not sure that there is because the services are highly variable. You could present your school in a small community with an enrolment form. That principal could go through their risk assessment and say, "We have not got the services to support." Then you could go to another town very close by and that principal, depending on his attitude, could accept that child and say, "Yes, we will work with this child. We are prepared to put in the supports." But they will not have any greater access to other supports so again it depends on principals.

CHAIR: Would there be a benefit to your organisations if there was a point of contact or is it better to establish your own relationships in each of those towns and going through that way?

Mr RYAN: Well the communities are highly variable throughout the State. I do not know whether one person could cover.

Ms TOWNS: It is probably a bit of a catch-22 situation. I know with the Aboriginal education assistants in the schools, we do have a point of contact in Dubbo who I know does manage most of those Aboriginal education assistants. But it is still really important for our staff on the ground to have that local contact.

Ms JOHNSTONE: I would have to agree with Dale on that: it is a catch-22 situation. It would be beneficial to have that one point of contact but it does not necessarily mean that that would be the most effective way to do that and that we would be able to get the results that way.

Ms TOWNS: With the first point of contact we would generally ring them and ask who would be the best person in the town, in the school, the TAFE or the childcare centre to contact. So it is still good to have that point of contact to give you a bit of a name if you are not sure in the school. Generally we really know on the ground though who the right person to talk to is.

Mr RYAN: If I could go back to what I said previously, because you have a standard practice in schools then one school can read that standard practice differently to another one. So by having a central location of the same application might be knocked back every time when there might be schools prepared to take that child or be prepared to put in a transition plan to take the child. Part of my concern is if it was a centrally-located service you might miss that local knowledge or that local ability to be able to provide. I think that central point would need to have good relationships with the school to know the capacity and the personalities in those schools as well.

Ms LAMBERT: Absolutely.

Ms HAN: I think one of the issues for families raised quite consistently is that they want one shop that does all or one point of contact, one assessment tool. You know, I do not have to have this assessment tool and many assessment tools before I can be eligible for a service and then go through their intake process. They have quite frequently asked that there be one centre point of contact for intake and the same assessment processes following that information is captured in one system. Very difficult to do but I can understand the dilemmas of having to fill out so many forms so many times with so many people.

CHAIR: What involvement do you have with people in your services or programs in the development of transition plans at any stage—whether it is preschool to primary, primary to secondary, or secondary to post? What input do your organisations have in those transition plans?

Ms LAMBERT: It is probably on a case-by-case basis. For instance, at the moment we have a young child in Brighter Futures who is starting school next year with behavioural considerations and a physical disability. We have started working with the school already and that is going really well. Whereas other children who are perhaps not as vulnerable, who do not have the disability, would not need that extra coordination beforehand. It is not something we provide as a blank but something that all our programs do as part of what they do at any point, whether it is starting school, moving onto high school or even moving towns. One of the other things we find is the lag in organising for a child to be re-enrolled in a new school in a new town. Often families get referred to us as part of our Aboriginal intensive family support program because a child has not been to school in months and months—they moved town and they did not have the support around them to get them back into school and organise that transition.

Mr RYAN: We also need to provide transition support for whole families because in the group we are talking about the families often have difficulties with the school because maybe families are embarrassed about their child's behaviour at school, the suspensions they have received because of their particular needs. So the families then disengage from the schools because they know the next time they talk to the school it is probably a suspension or they are going to be growled at because of what their kid is doing at school or they might be going to suspend them so they tend to disengage. Transition plans need to include families.

Ms JOHNSTONE: Absolutely. With a number of these clients the families have complex needs themselves so it is being able to address the family's need as a whole rather than just targeting the individual student.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: When you talk about providing transition support for families what are some of the elements of that? This will give us an idea of some of the elements of a successful transition program. For example, Mission Australia's submission talks about pathways to prevention providing some of that. Can you give the Committee some examples of how you provide that support?

Mr RYAN: I was involved in an out-of-home care program, which I mentioned previously, and transition was often part of the case plan, so the carers are involved with the out-of-home care coordinator, and the same sort of thing would happen with families. You would have a conference where the families and the education providers get together and talk about the particular needs of the child and what would be the most appropriate class.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Is the student involved in that?

Mr RYAN: Yes, with the carer, and in the case of a family the family would be involved as well, so the parents or carers are part of the decision—and so is the child—about what would be the best class, what would be the most suitable, how the transition plan would work and what are the particular needs of the child. The parents often have a fairly good idea of what the triggers might be, particularly in transitions, and if there are other providers, if child psychologists are involved or Ageing, Disability and Home Care [ADHC], they often have behaviour intervention plans or management plans and they can inform the schools of particular triggers and particular ways to deal with certain behaviours. The child is then aware that the school knows that if the child does this then this is the consequence, or this is what the school will do, so everybody is involved and I have seen this work successfully.

Ms TOWNS: I will just give you an example of something that we have done previously. We had two students from two different schools who were getting ready to go to the senior campus in Dubbo. Both students had disabilities. We were working with them on an individual basis for quite some time under our Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program, which is an Aboriginal-based program, where we would engage with them weekly initially to get the school work up to date and, once they were up to date with their school work, we just worked with them on activities to develop their self-esteem and confidence. We started individually with both students and then we merged them together to provide activities for them prior to them going to the senior campus, purely because we were really quite concerned about them not being able to have the capacity to make friends or to fit in once they were out at the senior campus.

We also brought in in-kind mentors from the community who, with our worker, would provide an activity to those two students prior to them going out. They might have been doing beading or scrapbooking, but it was the relationship that they were developing with the mentor that was important for us. We did that and the group stuck with them for a full term before they actually went to school. We also worked with them together through the school holidays prior to them starting at the senior campus. Once they started at the senior campus, they remained on our program and remained doing some group work activity with us. That is just one example of something that we have done in Dubbo.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES: You mentioned that one of the challenges is having services available in some areas. Are you aware of any towns or communities that have implemented programs that have encouraged or promoted people to come to that area to work and provide those services?

Ms TOWNS: It has only just happened, so my detail on this may not be as up to date as it probably should be, but I know that in Lightning Ridge, in the Far West area, Royal Far West is actually providing a van that is driving around to look at the wait list and look at what services are needed for children at least. I know that is something that has been quite positive, especially in the Lightning Ridge-Walgett area, but that has just kicked off in that area, so I cannot elaborate on exactly what they are doing, but assessment-type stuff.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES: Who is funding that?

Ms TOWNS: I am not sure. It is through Royal Far West, but I have only just got the details from my staff on the ground about that one.

Mr RYAN: You have heard the comments that a lot of the towns in this region have been depleted because of the mining industry, and the comments that the mining industry—whether this is right or wrong—tends to offer great packages, so people offered a position in Bourke or Brewarrina expect to be given extra advantages, have housing provided or extra incentives to go there. That creates concern for the local people, who say, "Well, we live here, how come an outsider would get this benefit and we have been living here forever and we don't get that benefit?" A lot of smaller towns struggle getting professional people to move there, so for a town like Walgett a lot of the people that are providing services from other organisations would live there during the week and then move out on the weekend.

CHAIR: We went to Orana Heights this morning and saw some fantastic facilities, but obviously all services are not available to people in, let us say, Trangie or Nundle or somewhere like that. Is it safe to assume that if I had a child with autism or an autism spectrum disorder and I lived in a town like that, they would just go without, or what outreach services are provided to help their transition to school?

Ms LAMBERT: We have a case of a family living on a property that is about 90 kilometres from the nearest town that has a class with a specialist teacher and is willing to accept a child with autism, so the mum and three kids move into town during the week so the children can go to school at that school, and they go back out to the farm on the weekend.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES: Do they get financial assistance to move?

Ms LAMBERT: Not that I know of.

Ms TOWNS: We deliver Brighter Futures in a lot of smaller towns. If there was a Brighter Futures family that we were case managing, we do have a brokerage component as part of our program, so if we had a family that had issues we would look to find how we could get support to wrap around the family. I mean we get a lot of assistance from the New South Wales Outback Division of General Practice, which is one of our major partners in our region. We also access the Aboriginal Medical Services [AMS] for support. It really is going back to working on a coordinated approach with who you have available in those towns and, if they are not in that town, often we will take the families to where they can gain support.

Ms JOHNSTONE: Our programs have an outreach component where we can provide transport so that families do not have to go without accessing those services, for whatever reason.

Ms TOWNS: But again we are talking about a targeted family. We do get phone calls from families saying, "How can I get referred to your program so that my family can have access to the services you are providing", and not everyone is eligible for our program. That can be really difficult for families that are missing

out when they see that we are paying for child care for some families, but "Sorry, you can't access that because you are not in our program." I know that can be quite difficult.

Ms LAMBERT: Going back to the comment about families that are moving to town, they are with the programmed access to 12 months of respite care, so really we are providing the financial support and they have come into the program purely for that reason.

Mr RYAN: One of the things that our family referral service has identified is that the smaller private schools in those towns do not have access to the services that a state school would have. A lot of towns may have a small Catholic school, and they just do not have the services. They do not have access to counselling or support.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: I think you said before that a school 70 or 90 kilometres from where the student with autism lives is the school that is able to accept them. Do you find that there are schools that technically, on paper, should be accepting students with disabilities, or students with some autism spectrum disorder, but are not? Are there problems with that?

Ms TOWNS: I have not found it with my families.

Mr RYAN: I would say, in a particular instance in out-of-home care, I could see why the school would not accept a boy because of his behaviours and because of their risk assessment, but another school that had similar or less support and was more remote was prepared to take him on. I think it can vary greatly as to what the school is prepared to take. One school might be quite within their rights to say, "We are not prepared to take this child because we do not have the support", and you can understand why they would do that, and they have followed all the protocols and procedures and quite rightly said, "No, we do not have the support", but another school will say, "Yes, we are prepared to give it a go".

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Who has the responsibility at the school to make those assessments?

Mr RYAN: In that particular instance, it was the principal.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Is that generally the case, or does he or she delegate someone else to make those decisions?

Mr RYAN: I think in the cases we have been involved in it has been the principal, but other people might have different experiences.

Ms JOHNSTONE: I think it is the principal mainly.

Mr RYAN: Yes, because the enrolment process is quite a long process. I am not sure whether you are familiar with it, but it is quite involved.

Ms HAN: In the city, I think it is more the disability guidance officers that will have those decisions in the main. They would no doubt go to the principal and report, but a lot of the groundwork would be done by the disability guidance officer.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES: If a parent finds that one school makes one decision and another does not, is there a right of appeal if you know that a decision is being made, not in the best interests of the child but because—

Mr RYAN: Unfortunately, I think parents realise that if they have a right of appeal the support for their child may not be as good as it could be if the school initially denied their child access, and it is not always a case of knowing, but sometimes, people being people, "I'm watching you", one slip-up and—

CHAIR: Mission Australia is probably involved in this, but are there specific programs that have worked in areas such as transitioning people with complex needs into the workforce?

Ms TOWNS: Yes, we have the Youth Connections Program pretty well right across the Far West region. That does work in transition from school to employment, TAFE or university. In Dubbo we have the Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program and we are working at the moment with some Aboriginal

year 12 school leavers to get them either into employment or TAFE. We have some that are going for university interviews, which is pretty unique for us, so we are supporting them through that. For those that we feel may get a chance at a university interview, our caseworkers are going through the whole process with them, taking them down and waiting for them really, and providing accommodation. We have done a lot of work experience programs in the past where we have been able to negotiate with schools that one day per week the student can do a work experience placement that we have organised and have the opportunity then to go into employment. That has been quite successful for a lot of our students.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Does that target students with additional or complex needs?

Ms TOWNS: I suppose for us it would. Most of the students that we have are at risk of dropping out of school, so a lot of their needs would probably be more based around behaviour, for those programs that I have talked about.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Most of your clients go into mainstream programs rather than specialist classes or support classes?

Ms TOWNS: No, not all of them. We have had to develop alternate training programs for them and generally that is in partnership with Outreach TAFE. It may be a step to try to get them into mainstream education. We may provide an alternate program for one or two days per week for a term, whether it be spray painting or beauty or whatever it might be, depending on the needs of the group of clients that we have at one particular time, just as a stepping stone to getting them into TAFE. Most of the time we would start that outside of the TAFE campus, in the process I suppose of integrating them, so we might provide one day where they are in the community doing landscaping or spray painting or whatever, and then they progress to a day at TAFE as well, but they would still be in our program, not going through mainstream, just to try to give them an introduction to what the campus looks like so that they are able to then look at mainstream education. We have done a lot of programs in different areas around that.

Ms JOHNSTONE: Necessary programs for that empowerment, so that young people do re-engage and, like Dale said, the pathway action to mainstream education and employment opportunities. It could even be support such as having a caseworker sitting in a computer program with them once a week until they feel confident enough to be able to attend that program independently. It could be something as simple as that sort of strategy if they are uncomfortable making friends or they are quite shy, actually having someone that is known to them sitting in that class. It is developing relationships with the teacher and the TAFE or education network to make sure that it is possible that we can do that, and then they can access those educational options independently. Then they can access those educational options independently.

Ms TOWNS: As part of the Youth Connections Program we have a tutor employed full-time; so for students who are not fitting into mainstream education they are able to look at Open Training and Education Network [OTEN] courses and do their modules with the tutor on-site. It is really difficult because it is on a needs basis on what the needs of the client is, but certainly if they do not fit into mainstream education we look at how we can support them. Generally it is Certificate in General Education or something like that that we would like at, but, again, that depends on the needs of the client.

Mr RYAN: In Dubbo, for instance, Mission has got the Youth Connections Program and Burnside has got Reconnect. Reconnect is about encouraging children and young people who are at risk of leaving home. Obviously if you can keep families together you can give them the opportunity for their kids to go on to further education or to continue in their education. There has been a fairly good relationship between what Youth Connections does in schools and what Reconnect does here in Dubbo and ensuring that these sorts of issues are identified. Reconnect might work to keep the kids at home with their families and then Youth Connections pick up the education side of it. That is where it is important for the service providers to be working together.

Ms TOWNS: Absolutely. Those two programs work together quite well. We may need to look at family mediation for these issues within the family as well and we would go to Reconnect to assist with that type of stuff as well.

Mr RYAN: Reconnect is Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA] funded and Youth Connections is Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations funded.

Ms HAN: There is Transition to Work with participation money for other children with complex needs and you can apply for that from age 16. We have just approached a nursery—I know that it is one avenue for some children—but it starts that sort of role of employment within that area, to see if they like it and enjoy that sort of environment and then go on. Also now with education department approval we have opened a learning centre on the Central Coast for children who have been expelled from school to try to encourage them to transition back into school, and that would be for a very small number of 10 children. That starts in 2012. We are finding that children are not wanting to go to school younger and younger now. It was 16 to 18 and now it is the 12 to 16 age group. It is about working at a younger age, about schools and trying to make them a little bit more specialised. That is our step forward to try to address getting children back into education.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Obviously with some of the families you are dealing with there is a connection between the State and the Commonwealth governments in terms of agencies. Is there any fundamental dysfunction that operates between dealing with State and Federal that is systemic and there is something this inquiry should be looking at or is it probably as good as you are likely to get and it is not going to get a whole lot better, given that we have got two levels of government operating? Are there any obvious dysfunctional points between the Commonwealth and State agencies that you deal with where you might be talking to one and you talk to the other and it is very apparent that they really have not been talking to each other?

Mr RYAN: We found that with the family referral services, which was mentioned as one of the concerns, there were some changes in one of the departments—changes to Referral Pathways for Brighter Futures but the referral service was not informed. So the Department of Community Services made some changes and did not inform Health. It might seem only a minor thing but sometimes government departments can make their own decisions and not inform other departments. One of the things that concerns me is that we are looking to do some work with Mission to provide some services up into the north west of the State, but there is also some FaHCSIA funding coming out that has got very similar requirements. You are doing this work but you think that the FaHCSIA funding can also provide the same service, even though it is under slightly different guidelines.

It would be nice if we could coordinate that funding and say, "We can do some really good work if we can get Federal and State working together saying, 'What is it we want to achieve in these areas?' and coordinate our responses so we are not competing with one another to get something up and running in a very short time". So for three-year funding if you want something to work you have to be in there for the long haul because the communities are sick of people going in and out and we are not showing respect. Some of the tenders that come out from government departments are really short-term and are often very offensive, I think, to communities.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: When you say "short-term" can you give us an example? Are you talking about 12 months?

Mr RYAN: Say three years. You have got to get your tender in in the next two months and you have got to be operational two months after that, and you have got to be delivering services two or three months after that. You have got a really short panic time to get anything working rather than saying, "We think we can do this really well and we could do some wonderful work if we had the funding".

Ms JOHNSTONE: Utilising what is already there.

Mr RYAN: And working together with State and Federal.

Ms JOHNSTONE: I think that provides a level of consistency with the target reps that we are working with as well so there is not that, I suppose you could say, double-dipping. That way we can have a more integrated approach to achieving outcomes and working towards goals with these families so they are not working with 15 different services and having all these different individualised plans instead of everyone coming together to just work on the one plan. I think that would provide a level of consistency as well.

Ms TOWNS: As Dave was saying, it can be extremely difficult when you are working in small communities and you are working with a program that may be working with 12 to 18 year olds to keep them in school and then another program from another government department is rolled out that merely mimics what you are already doing in that community. That can cause quite a lot of unrest between the two agencies that have funding as well. I know that we have had those experiences, Dave.

Mr RYAN: Yes, we have.

Ms TOWNS: It just depends on the non-government organisations that are on the ground and what their relationships are like as to how that pans out. That can be really, really difficult. I can only imagine how it is for families on the ground who say, "Well, they do this but now you are telling me you are going to come and do the same thing". I imagine it would be quite confusing for families on the ground.

CHAIR: So where do they go? If I have got a child with complex needs and I need to get help where do I go?

Ms TOWNS: They go to one agency and then the two agencies that have the similar funding need to sit and talk together about what they are going to focus on and do a co-case plan with the family, mainly with the agencies speaking about what they will provide, so there is no double-up and no confusion for the families. I suppose that is what we have had to do in the past.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Have you found that if the Federal agency does it it is because there has been consultation or communication with you beforehand—you know why they roll these programs out but then it duplicates what you are already providing?

Ms TOWNS: I have no idea.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do they take any feedback from you on it?

Ms TOWNS: I suppose there is an example that is happening currently that we have been working through, and that is with Reconnect and the Youth Connections Program, which are both very similar, and we have had the funding groups involved in those discussions quite a lot of times. It is about working through that at the moment. But that has been difficult, not so much in Dubbo, which is a bigger town, but in small towns like Walgett, Coonamble and Coonabarabran that has been quite a difficult issue.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: So you have had the experience that the Federal Government will just roll out a program that has already been operating by non-government organisations—

Ms TOWNS: Similar programs.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: —without any consultation at all?

Ms TOWNS: I suppose everyone sees the tenders when they roll out and choose to apply for them. So people are aware that they are coming out. I suppose within the non-government organisation area it is difficult because we all apply for the same tenders, so there can be quite a competitive world out there when you are rolling out programs that are similar to others and one of your competitors may get that program. Again it comes down to the management of the program and how we work together with those issues.

Ms LAMBERT: From what I have seen—because I am on the outside looking in—from some of the other programs, the non-government organisations out here manage because they do know each other well and they coordinate really well because they are similar and they will take these tasks and you take those tasks and then we are not competing and we work together to help the family out. So I see that happening more and more. But it is really because the relationship is out here, not because of any legislation or organisation on anyone else's part.

Ms TOWNS: With regards to chapter 16A, that has been something that we have been working on with family case management and it was difficult when it first came in with regards to exchanging information, but that is something that is working quite well for that program, that agencies are able to speak to each other more about what is happening with families and what are their needs.

Ms JOHNSTONE: They have provided a forum for government and non-government organisations to develop and strengthen partnerships as well, particularly through that program, and I found that my ground staff now have, as was mentioned before, a personal contact within those organisations where if they are unsure or need some guidance they can go to that one person instead of jumping through the hoops until they can get some information that they need to assist the families.

Ms TOWNS: We are talking about families with children who are at risk of harm.

CHAIR: Getting back to the actual transitions, particularly for children with special needs or complex needs, are there any recommendations from where you sit that you would like to see coming out of this inquiry that would make a difference for families and particularly the children?

Ms LAMBERT: I just think looking at the incidence of school suspension. We see it a lot more with children with disabilities. Now it is geared up that after the first suspension some of them go on a long suspension—I think it is five to 20 days—and we have even had eight-year-olds. The example I would give is a young child—we were quite sure it was not behaviour—we had not had him assessed; we had been doing a lot of work with the family and the school said how could they support him in school because every time he is home he is home for 20 days? There was not great planning happening around ongoing school work for him to do at home. Teachers are not physically able to get to that as well as keep up with managing the class. We were supporting that and getting some extra things like supporting the family.

The end result was that it was not behaviour at all, he had been misdiagnosed and it was an anxiety disorder. Once the school knew about that and worked out ways to approach it all that settled down and the suspensions stopped. In the meantime, he had had three long suspensions—60 days off school in a year for an eight-year-old. So it is things around that and managing those types of things. But that really impacts on those sorts of families. Often the parents do not have the skill set to negotiate with the school or they feel threatened and get really angry, so it makes the situation worse, unless they manage to ring some of the programs that are working with them. If you can go with them, often with that first confrontation you can model the behaviour, keep it calm, that sort of thing. But they get to the school sometimes without the support.

Ms TOWNS: Cathy has probably hit it on the head but I think there needs to be a more coordinated approach when we have students who are transitioning so that the school works with the services that are on the ground. I suppose I am talking about some of those smaller communities where there are programs that we know run on the ground through the non-government organisation sector and they could support the transition of these students. So it is just that coordinated approach.

Ms JOHNSTONE: The provision of updated information on what supports can be accessed so there can be a coordinated approach and knowing who is working with whom. There needs to be some stronger communication happening between all of the parties involved and more regular communication.

Mr RYAN: There are also variations in eligibility criteria in services as those children move through education, going from child care into primary school.

CHAIR: We have heard a bit about how at certain ages things cut off, et cetera.

Ms LAMBERT: And they tend to cut off right at the time when you need to transition. In school, teacher support cuts off at year 6, just when they are going to high school. If their behaviour gets worse and they discover they cannot cope it is going to be when they move from primary to high school. There is a whole raft of early childhood support that finishes when you start school. So while you are at home on early childhood support you get all sorts of free therapy, financial backups and special grants; the day you start school you are either not eligible any more or they cease. Every time you have a major change it is impacted by all the other things you are not eligible for any more or the different things you have to apply for.

Ms TOWNS: I suppose from my point of view with regard to the cut offs, from a service provider's point of view we can actually apply for special circumstances as well so if we are looking at a program that might start with an age group from 10-year-old and an eight-year-old is referred we can get special permission to take on a younger person or to take on someone at a higher age as well, but I suppose that comes back to that communication.

CHAIR: You need to be involved in the process to make that application.

Ms TOWNS: Yes.

Ms JOHNSTONE: It comes down to the organisation being proactive to actually apply for that as well.

Ms LAMBERT: But I think too we are talking about all the families who have access to organisations, not about all the families that don't. What about all the families that do not know they can go and ask for help or they are still trying to do it on their own?

Ms HAN: Removing some of their barriers like transport. That is a big issue for a lot families when the transport for their child to school cannot continue and they have to transfer to another school that has none of the resources and none of the supports. That can be instrumental in their progress along the line. I would love to see the day where we actually had one spot where that information was located and families could—I am speaking very unrealistically here—have one set of information that goes along with them wherever they go and that is acceptable in the various formats—whether that be the education department or whether that be Aging, Disability or Home Care, a non-government provider or whoever it is. But that endless sort of row of having to fill out form after form—

CHAIR: Telling your story over and again has been a recurring theme. Victoria does have a transition's website, for example, which the Committee will have a look at. I do not know how great it is but hopefully there will be something to at least help chip away at some of those barriers.

Ms HAN: Exactly. I do work in Victoria and the behaviour intervention services down there are all on a centralised system. So wherever you go you can actually seek that information. Okay, it is very time consuming initially but it all goes on there and people actually access it. So there are those abilities. It would be great to see a change in that direction.

Mr RYAN: There can be delays in transitioning between schools as well for children in the enrolment process in moving from one school to another. That can place extra stress on families, particularly if you have a child with a disability.

CHAIR: Thank you all for your time today and also for the work that you do. Keep an eye out because hopefully the Committee will make some recommendations that will make a difference.

(The witnesses withdrew)

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN, President, Dubbo Aboriginal Education Consultative Group,

RAY ELDRIDGE, Area Manager, Indigenous Student Services, Charles Sturt University,

RODNEY TOWNEY, Manager, Aboriginal Education and Training Unit, TAFE Western, and

SHIRLEY ANNE WILSON, Chief Executive Officer, Multi Purpose Allira Gathering Association, before the Committee:

CHAIR: Welcome to the inquiry. I will ask you to introduce yourselves and tell us briefly what you do before we open up for questions concerning the transition of children with special needs. Ms Wilson, we will start with you. Ms Wilson we will begin with you.

Ms WILSON: I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Multi Purpose Allira Gathering Association, Dubbo. We offer programs such as long day care for children, an aged care program, which consists of community aged care packages, and we have a Home and Community Care [HACC] program. We also tap into health for all the services we need for our children and Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] meetings are held there. We are also a social housing provider and we manage 10 elders units in Dubbo.

CHAIR: Aunty Pat.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: I am known as Aunty Pat Doolan. I am an elder in the community of the Wiradjuri people. I am President of the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. I work with a lot of the 10 State schools, including TAFE—where Rod Towney sits—the two colleges in town, early childhood and Charles Sturt University [CSU]. So I am right across the whole spectrum of education. We have a partnership with all the schools. My role is to provide advice and support to the schools to ensure that my students, who are Aboriginal students, are reaching benchmark in the first instance and then pushing them beyond that so that we can get to higher education. We have certainly been doing that over the past five years; we have had graduates from senior campus then go on to university. But within those systems—I will talk later, if you like, about what we need to improve in some of those things—I am happy with where we are at. We have currently gone through a restructuring of the college system. That has left us with some stigma in the town as far as the junior campuses are concerned. So I have some concern around that and I am working closely with the schools to try and address those issues. That is me. I am retired by the way.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You do not sound like it, Aunty Pat.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: I am also part of Indigenous Police Recruitment Our Way Delivery [IPROWD] and I work closely with them.

CHAIR: Mr Eldridge.

Mr ELDRIDGE: I am the Area Manager for Indigenous Student Services, Charles Sturt University. I am based at Wagga Wagga. We have five campuses across the spectrum of New South Wales that I work with and I manage. We have staff in all of those areas, including Dubbo. I am not 100 per cent sure why I am here today but I am here for students for higher education and we are also actually working towards kindergarten to year 12 and beyond. We have been putting transition programs within the schools for a long time.

CHAIR: That is why you are here. We are not only looking at kids starting school, we are also looking at the transition from secondary school to tertiary education as well.

Mr ELDRIDGE: And kids with a disability as well. We cater for all students right across the board at CSU, for students with disabilities and other things that go with that.

CHAIR: Mr Towney.

Mr TOWNEY: I currently manage the Aboriginal Education and Training Unit within TAFE Western or the Western Institute of TAFE as it was formerly known. I have been in that position now for about seven years. I love my job. I love waking up in the morning and going to work because seeing people educated is the way to get out people into positions, and that includes work. I manage a number of staff and our institute covers

from Lithgow right out to Broken Hill and from Grenfell right up to the Queensland border. Within that area we have 24 campuses and we have Aboriginal staff who are strategically placed in places like Bourke, Broken Hill, Walgett, Orange, Bathurst and Dubbo.

I am also privileged to sit on the executive of the Western Institute of TAFE, so it is not just about us as Aboriginal people recommending up, it is about me being a part of the real decisions that are made with respect to Aboriginal people in this part of the world. My other hat is that I am a councillor on Dubbo City Council and still am an executive member of the Local Government Association of New South Wales, and I am very proud and honoured to sit there as well.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: At our previous hearings a couple of the witnesses from various non-government organisations and service providers have talked about the concept of disabilities within the Aboriginal community and that there is sometimes perhaps a stigma associated with, or less acceptance of, young people with disabilities. Is that the case? If it is true, could you give an explanation for it or the cultural reasons behind it?

Mr TOWNEY: I might ask our elder to answer first.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: I think with the new generation, there has been a lot of breakdown within our culture, so a lot of the structures have not been passed on. I have not actually seen what you have just talked about, but I can believe it is there because of what I just said, the breakdown in cultural protocols. I also know that there are some good systems in place to address a lot of those areas—disabilities in particular, and working closely with schools. I know schools have a section where kids are taken in to be integrated into the mainstream. Parents are encouraged to come and be part of that as well. I think the stigma comes from when you come back into your own community.

Kindness is part of our culture, and kids will automatically do that, but when you belong to a peer group that can get overlooked and I guess that is where that attack comes from. For me personally, I see the opposite. I would think that those services that have mentioned it, from where I am seeing it, sometimes they do not use the elder structure or the key people in the community, like Rod and Shirley Anne and myself. I do not want to be used any more—I sit on the police thing and I sit on health—but there are others in town that they need to look at to put that mentorship in place. We need it because there is a total lack of that, not just in disabilities but right across the board. I will stop there and come back to it if I have to.

Mr TOWNEY: I want to tell you how it is because, if we do not, the truth is not coming out. In this part of the country there are a lot of redneck people around, and we are all aware of that, but I think it happens all over the place. It is a shame on our country overall where, if you are an Aboriginal person, in many areas you face discrimination every day. I have in this community here, but I am pretty forthright, I will come out and assert what I believe and will not take a backward step. That is me. If you are Aboriginal and you are disabled, it is even worse.

We try, within my workspace, within council, to put things in place to counteract and to help people along the way. When we talk about employment within government departments, government agencies, there is still a lot of stigma around. When the word "Aboriginal" is mentioned, you are placed on the lower rung of the ladder straight away. It is shameful. I keep asking the question and making the statement that in this country we have—I am not quite sure what the latest census is saying—probably 600,000 Aboriginal people within the whole country and yet, when you look at the millions and millions of dollars that are so-called pumped into Aboriginal communities—

Mr ELDRIDGE: So-called.

Mr TOWNEY: —we are still on the lower rung of the ladder, yet people can come here from other countries and be elevated pretty quickly. It is a concern of ours that this must be addressed. I keep saying that all that money is not getting to where it is supposed to go. We get sick to death of consultants coming out, people coming out and being paid for this, that and the other, and the funds do not reach where they are supposed to go. It is a big concern of ours which must be looked at—State and Federal.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Aunty Pat, in relation to some of the service providers that suggested to us that in some Aboriginal communities disability is less accepted, you are suggesting it may be

their understanding or inability to communicate with Aboriginal communities about disability rather than something coming from the Aboriginal communities themselves?

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: That is what I have said, but I also said in today's society, especially with the young ones, the breakdown of our protocols. To put it into perspective, like Rod has just mentioned, we have to realise that we are sitting in a National Country Party seat historically and racism—I am one of those who was brought up here and my people were not even allowed into the shops. I have worked my darnedest to break down those barriers, but even I, if I am caught shopping in a row by myself, straight away security is called. That is the kind of racism we face every day—and that is me, a well-dressed person. What about a black student who is in there looking daggy? Straight away the police are called. Those kinds of things still exist.

We all know that it is there and you have heard all this before. What I want to know from here is how do we put some things in place to address those things. If I can give you an example, just recently one of the big corporate bods—Woollies, in fact—had a recruitment drive where they train X number of Koori students in the retail sector. That is Transition Pathways, by the way, either from school or from TAFE, out of school. A lot of those kids got jobs and they look quite smart and presentable in their uniforms. What happens in the workplace is not the reality. They do not have counselling, they do not have mentoring, they do not have coaching. I just heard last night that one young fellow—who I know has worked in retail for X number of years and should not have walked out of his job—has walked out because of those things that I have just mentioned.

There is a lack of counselling for him. Where does he go? He is not going to go and tell them, "Hey, look, this person is giving me curry down here", because he knows very well nothing is going to be done about it. That is a sad indictment. If we are talking about employment, we need to put those other things in place. They are not there. What they do is the corporate induction. You go back and produce the goods. What happens when they come up against these issues? I was really saddened to hear it because I know the young boy, I mentored him along the way and I know that he can produce the goods. I was sad that he had nowhere to go—not even come to me.

I heard of another incident where in the induction they are trained to do whatever, including picking up fruit off the floor in case I slip on it or you slip on it. One worker refused to pick it up—not a Koori. He went to the Koori person, who was right down the back, to come and pick the rubbish up. It was addressed internally, I am told, but that should not happen. Why go and get the Koori worker? You are in there as part of that team. Take care of it. If I had walked in there while you were running to get the other person, I could have broken my back slipping on a grape. That is the sort of thing I am talking about.

What is not happening in a lot of the employment places is cultural awareness, and I am not talking about the generic package, I am talking about the package that relates to the kids that live in Dubbo, to us as community people. They have to understand the dynamics or protocol—who's who in the zoo, if you like, or the eldership. Nobody cares about the eldership—certainly not the corporate bods—but if we are going to get anywhere with these young people taking their place in society we need to put those things in place, and I am tired of hearing on the radio, "Go and find a job." You tell me where there is a job for a black person. They have a massive drive through the employment agencies. After they have recruited X number of people and placed them, what do they do with them? They hang them out to dry. That is my answer.

CHAIR: Could I touch on the support services that are available at Charles Sturt University and at TAFE for Indigenous students, firstly, coming from school and then progressing through their studies? Do you provide post-study support for those students?

Mr ELDRIDGE: We are working with Rod's group now in the western district for that transition to happen from TAFE to university because it has not happened real well in the past. I actually have a meeting next week back here with the manager, so we are getting together to put some stuff together for that for 2012-13. The stuff that we are talking about, the support systems that are there, is what we call Away From Base through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], which is a system that brings students in on block release. We pay for their meals, accommodation and travel—all of that sort of stuff. While they are here, we give them support through our educational programs with our learning skills advisers and counsellors, whatever they require on the ground. There is a bit of a hole with students at Charles Sturt University as far as distance education goes because they are here for a certain amount of time and then they are back in their communities.

It is very difficult to get support to those communities for anything, let alone educational requirements. It is hard enough buying a lettuce or something like that in really remote communities, so when we bring them to the big smoke like Dubbo it brings its own problems with it as well. We have another program that is called our Darrambal Program, which is Wiradjuri for footsteps. We use that program to bring in students who are of mature age mostly, and some from year 12. They come and do a week with us on campus, either here in Dubbo or in Bathurst. We run through a program that shows them what university is all about, what they can expect, the workloads, what it is like to go to class and all of the issues around that, and that program runs for the whole week, like I said, and it is academically focused as well as needs focused, learning skills and financial support—all of that stuff is all wrapped into that week. It is a pretty clambered week though. To get a snapshot of four years or five years at university in a week is hard.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: You said that was a funded program?

Mr ELDRIDGE: It is a funded program through Centrelink and it is co-funded through DEEWR. I think they are all a branch of DEEWR anyway. We have good successes with that. We normally have between 50 and 60 a year come through the Darrambal Program. We have about 540 Aboriginal students across our footprint now at Charles Sturt University. Rod's is a lot better than mine. He does me ten to one actually—which is really good. I do not care where they get an education, as long as they get an education.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What we are finding as we are travelling around and meeting with our witnesses is that on the issue of disability of children and young people obviously there are the physical disabilities which can be seen and people appreciate that by observation and then there are other disabilities such as autism and those types of related disabilities—and I use the word "disability" advisedly—that are not apparent by looking at the person. Obviously both have different challenges associated with them. In the context of the Indigenous community do they distinguish between these two types of disabilities that a person might experience? There is the physical and then the ones that are not obvious. Are they distinguished?

Secondly, we had the opportunity to visit a local school today where there are virtually brand new facilities and you could probably say state-of-the-art in terms of the teaching techniques to try and deal with students with a disability. Is the Indigenous community comfortable or uncomfortable or happy or not happy with the way in which the mainstream education system is being utilised to try and deal with that disability? Does that provide suitable access to or is it not a good fit for dealing with disadvantaged Aboriginal communities?

Mr ELDRIDGE: I think we have got to look at it in a couple of different ways. We are looking at a disability as a disability but we also have to look at it that there is a disability there because you are black.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: And that is a separate issue as well but related.

Mr ELDRIDGE: It is a separate issue as well but related, and that is the trouble.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: You cannot separate them.

Mr ELDRIDGE: No, and the thing is it is like dual diagnosis when you are talking about drug addiction and alcohol addiction: we are talking about another little spindle has been put on the side because the other little spindle is you are black. So you are black—you have a disability, and there is something else going on there as well. The ones that are not in your face are the ones that could be the problem; they are the ones that are not focused on in the community and they get lost in cracks in the system because they are usually put down as ADD, ADHD or whatever it is, because they are not learning at school, but there are other underlying problems there that are not being picked up. But I did not answer your question. The first part of the question I think Aunty Pat could probably answer that better than me.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Come on, you have a go at it too.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: There is no right answer here; we are really just investigating to see if what is being offered by, if I could use this term, the white mainstream education system is what we think are the best current practices for dealing with persons with a disability. In the way it is being managed and dealt with now—and we saw something which I was very impressed with this morning—is that a good fit or not a good fit for physical and non-physical disabilities?

Mr ELDRIDGE: From my point of view, not being right in the school system—I am in the higher education section, but I am still an Aboriginal person, I still deal with stuff and I still get into the communities—I understand that it is better. I do not know if it is a lot better but I know that it is a lot better now than what it was 10 years ago. The systems that are being put into place seem to be coping okay. But the issues I think we are facing, and I have got to go back to that black issue, are not only the issue of being accepted in your own community but in your own Aboriginal community, which is another issue again because Aboriginal people predominantly look after their own: we look after own elderly, we look after our kids and we look after our kids with disabilities as well. Whether that means looking after them at home and not sending them to the centres or not sending them to a place like that I am not too sure at the moment—I have been out of the health game for too long.

Ms WILSON: Trusting mainstream services to look after your kids with a disability is a big issue. There is not much around for parents. When their children are diagnosed with anything parents are not given much information so they do not know.

Mr ELDRIDGE: There is a cultural barrier there as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: This may not bring you any comfort but the non-Indigenous witnesses who have come before us today and on other occasions echo the same concerns as well, that there is a struggle to obtain information and go to sources to get adequate information.

Ms WILSON: I have got some parents who have got kids with disabilities at Allira and they get on the web—they have to source their own information through the web.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: What types of disabilities are we talking about?

Ms WILSON: I am talking about epilepsy—I do not know if epilepsy is diagnosed as a disability or an illness, and there is another separation of diagnoses.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Certainly if it means they have got special needs at school then it is the sort of thing that we are interested in.

Ms WILSON: In our community kids are suffering from diabetes now. Our parents are struggling with that. They have got to go and find their own information. Now their kid has to eat all this special food different from what the family is eating. It is really hard out there.

Mr ELDRIDGE: There is a psychological effect on that as well. If you have got children with diabetes as opposed to having a mental illness or something like that, it is on top. These things are just pushed on top and on top. If you have got a five-year old who is born with diabetes and has to give themselves insulin shots four times a day on top of going to school, on top of being an Aboriginal student in the school fighting the normal things that are there—the racism and what have you—it becomes a very big barrier. We are not going to deal with it all today but I am just staying there are those issues. Non-Indigenous kids are probably going through the same sort of transition themselves. There are other things within the school system; it is just not a black and white issue.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: What are some of the programs or elements that you have seen that make an Aboriginal student's transition from, say, early childhood to primary school or primary school to secondary school, better than maybe some students who are particularly unsuccessful? Because what we are trying to do obviously with this inquiry is come up with some good recommendations around things that need to be put in place. What do you think works and makes it easier?

Ms WILSON: We are early childhood and with our transition to kindergarten we deliver that service: we take our kids wherever our children are going, into what school, we take our children to those schools on a regular basis so they get familiar with the place and know the routine.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: Beforehand.

Ms WILSON: Beforehand.

The Hon. CATE FAEHRMANN: So maybe with families as well?

Ms WILSON: Then the school has the transition where parents are involved and the parents then go along for an introduction and the kids are placed in classrooms.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Orientation.

Ms WILSON: Yes, orientation. But we nurture them at early childhood and when they get to kindergarten and start to travel through school they are totally lost—there is no support: no support for the parents or the kids.

Mr TOWNEY: And that is to do with that cultural affirmation. In the pre-school in Shirley Anne's centre they are taught, amongst other things, the Aboriginal way of doing things and it is understanding where those kids come from—we have different language groups living in Dubbo—all those sorts of things, and we cannot classify Aboriginal people as being all the same because they are not all the same. We are all Wiradjuri people, but living in Dubbo we have a whole range of different Aboriginal nationalities living here.

Mr ELDRIDGE: Even though we are Aboriginal we are all different.

Mr TOWNEY: And at times even amongst those people they cannot see eye to eye on some issues. Wiradjuri country is important to us, first and foremost, then looking after our kids. So when kids move from Shirley Anne, from my home into school, if teachers cannot understand those cultural differences, including languages, when they get into other schools, through the primary school into high school, you know they are lost, and it has to be recognised.

CHAIR: Are there any programs at the moment that are working with those schools to recognise these issues and to help with that transition? What we have heard this morning in particular is one of the parents said that the transition support should be with the place where the child ends up, not the place they are leaving from. What programs or systems are available at the school they go to to help the teachers and the principals and the other students educate maybe the needs of these Aboriginal children as they come?

Mr TOWNEY: I came out of school as a teacher into TAFE and, of course, Aunty Pat as our ACD president can address that, but I know that within most of our schools—I am not quite sure if all—there are some Aboriginal teachers and Aboriginal education support workers.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Yes, that is true, we do have quite a few trained teachers working within the schools and there are some things that have been put in place. For example, I live on the edge of the housing estate and there is a school about 200 yards away from where I live. We have worked with that school to get those parents to come in and prepare for that transition. Already next year's enrolments have been there, and previously they would not go unless me or my daughter went with them because we live in that area. But now they are going by themselves. That relationship has taken some five to six years to build up.

We have a principal who was open to suggestions to work with those families, to not only bring them into the school but to go into the housing estate and meet with the community at the community base centre. So now today they do not ring me up and say, "Aunty Pat, can you come with me to the school?" they just ring up and say, "I've just been to the school". I am excited about that. The other thing that has happened within those schools, and transition from early childhood to kindergarten, is that we have worked with the schools to put in hearing things, the new format for the classroom situation where you have these newfangled—

Ms WILSON: Smart boards.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Not smart boards, the newfangled technology where the kid down the back can hear the teacher up the front.

Mr ELDRIDGE: They have speakers all around the room.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Yes, those things are in two of my schools that I know of. We work closely with the early intervention programs to try and get those things in. One of the things I have come up against is trying to get my parents in the first instance. If I cannot get them into Allira then how do I get them to access the other centres? That is still a work in progress. But there are some things in place. As far as the schools are concerned I am happy as the chair to see where my kids are at, because when I came into the chair some seven

years ago our kids were not even reaching the benchmark; they were going into year 6 still at 3. That is not good enough. Now they have to show me where those kids are performing and what can I do as the chair of this group to help them to address some of those issues. We have done that.

I have just been re-elected—this is my tenth year—but I am saying to the schools that we cannot rest on our laurels, we have to move forward. I want to get those kids from kindergarten through to year 12 and this is what we have to do. Fortunately, my schools are working with me, but when I am talking about the transition from schools, we have got transition pathway for year 12 students who are not going on to university to do that employment pathway, and that is where I have found that there are real issues, and we need to address that if we are going to get them out into the marketplace and work. They are my concerns.

Ms WILSON: Just with disability itself, there is not much around in Dubbo that our parents can access. There is the early intervention centre in West Dubbo, but apart from that our parents are on their own. I have got four sons. For me, that transition to school within classes even is hard especially when they get to high school. I was involved in a school which made it easier for my kids, and I even sat on the school council. So I think parents have an obligation too to become involved and support their kids all the way through.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Absolutely. They do.

Ms WILSON: My kids went to year 12, which is a great achievement, but it would not have happened if I was not in the centre and in the high schools and me being seen there making decisions and things like that.

Mr ELDRIDGE: I think that is another issue. The thing is where there isn't a lot of help from community in these smaller schools that have smaller amounts of Aboriginal students in them, and I would like to have a look at their failure rate—"failure" is the wrong word—but their rate while they are at school. Where there is not a large presence of elders and a large presence of mums and dads, I think there would be considerable issues within those schools for kids to continue onto any sort of higher learning from wherever that is.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Aunty Pat, in your opening statement you spoke about disability in the context of the Indigenous culture and that you were concerned about the breakdown.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Yes, the breakdown.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If we were to backtrack and look at traditional Aboriginal culture, can you explain for my benefit—and perhaps others as well—how Aboriginal culture deals with and understands a person who might have a disability and how the culture deals with it?

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: It has always been a part of our society that it is your child and you just accept it. It is accepted in our communities. But if there are services available my people just do not go looking for services—certainly not my age group—and prior to that we just dealt with it. That has always been the culture. Right now when we see that kids need help and parents need help then parents are reluctant to chase that up for want of being turned away. I was at a meeting the other day with the education people and one guy asked—a black man—where the nearest NRMA place was. The response was just so curt. Why would you go and ask that person for a direction in the first place? That person is quite articulate and can explain himself and so on, but that was the response. Now that is still happening. Why would a parent with a child with a disability seek that service with that kind of response? That is the reality that is happening right now. As far as our people, my own mob saying, "This child doesn't belong to us" it is a part of our group but parents just not accessing the services they need.

The other thing that I think you need to know about is—I just lost my train of thought because I am getting really excited about it—encouraging the education system from early childhood through to tertiary level to think about high expectations rather than low expectations. I always use the example of when my kids were growing up if they weren't performing in the classroom then get out in the yard and pick up papers. I have got people to think beyond that now but we still have that sort of underlying concept. A kid is not going to learn while that is there. The other thing that really bothers me is the sanctioning of benefits that is coming in. I have just come back from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander [NATSI] conference at Darwin and we talked about that. When it came into place here, I got two of my schools to workshop—not in the school, but take it to a community place or take it to the park where the parents are and get the parents to come and tell them about it. For example, if a kid does not turn up for school this is what will happen!

Now I am just told—not directly, I am just hearing it on the grapevine—that it is actually going to be trialled in Dubbo. Now that is taking away human rights. Most black people live on benefits, as you know. We do not have the employment, and the ones that do have the employment carry the rest of us. But if they take away that benefit because a kid is not attending school that leaves that family with—I mean, it is a terrible way. It is government control again. Why can't those people have a say about it? We have tried to address that by explaining what that means, and two schools have worked with me on that. If that comes into play then that is really disadvantaging my people again.

CHAIR: Mr Eldridge outlined the program that Charles Sturt University does for a week. Do you have a similar program from students coming into TAFE as to what to expect?

Mr TOWNEY: Can I take one step back?

CHAIR: Sure.

Mr TOWNEY: We get students that come to TAFE that have gone right to years 10, 11 and 12 and their numeracy and literacy skills are rock bottom.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: That is right.

Mr TOWNEY: We have to teach them how to read and write properly, construct sentences and paragraphs, and we have to help them with maths. There is something wrong with our education system when that continues to happen. It is not only Aboriginal kids; you get a lot of non-Aboriginal kids the same. It is disgusting. So what we do is that we run bridging courses. IPROWD, which you asked about earlier, is a police program for getting young people into the Police Force and the academy. That is a bridging course. Some of those students are well up there, but we get them up to the level where they can get into the academy and then hopefully go through and become police men and women. We do that with a number of other courses as well such as health programs, the early childhood—

Mr ELDRIDGE: Social work.

Mr TOWNEY: Yes, social work. We have a memorandum of understanding [MOU] in conjunction with Charles Sturt and that works wonderfully well. We need to see a lot more of that. Our problem is that I can only deliver so many courses with the funding that is given to us. It is terrible when I say to my institute director that we can't turn our people away when they want to come to the door. There have been cases when courses are full that that is what happens, and they won't come back again. We have many people living in our community here at Dubbo that will not come up to TAFE, will not go to school or university unless they see an Aboriginal face behind the counter or they can ring for Ray, Shirley me or Pat or one of my staff. That is how it is, simple. There is no way that those people will go to a non-Aboriginal person who is a counsellor, for example. That is the reality in this country in which we live at the moment. I guess what I am saying is that we need more Aboriginal staff right across the board that can fit the positions—not token positions—to help our people through; then and only then will things work.

CHAIR: Would that be the same for disability support? For example, do we need to have more Aboriginal people working in the non-government organisations to breakdown the barrier for those Aboriginal people to seek assistance?

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: Absolutely.

Ms WILSON: And they need to put out what they actually do.

CHAIR: Back to the information that you were talking about?

Ms WILSON: Yes. Our parents need to know what these services offer: they don't. Anyone with a disability it is straight to Health, and Health is not always where they need to go. I deal with early intervention for our kids and I deal with Health. I am in partnership with Wellington Aboriginal Medical Service [AMS] occupational therapy services for speech. I mean I will partner with anyone that can support our kids.

CHAIR: When you say they go to Health, do they go to a doctor or—

Ms WILSON: They come to Allira. I make them all come to our service. There they are in an Aboriginal service with all the Aboriginal staff who can support them with their kids, take them to the occupational therapist, take them to the speech and support them all the way.

CHAIR: As part of the service you offer you will take them through to the required service and stay with them the whole way through so that they get the support for their children?

Ms WILSON: Until the feel comfortable, then they can come on their own and talk the talk and walk the walk. We even have the immunisation set up in our centre so that all our kids get immunised. Because the immunisation rate in Dubbo was very low for our early childhood kids. I went to Health and I said, "We need this program at Allira." It has been operating for over 10 years. That is what I do. I go out and get the services to come work with me so that it is like a one-stop shop then for the kids. Then we become like a referral place and support the parents with other things.

Mr ELDRIDGE: Also to do with that I think there needs to be an audit on what is actually around because there are so many services State, Federal and non-government organisations, right across the board. Dubbo has probably got every one of them. I come from Wagga Wagga, which is probably no different to what Dubbo would be—we have got similar Aboriginal numbers and what have you. But there seems to be this magnitude of things and for people—dare I say—who have got a low standard of education, how are they ever going to pick through that and find out what services they need to deliver to their kids, whether they have got a disability or whether they need anything at all—immunisation or what have you? There needs to be an audit done of all of these organisations that pop up in these little towns. I have called Dubbo a little town but it is not really a little town. If you walk you walk down each side of the main street you will find all of these agencies that you have not got a clue what they offer.

Mr TOWNEY: What we refer to those people or organisations as is an "Aboriginal industry". There are so many dollars that are—I use the word in quotation marks—"thrown" at us but it is not even getting to us. The dollars that do can have a little sort of ripple effect. What we need to do is to change the mindset of people. We are educators and that is where we need to be. That is where the difference is. I would not be sitting here today—Mr Blair you asked a question about distinguishing and all those sorts of things; we all remember a good understanding teacher in our early days—and I would not be on council if I did not have really good strong mentors that had that empathy with us and for us and knew there are differences in communities and amongst Aboriginal peoples.

I am blessed because the person who I answer to is our institute director—she is a lovely lady, wonderful—and she put her head on the chopping block, so to speak, to get where we are at today. When I was interviewed for the job seven years ago I did my own research and I had a vision of doing bang, bang, bang. All of those things have been realised now. Once whatever else happens; it is icing on the cake for me. I can walk away from this job happy, although there is still a long way to go.

CHAIR: Is part of the role of the support officers that you have within TAFE to be that mentor?

Mr TOWNEY: Yes.

CHAIR: To then help those students come into the TAFE system, understand what is expected and support them through?

Mr TOWNEY: That is exactly right in all organisations, but particularly ours. But again we are still short on the ground and we can only work with what we have got. TAFE Western has the highest enrolment numbers of Aboriginal students anywhere in the country.

CHAIR: What is that number?

Mr TOWNEY: This year I would reckon it would be between 7,500 to 8,000 Aboriginal students.

CHAIR: Are you doing a lot of work in schools, particularly in the senior colleges here, to say this is a viable option for Indigenous students?

Mr TOWNEY: I and my work team work pretty closely with Alan Hall and others, like my counterpart in schools, and with the local Aboriginal education group. But it needs to be a lot more.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: I am coming on their reference committee—

CHAIR: I thought you were retired?

Mr TOWNEY: She won't retire. But can I say before we finish that we teach Aboriginal languages through our centres. We teach our language: the Wiradjuri, the Kamilaroi language up round Walgett and those sorts of places, and the Paakantji language around Wilcannia. We are looking at a couple of other languages as well, because languages are not dead, they are there. What I have seen languages do is change young people and how they think about things because it is not only the language being taught; it is all the cultural stuff that we talk about as well. The respect, why are we here? We are laying our law down, they are listening, and people are going places. From this memorandum of understanding that we have with Charles Sturt we have seen students grow. We have a young doctor, who has come from here, who will be coming back to this community next year—Kerry Perins' daughter.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Trying to absorb and appreciate what you have been saying today, can I go back to a point that Shirley Anne made about disability associated with health, that is, health is the way in which disability is managed, dealt with and cared for. This inquiry is focusing on how, in the context of education, a person with disability is managed. Would it be an overstatement to say that Indigenous people do not associate schooling and education as a way in which physical and non-physical disabilities can be managed and helped? In other words, they do not appreciate that in our schools we are at the point where there are special programs and teachers who are highly trained to deal with disability and they fall back to the thinking that essentially, if there is a physical disability or a non-physical disability, the health system is the way to address it?

Mr TOWNEY: The latter, the last sentence.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: So there is a gap?

Mr TOWNEY: Yes, schools are there to educate—that is how our people see it. Health is there to look after all the health problems.

CHAIR: I would like to invite you to stay for afternoon tea. Some members have to catch an early plane, but the rest of us will be here for a while, so please stay and we will continue chatting over afternoon tea.

(Short adjournment)

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I was interested in the young people you spoke about who were involved in the bridging courses that you had to establish because of the low level of literacy and numeracy. Are you finding that any of those young people have additional needs, as well as literacy and numeracy? Do any of them have hearing impediments, so that they might need note takers in their classes, or autism, or cerebral palsy—any of those sorts of disabilities?

Mr TOWNEY: With the IPROWD police program they have to go through a stringent health test and some of them have been found wanting. For example, a young fellow from Menindee suffered asthma pretty badly and he could not get in because of that. He passed everything else. We were trying to keep working with him, but I think he has since found other employment. There are occasionally people that pop up who have medical problems and issues.

CHAIR: IPROWD was specifically for the police and the model is fantastic. Is it to be rolled into other sectors, like ambulance officers or any of the other essential services?

Mr ELDRIDGE: That is my understanding of it.

Mr TOWNEY: Through South Sydney institute, they are working with the other forces, like the army, navy and air force, and doing that currently, as we speak. I was talking to my counterpart there some time ago. We would like to have that out here, because we have people travel here, but they will not go any further. We

have also had discussions with the New South Wales fire people as well, because there are people who are interested.

CHAIR: They have a training facility at Wellington for that, do they not?

Mr TOWNEY: Yes. The New South Wales Police Force, through Mr Scipione and his senior people, and the Government are very much behind that program. Some of these young people are doing fantastically well and want to go back to their communities.

CHAIR: I first learned about IPROWD through Troy Grant. It is just amazing. I watched the *Four Corners* or *7.30* story on it last year.

Mr TOWNEY: Troy has been a great supporter, and still is. It is good.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Today we visited at a school some classes of kids with special needs. One was a class for kids with intellectual disability, another was a class for kids with autism and another was for kids with multiple disabilities. There were certainly Aboriginal kids in each of those classes. For those kids, do you know what sort of support their family has at home? Where do those families go for support when, for example, their kids have to move from primary school to high school, which some of them look like they will be doing soon? Are you familiar with what is happening with those families?

Ms WILSON: I am not.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: I know of one family who has been there with the child right through, but that is only one. There are others who are reluctant to go and do that, although on presentation days, for example, when they bring everybody together, including children with disabilities in wheelchairs, they sit right there with the community. I do not see all the parents coming and being part of that, and the reluctance I think is still the stigma that is attached. It is not because the schools are not trying—they are. I volunteer with most of the schools and I see it happening, but I still have to educate my own people to utilise the service or support. One of the things I am really concerned about, and you would be aware of this, Dubbo schools receive priority funding—socioeconomic status [SES] and schools in partnership [SIP]. I sit on most of those committees.

I want to see better outcomes with SIP. I do not want a special group of kids being targeted. Schools in Partnership we know is for everyone, it is a bucket of money given to that school, but it has community people sitting on the committee. I do not want to see just kids with disabilities, if you like, the target group because other kids fall through the system. I am talking about my own experience. One of my grannies, who is quite articulate and presentable, and works, was not targeted in the SIP, but who is to say she does not need special help as well? I have taken it up with the schools so we can address that for kids who come behind her—not necessarily mine, but all kids. That is one area where I am concerned with SIP. It needs to address not just those targeted groups, it needs to address kids who we need to get to reach benchmark.

Other programs where we have utilised funds is to gear the curriculum around that particular target group's needs. Girls Circle is one of those programs that is operating out of one of our campuses and that is geared around self-esteem. It is a NAPCAN program and it is working. I have sat with that group from NAPCAN to say we need to integrate their concepts into the mainstream, so that they do not choose Girls Circle over mainstream classes, and how do we get them to reach benchmarks. It is a work in progress, but that worries me a little bit because most of our schools get national funding.

CHAIR: Have any of the children from your early childhood centre accessed the early intervention unit?

Ms WILSON: Yes.

CHAIR: How have you found they come back to you, because they go there for a few hours, maybe twice a week?

Ms WILSON: Yes, and they come back and the supports come with them.

CHAIR: And it has been effective?

Ms WILSON: Yes. I network with everybody. Whatever the needs are, I go after them—always have, always will.

CHAIR: We have heard that in some areas, not so much in Dubbo, people do not get access to that early intervention or, if the early childhood provider is not working with the local school, that is where we see some barriers.

Ms WILSON: We have an early childhood committee where we all get together, so it is fantastic, and everyone knows everyone, and everyone can speak clearly and openly.

CHAIR: It is about communication.

Ms WILSON: It is. The other thing that I find with children with disabilities is that parents have no support out there. If parents are not supported, they really cannot support their kids either. It is in the hard basket. Like I said before, they are looking for support, looking for resources to support their kids. It is very difficult. There is not much out there.

CHAIR: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Ms WILSON: I would like to say that some of the schools have really good programs for children who have a disability. I do not know what school you went to today, but Buninyong certainly has. I think some of the schools are really trying and I think parents are very lucky that they are.

CHAIR: We went to Orana Heights and I thought it was excellent.

Ms WILSON: Yes, that is another school. They have the support for our kids, because generally in our community I only know about the early intervention centre. I do not know of anywhere else our parents can go, so I think it is great that these schools have set up these places to support our kids.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I was wondering what you thought we could do and what recommendations we could make to the Government about what needs to happen that will be of use to families of kids with special needs. I absolutely hear everything you have said. Firstly, it is about the disadvantage that people face as Aborigines, but in addition, where kids have an intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy—whatever that extra condition is that means they have special needs—are there things that you think we could be doing that we are not doing?

Ms WILSON: Allira grew out of being not able to access mainstream services. A group of mums tried to access mainstream services for early childhood for our kids—and I am a founding member and that is how I know. That is how we grew—because of that. We were told by this community that we were setting up an apartheid group—openly on the radio. They said, "What do they want it for?" as clear as day. I think a hub would be a great start with all the services in one place.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Like you said before, the one-stop shop idea.

Ms WILSON: So our parents do not have to run here, there and everywhere to get support; it is in the one place.

Mr ELDRIDGE: And one document that says that.

Ms WILSON: Yes, one piece of paper that says they have been assessed and they do not have to go about being assessed again, again and again; it is just one place.

CHAIR: We have heard that a lot; that is from everywhere. Two common things we have heard through this inquiry are that parents have to tell the same story over and over and over again and that they have to repeatedly apply for different services at different places.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Different entry points and different criteria and it is the same person all the time they are seeing.

Ms WILSON: But again, coming back to what Rod said, you need Aboriginal people working in there so that our people feel comfortable to openly speak.

AUNTY PAT DOOLAN: I think sometimes the criterion for our people is you must have that piece of paper. My background, as Rod said, is primary-trained; I also do grief counselling. But if you are looking at most of our people who have got those skills you are forgetting about the paraprofessional who has been there. One school in particular here we have lost a person with those kinds of skills, who could relate to disabilities and had that group of kids eating out of their hand and worked with Koori kids to make sure that they were reaching benchmark. Instead of offering a paraprofessional position to that person who has got skills from their own tribal group they lost that person. Why would she stay if they are not recognising the skill value? They are floundering now because the criteria is that they must have a new university graduate who has got no life skills and has got no concept of the 14 tribes we deal with. How is that going to make an impact? That is the sort of thing I would like to see addressed, and I would like to see the partnerships strengthened between all parties, black and white, but certainly to leave those partnerships open so that they utilise everyone.

Mr TOWNEY: There needs to be the one-stop shop, because you can throw money and throw money but is it just to keep people in jobs? Is it to keep government happy? Is it to keep families happy? It has got to be more than that—all staff at all levels. The different Aboriginal nations, or tribes, have to be recognised, rather than clumping them all as the same. The language issue is crucial and vital for all of us. Having said all that, there are lots of good non-Aboriginal staff within schools and TAFE and other agencies—we are not saying they are all bad—and they want to do the right thing. But just the language issue itself, I have spoken to a couple of the school directors and they said it is all a good idea, but nothing seems to be happening. If we had a language position with all the language teachers underneath that position for TAFE and school it will work, but it needs to be resourced to be able to work. We have got the language, we have got a lot of the resources but we need funding and schools and TAFE to get together to make it work, and we can make it work.

Mr ELDRIDGE: I think you have got to bundle the university in there as well.

Mr TOWNEY: Sorry, and the university.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time today.

Ms WILSON: I know you are here talking about disabilities within schools but please do not forget our parents because if there is no support out there for our parents there is no way they will be able to support their kids. It cannot just be left up to the school teachers; it has got to be the family as well that is getting support—enough resources.

CHAIR: It has been made very clear through a lot of witnesses and submissions that the transition needs to focus on the family unit as a whole, and the child is one part of the unit.

Mr ELDRIDGE: What happens to a kid with a disability if the parents and the kid have a bad experience? They curl up in a ball and go home and they do not access anything, and it just flounders from then. That is what happens if you get a bad experience anywhere: you do not go back. That is the problem. I think Rod touched on that before with education; it is exactly the same: if you get a bad taste in your mouth when you come back you do not go back.

Mr TOWNEY: Lastly, I say to politicians of all persuasions that if you would like to talk to me as an individual—I am sure other folk will say the same—please ring me and I will be only too happy to drive all the way to Sydney, because I can see the need for this to happen, to sit and talk to you face-to-face. I have done it in years gone past, both Federal and State. I know our Premier—I have met him more than once—and a number of other Ministers and people from different parties, including The Greens.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 3.37 p.m.)