

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No. 2

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

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

At Sydney on Monday 22 March 2010

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. R. M. Parker (Chair)

The Hon. Tony Catanzariti

The Hon. M. A. Ficarra

Dr J. Kaye

The Hon. S. Moselmane

Reverend the Hon. G. K. M. Moyes

The Hon. C. M. Robertson

CHAIR: Welcome to the first public hearing of the inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs by General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2. This inquiry was established in response to the concerns raised by teachers and parents about the adequacy of funding for special education places, the curriculum, support services and the assessment process for children with disabilities or special needs attending New South Wales schools.

The Committee will hold three public hearings during this inquiry—full day hearings today and tomorrow and another full day on 10 May. We are going to take evidence from a broad range of stakeholders, including the parents and teachers of children with a disability or special needs, representatives from the Department of Education and Training, non-government education providers, academics and advocacy organisations. The number of submissions we have received to date has been overwhelming. They are behind me in folders—about 750 of them, from parents, teachers and organisations, all of whom managed to put together submissions and give us information.

We can only try to come up with some solutions based on the evidence that we are given. We cannot solve individual issues, but our hearts go out to those parents and teachers who are struggling every day. I refer to parents such as the one who rang me in tears about having to be an advocate for their child and fighting for what they need from day one, having lack of sleep, but still wanting to make a submission to this inquiry. We say thank you to all of you. We can only try to live in your shoes for a little while, but we hope, and will use our best endeavours, to make some sense of what is going on in the community, unravel the web and make some recommendations to Government.

I would like to thank everyone who has made the effort to prepare a submission or to participate today. No doubt many of you have other significant professional and family responsibilities to attend to. We do appreciate your participation. Those folders I have referred to are from people who were able to put their submissions in on time, but sadly the Government's submission did not arrive until last Thursday, so the Committee has not had the time to really digest it. The Government representatives will be giving evidence tomorrow. It is a pretty poor effort considering the number of bureaucrats—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: This is a wonderful way to set the tone of the inquiry!

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: We are trying to get a good resolution.

CHAIR: Do not defend the indefensible. Unfortunately, that is the situation. The evidence we gather from the inquiry will form the basis of a report that the Committee will present to Parliament in the middle of this year. This report will include recommendations to the New South Wales Government regarding how to address the issues raised during the inquiry. The Government will have six months in which to respond to the recommendations made in our report and everyone who participates in this inquiry will receive a copy of the Committee's recommendations and the Government's response.

Before we commence I will refer to some procedural and other matters. A hearing loop is available in this room for those people who require it. The public hearing will also be shown via video link in the Waratah Room, so if there are not enough seats in this room audience members are welcome to view the public hearing in the Waratah Room, which is located on this level. The secretariat staff will give directions if needed. A Braille copy of the terms of reference and hearing schedule is available on the table at the back of the room. A full transcript of the evidence from the hearings will be placed on the Committee's website approximately 24 hours after each hearing date.

In accordance with the Legislative Council's guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings, only Committee members and witnesses may be filmed or recorded. People in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photos. In reporting the proceedings of this Committee people must take responsibility for what they publish or what interpretation they place on anything that is said before the Committee. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from Committee staff. We hope this inquiry will get the attention it needs from the media. Any messages from the audience should be delivered through the Committee staff. Please turn off your mobile phones, particularly if they are receiving data, and keep them away from the microphones as they interfere with the recording equipment.

I welcome our first witnesses, three teachers who are providing every day the sort of care that we are looking at and dealing with the sorts of issues we are trying to grapple with in this inquiry. We appreciate their coming in today to spend some time and explain some of the issues that they face.

ROSEMARY FARNHAM, Teacher, Sarah Redfern Public School,

MELISSA HARDING, Teacher, Sarah Redfern Public School, and

JODI-ANN NIEDERMAYER, Teacher Representative Sarah Redfern Public School, and Assistant Principal, Leumeah Public School; affirmed and examined.

CHAIR: I understand that you do not wish to make an opening statement, but that there will be an opportunity for questions to be asked after the video presentation.

Ms FARNHAM: I will start with an overview of the Sara Redfern Public School and the context in which we operate. Sara Redfern Public School is set in the culturally diverse context of Minto, which is in the south west of Sydney. The school's enrolment is very close to 400. Included in this enrolment are two language classes, two classes for mildly intellectually disabled children and one class for moderately intellectually disabled children. In addition, we have approximately 14 students with special needs and disabilities who are in mainstream classes and who receive funding support.

Over the years, many of our students have lived in the public housing estate in Minto and have been from families of low socioeconomic status. Approximately 65 per cent of our students still reside in public housing in Minto or in the surrounding areas of Campbelltown. However, our school has been in a state of great change over the past four years because most of the public housing estate has been demolished and many of our families have moved into new private dwellings. Up to four years ago, Sara Redfern Public School was viewed by many as significantly disadvantaged. However, as more public housing is replaced by private dwellings, we are moving towards being a school in a predominantly working class area.

The stories that you will hear now and over the next two days are not confined to disadvantaged schools in poor and underprivileged areas. In fact, many of the children you will see in a moment come from the less developed housing areas in Minto. Learning disabilities and special needs are certainly not confined to the economically challenged.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Before I begin the presentation, I acknowledge the parents of the students that we all teach. They allowed to us take this footage and to share it with a lot of people. The footage is of their children, so it is quite confronting and distressing for them. However, they were able to put their emotions aside for the good of all kids with special needs. We really thank them for their support.

Last year I taught a class for children with a moderate intellectual disability. The average person has an IQ score of approximately 100 points. The students in my class with a moderate intellectual disability have an IQ score ranging from 40 to 55 points. That means they are in the lowest 0.1 per cent of the population. These students are placed in a class of 10. In my class I had 10 students ranging from kindergarten to year 6. That is from five years of age to 12 years of age. I am sure members would understand that the educational needs of a five-year-old and a 12-year-old are very different, let alone their social and emotional needs.

I had students in their first year of schooling, in kindergarten, who could barely sit and listen—they like playing and nursery rhymes. I also had two students who were in year 6. They were preparing to go to high school the following year and they were beginning to go through puberty. They required a completely different curriculum. As members can imagine, the setup made it impossible to cater adequately for the diverse social, emotional and intellectual needs in the class. In addition to this, all of the students in my class, along with their moderate intellectual disability, also had additional disabilities and/or needs.

[Audiovisual presentation proceeded with.]

Ms NIEDERMAYER: As a teacher I have always taken great pride in providing the best education for my kids. I have worked hard for them and I care deeply about them. I love them. These children come to school every day and they want to learn. They are capable of learning, but they are not achieving what they are capable of achieving. It was disheartening and frustrating to know that, despite my passion, experience and relentless efforts, it just was not enough. These students could have achieved so much more if they had had the resources that they each needed and that each one of them deserved. I will hand over now to Rosie.

Ms FARNHAM: Last year Melissa Harding and I taught regular kindergarten. Many of the children in our classes had learning disabilities. These children face challenges in their learning. These challenges were not for reasons such as having English as their second language; they have special needs and disabilities that affect their learning. These students receive no funding, or inadequate funding, to address their learning needs, which makes it difficult for them to participate effectively alongside their more able classmates. Without adequate support it is difficult for us, as teachers, to cater for all the needs of the students in our classes. Our capacity to prepare meaningful and individualised learning programs for these children is beyond reasonable expectation; it is very difficult.

We, as teachers, need to ensure that all our students—able children or children with learning disabilities—have opportunities to achieve their full potential. John is one of these students who faces challenges in his learning every day. John has a severe developmental speech and language disability called dyspraxia. He has a severe comprehension disorder and a mild developmental delay. John's speech therapist said that it was the worst case of dyspraxia that had ever been seen. John cannot form sounds, as the physical movement of his mouth does not allow him to make them. It affects his progress in areas such as reading, writing and talking. It makes it extremely hard for John to communicate with his teachers and with his peers. Every day he faces challenges socialising with other children, along with simple things such as making his needs known.

John's dyspraxia affects his coordination for eating and his other mouth movements. He also has a coordination disorder that affects his motor skills, such as holding a pencil that, in turn, affects his writing. It also affects other motor skills such as running, jumping and hopping, or basic movement skills that children do every day at school. His coordination disorder affects his upper body strength, which mean that he has a problem sitting and holding his body upright over time. John's dyspraxia and his coordination disorder have a considerable impact on every aspect of his school life—from reading and writing to socialising and just moving.

The Department of Education and Training does not provide any support for children with disabilities such as dyspraxia. Even though John's multiple disabilities are so severe and significantly affect his functioning level, he was not eligible for any funding at all. So here we had a child with such disabilities in a regular classroom and he was not eligible for any funding support whatsoever. John did not fit into one of the department's boxes: he was a typical case of a square peg in a round hole. So our journey for finding funding for John began. The school councillor, the principal, his parents and I met with occupational therapists and physiotherapists, and all our initial requests for funding were rejected.

Many hours were spent in this process—hours that were taken away from programming and necessary preparation for all the children in the classroom. John's family had to support him privately with speech, occupational therapy and physiotherapy services. Finally, an early school support program was offered to John. Every day his family travelled over two suburbs to our school to receive that support. John received two hours of assistance each week. At the end of 2009 John was reassessed. It was found that he did not meet the criteria for school for specific purpose [SSP] funding, and this funding of two hours per week will not be reoffered to him in 2010. So it was back to no funding for this child who has severe dyspraxia that, it should be remembered, the Department of Education and Training does not fund. I would like you to meet John on our video and to see the difficulties that he faces in everyday life at school.

[Audiovisual presentation proceeded with.]

That is what John received in 2009. I think you would have been able to tell from that footage what difficulty he had every day at school, even just trying to make his own needs met. It is difficult for the teacher and very difficult for him as well in the classroom. After our Parliament presentation and media interest, the manager of Equity visited with me. Her recommendations were to purchase a \$25 literacy program. She offered to come out to in-service our aide, and that was an aide we did not have, we did not have an aide for John. He was not funded at all. Her response to that problem was to in-service a year 6 peer tutor, who would work with him every morning. Imagine the huge responsibility for that year 6 child, not to mention the time he would be away from his own classroom and his own work.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Unbelievable.

Ms FARNHAM: Unbelievable. Finally, John was given special consideration in 2010. Our suspicion was he only got that funding after the pressure that was applied to the department. John was to be given classroom support for his physical disability. In 2010 he was given one hour per week. So, after all those hours

spent to find support for John, he receives less funding this year. Work that one out. In 2009 he got two hours per week; 2010, after all the work we went to, he gets one hour per week. It is an injustice to John once again.

John is a beautiful child and he tries so hard to achieve despite his many disabilities. If he cannot access funding, who can? We are letting down the most vulnerable students. We are not providing them with adequate support. How do these children cope with the challenges they face every day? There are many Johns in our classroom who need support but do not receive it. Despite our best efforts they require more support than we are able adequately to provide as teachers in regular classrooms. We cannot be experts in all areas of their needs. John and all the other Johns need to be heard, and we need to be John's voice. Now meet some more of our other students.

Ms HARDING: Last year I was a teacher of a mainstream kindergarten class. I had a class of 20 students, and nine out of those 20 students have diagnosed difficulties and/or special needs. I am now going to show you video footage of some of these children. Firstly, we have Vanessa. Vanessa was diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability and a moderate language disorder. Vanessa struggled with things like writing her name, cutting, holding a pair of scissors, holding a pencil. She needed assistance with pretty much everything in the classroom. Vanessa received no funding.

This is Leilani. We have never heard Leilani speak. She can but she chooses not to, not only at school but also at home. Leilani has been diagnosed with depression and severe anxiety. Her elective mutism is a symptom of this. She also has a severe language disorder. Despite these significant disabilities, Leilani did not receive any funding throughout the entire year in her first year at school. Leilani has now been referred to infant, child and adolescent mental health. We have finally been able to make an application for funding support for Leilani. We await the news of exactly how much funding Leilani will receive. If John receives nine minutes a day, we do not hold a lot of hope for Leilani.

As you will hear, it is very difficult to understand Kalani. It takes time and persistence to communicate even the most simple messages in the classroom. Kalani has poor concentration and frequently loses focus when completing tasks. He requires continual reminders and one-on-one assistance and scaffolding. Kalani has a severe language disorder and was diagnosed with oppositional defiance disorder. With this diagnosis Kalani receives 48 units of teachers aide time per day. Kalani no longer receives any funding for oppositional defiance disorder and he receives no funding for his language disorder. So, in 2010 Kalani receives no funding,

This is Britany. She was a member of our regular classroom. Early in term 2 she received a placement in our class for moderately intellectually disabled children. Britany has a moderate intellectual disability, a severe language disability and autism spectrum disorder. So, with more than one significant disability Britany was a child who was placed in a mainstream, regular classroom with another 19 students.

Ranold struggles to comprehend instructions. He does not have the ability to speak in full sentences and has very poor coordination. Ranold has a mild intellectual disability and a severe language disorder yet he does not receive any funding. Matthau has very poor coordination in his whole body and hand movement. He requires assistance in formulating sentences that are appropriate for his age and any simple tasks such as cutting and holding a pencil. Matthau has a language delay and a global delay and does not receive any funding.

In addition to these children, this mainstream class also included another four children with diagnosed disability. This is April. April has a mild intellectual disability and a severe language disorder and does not receive any funding. Eljay has a mild intellectual disability and a severe language disorder and does not receive any funding. Samuel has a moderate language disorder and does not receive any funding. Cassandra has a severe language disorder yet once again does not receive any funding.

You will now see a short clip of a writing lesson. It will highlight the extreme range of abilities in this regular, mainstream class. I provided an abundance of support, modelling, demonstrating and monitoring throughout this lesson. Let us look at the results.

As a teacher I did everything possible to ensure that the children in my class would succeed and learn. It is obvious, looking back, which children succeeded and those who struggled. It is so incredibly frustrating to know that as a teacher you have provided every possible opportunity but it was still not good enough; knowing that, despite our best intentions, despite our planning, despite our experience and our professional learning, and our skills and our ability, we are not able to adequately cater for these children, quite simply because we are not

provided with the resources to do so. Many of these children will never reach the fullest extent of their developmental potential without one-on-one assistance and scaffolding.

Almost half of my mainstream class have diagnosed disabilities. Let us also consider the half that did not, the half that were average children in a supposedly average class in their first year of school. With so much of my time devoted to the children with special needs I was not able to extend the average or above-average children to their fullest potential—probably not. This is not an isolated case. There are cases just like this in regular classrooms all over the State. Many children just like John and Kalani are suffering injustice and not receiving the quality of education they deserve.

This situation is challenging to say the very least. It is challenging now. We have major concerns about the proposed School Learning Support Program and what it will mean to for schools, teachers and, of course, the children. We will have a look at the School Learning Support Program at Sarah Redfern Public School and what we stand to lose. It will mean, for our school, the loss of two language classes. Our two language classes will be abolished meaning that children with severe and complex language disorders will move out of classes of 8 to classes of up to 30. It will mean the loss of the Early School Support Program. This program is vital in providing intervention and support to students with mild intellectual disabilities. It will mean also the loss of over \$25,000 worth of funding.

At Sarah Redfern Public School we currently receive \$55,000 from the funding support program. With the proposed changes this will drop to \$29,830. You have seen how little funding these children get now, yet another \$25,000 will be taken away. With the proposed School Learning Support Program we will receive an additional day and a half of support teacher time per week. At our school we currently receive seven days of support teacher time per week. That will increase to 8½. So, from a gain of an extra day and a half support teacher time we lose two language classes, the Early School Support Program and over 25,000 worth of funding—and we think we are in a tough situation now.

Watching our footage today may have given you a lump in the back of your throat. Perhaps it made you feel sad, disillusioned and angry, and rightly so. As educators we experience these feelings each and every day. Just imagine the fear and heartbreak of the parents of these children and, of course, the frustration of the children themselves. If these children are not provided with adequate funding and support throughout their time at school, where will they be when they are 18, 25 or 40 years old? What becomes of them? Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you for setting the scene. I certainly have a lump in my throat. I have seen that before. As you say, it is something you deal with every day. We have so many questions about the individual children and the holistic issue. No doubt Committee members made notes and will want to follow up on some things. Obviously, from what you were talking about clearly there is a lack of resources. Is that related to how assessment is made and the timing of that assessment? Is it about when assessments are made? I do not understand how someone can be assessed to have some funding one minute, like Kalani, and then no funding the next minute. Is that where we should start?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Definitely. I think the problem is that the individual child and their individual functioning level is not looked at. Mostly the child's label is looked at. If they have a label like autism, then you get some funding. Yet, you can have one child with autism who is high functioning and does not need as much support. Then you have another child with autism who has greater needs but is still only getting that same support. Then there are disabilities that get no funding whatsoever. That is what we need to look at, not the labels. Look at what the child actually can do and cannot do and what they need support in.

CHAIR: It is all about functioning rather than the actual category they might fit into?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Yes, that is right.

CHAIR: Is assessment done early enough?

Ms FARNHAM: A lot of times we get the children in kindergarten and we do not know they actually have a problem until they arrive at school. You saw what we had to do with John: to try to get some sort of funding we had to meet with occupational therapists, physiotherapists and go through our school counsellor. It took a lot of time just to find that he was not eligible for funding because we were not looking at his functioning level; we were actually looking at the label he had and that just was not funded at all. Yes, it takes a lot of time as well because it is time that the teacher has to spend away from her class.

We seek that funding. It is not actually served to us; we actually seek it out. We try to find different areas where we can find some sort of funding. When someone comes out—we had occupational therapists and physiotherapists from Campbelltown hospital—John was probably a bit too hard and they did not know what to do with him. So, they just say, "We can offer you a beanbag for him to sit on. We can offer some sort of rocking exercises I could show him how to do to help his back" while my other 19 children sit and wait for me to do that with John. It is not always practical with these services we offer.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Obviously our system is inadequate. Why, in this day and age, when we have had lots of inquiries, we keep producing reports and cutting down trees nothing seems to improve. If we are going to make recommendations, if we look interstate and internationally, are their systems and models where this is working that we should look where there is proper identification, assessment and resourcing? I do not know how you are all not just totally burnt out, but that is another issue.

Ms FARNHAM: It goes back to the functioning level in a classroom.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: I do not think we have the answers of who has a better model; all we know is that this one is definitely not working. Our kids are not accessing the curriculum and they are not going to achieve the level that they should be achieving. The fact that only one disability is taken into consideration is just silly. If they have got multiple disabilities, you cannot just ignore the second, third or fourth one and just look at the first. They all compact and they all impact on that child's learning, and they impact on all the other children in the class as well, so this model is just not working. Instead of looking at labels and instead of looking at the cheapest option or the easiest option, we need to look at what is best for the individual child.

Ms FARNHAM: It is easy to put them into boxes, as we said. It is also about the curriculum as well. We are actually asking these children to access a curriculum that the more able students access who are sitting right next to them. They are just not able to and they are doing it without any support at all. We need to look at that area as well.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: I imagine that pressure is put on you from the parents of the other mainstream kids?

Ms FARNHAM: Yes.

Ms HARDING: And we have very bright children at our school as well. We have the enrichment classes, but in kindergarten they are all in the same class. We have gifted children and to be able to deliver our curriculum to them and then to differentiate that curriculum for those children with special needs is extremely challenging and even when there is only one of them in the classroom, it is very, very difficult to do that.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: And as Melissa said, this is not an isolated case. Since being at Sarah Redfern, I have left and I have moved to another school, Leumeah Public School and I am teaching a kindergarten class right now. It is still in the Campbelltown area but it is not in a housing commission estate. I have again got 20 kids. Within that I have got two autistic children. I have got a child with oppositional defiance disorder. I have got a child with a severe bowel condition, who constantly needs toileting or changes of clothes. I have got a diabetic student who needs her blood sugar levels taken every hour. I have one with language needs, so it is not just this school; it is everywhere.

Ms FARNHAM: And with the changes that we are looking at having come in, it is going to get worse. There is more to worry about.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: I have parents of the students in my class now who are concerned about that because my time is taken up with other kids, particularly when you have parent helpers come in. They are seeing what is happening in the classroom. I also have parents who are fantastic and they believe that these kids should be within the classroom because they like their child to be surrounded by everybody. Public school is about everybody and they appreciate that and they enjoy that. However, is it at the cost of their child's education?

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I have been visiting with advocacy groups looking at public schools over the last 12 months or so and talking to principals, teachers and parents and citizens associations. I am discovering there are areas that are totally different in the way they are being treated and administered to other areas of the State. How do you see yourself being ranked as an educational area?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: We are not high on the list. The problem also is that a lot of our parents within our area do not have the skills or the money to access their own things or to push the Department of Education and Training. If we were working at a school in northern Sydney or the northern suburbs—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You are saying that across the education department there is not equality of treatment, care or provision of funding?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: No, I do not think so, not at all.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Whereas in some of the areas I have been to, I have been very impressed with the department's leadership in special teaching and special needs in that area?

Ms HARDING: The parents of children in the more affluent areas are better equipped sometimes to go to discrimination lawyers and that sort of thing and they are able to push for these special things for their children. We have one example, Leilani. It took her mum a long time to realise that there was a problem. It took numerous meetings with the school principal and the counsellor—step-by-step guidance—to actually get that child to be seen.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I have met mothers like that. Do not stand between the education department and the mother. Can I push a little bit further because Brittany and Rosie both had dyspraxia, am I correct?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: No, this is Rosie and she can speak fine.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You have got John?

Ms FARNHAM: I have John, yes.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: And I taught Brittany.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Both of those were suffering from dyspraxia, is that correct?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Yes.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And dyslexia?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: No, just dyspraxia.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Why were they not being tested for dyslexia?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: It is a completely different thing. Dyslexia is about reading and how you see a page of words whereas with these children, she can see what is on the page; she can read it, but there is a connection that goes wrong between the brain and the mouth. She knows what she wants to say; the same as with John. He knows what he wants to say and something happens between here and here and it just does not come out the way they want.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: We will be having some specialists' input on that tomorrow.

Ms FARNHAM: John actually has a physical problem with his movement with his mouth and that actually causes a lot of his problems with the dyspraxia. He has had speech therapy from a young age and they have actually diagnosed exactly what he has. He also has a coordination problem, so he has a few other problems.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: A year ago the Parliament passed special regulations for children with serious learning difficult needs. It also saw, through the department, \$10 million of funding for special needs teachers. You are telling me that you are not really seeing that coming through?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: I did not know about it.

Ms FARNHAM: Not when we do not actually access that funding.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Were you informed about changes to the special Education Act for children with serious learning difficulties last year by the department?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Off the top of my head we probably were notified, but I think what is important is what is happening in our classroom and we are not seeing any changes in the classroom; we are not seeing anything getting any easier in the classroom; in fact, it is getting harder. We have had more special needs classes being shut down. Therefore, in our mainstream classes we have got more children with special needs. So in the classroom, all we can tell you is, from our classroom base, it is not getting any easier; it is definitely getting harder.

Ms HARDING: And as mainstream teachers we are not provided with any in servicing, any professional learning, as to how to cater for these special needs children.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You have not been specially trained as a special needs training teacher?

Ms HARDING: No.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: No.

Ms FARNHAM: We are kindergarten regular classroom teachers.

Ms HARDING: I have run a class with special needs, yes.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: We do receive professional learning on a range of different things, but we are not specialists in the area. I am not a speech pathologist or an occupational therapist, so that training is never going to be enough for these children.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Nor would it be reasonable to expect you to be, is that correct?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It would be unreasonable to say that one person could carry that degree of expertise across the range of special needs that you are interacting with?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How many kids are there in your current class at the school you are currently teaching at?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: At Leumeah, 20.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How many of those have diagnosed special needs?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: One is currently at a paediatrician trying to get a diagnosis, but at the moment five have a diagnosis; otherwise I am looking at six.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How many of those are receiving support beyond an hour and a half a week?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: I had a phone call about the funding regarding one of the children in my class who is autistic. I told the person on the phone about everything this child was doing or not doing, and having trouble with. She said, "He doesn't seem that severe because he is not violent." But he is not accessing the curriculum at all. He wanders around, he cannot communicate, he barely says a word—he can say one word at a time maybe, and that is only if he has a strong need. And she told me that that is not very severe at all.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The consequence of which is that you will get no funding for that child?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: I will probably get about an hour a week. I am not entirely sure about that, but approximately an hour a week.

Dr JOHN KAYE: We have heard a lot of examples, including an hour a week or an hour and a half a week. I am not trying to put you into a position where you want to say this is worthless, but am I correct in saying that an hour and a half a week does not really create the outcomes you want, that it does not have a major impact? It is not that I want you to say you want to get rid of it.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: No, I am not going to throw that back. But we need more than that.

Ms FARNHAM: Have a look at John, for example. Would he benefit from the hour that he is going to be getting?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: He still has those disabilities after the hour has gone.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That hour is an hour of what I would call a teacher's aide?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Yes, a support person.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That support person will not necessarily have specialist training in the child's specific needs?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: No. It is a pair of hands, I guess.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That pair of hands is your pair of hands? You have to design programmatic material for that person?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Thank you for your attendance this morning; it has been very helpful. Do you believe there should be classes just for these types of disabilities, rather than children being in the one class? Do you believe there should be special schools for those people?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Special schools, or special classes?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Special classes are better than special schools, in my opinion.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Absolutely.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I believe that if you have a class where you can get people from other schools coming into that particular class, it creates a wider scope.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Which is what we do have. My class was the IO class, for moderate intellectual disability. So every one of those students does have a moderate intellectual disability. A class is made for those kids, and I do have kids come from out of area—within the Campbelltown area but they come from out of area into that class. Yes, there are classes, and that does work. But what made my class difficult was that it was not just that they were all IO; they all had something else that made it so much more complex. They were put in that class because of one disability, but for a lot of them their autism was even greater. Yet, that would be a class of six or seven, and I think that would probably be too expensive, so they go with the greater class.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: The assessment process is one that, to me, seems a very, very important part of it. In your opinion, what should be done to get the right assessment for each individual child?

Ms HARDING: I think it comes down to the school counsellor and the amount of access we have to a school counsellor. Most of our school counsellor's time is taken up with paperwork and that sort of thing, because she is not there five days a week. If a child has a breakdown or something happens on a day when the counsellor is not there, they just have to wait. We sometimes have to wait a long period of time to get the student assessed by the school counsellor because there is such a big call for it.

Ms FARNHAM: And the hours for school counsellors are going to be cut. It also goes on the number of children you have in your school. Yet, you could have a very high need with fewer children who are actually enrolled in your school.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: How do you balance that between your school counsellor and the professional assessment?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: They go through the school counsellor first, and the school counsellor will make a recommendation to the parents.

Ms FARNHAM: You are really waiting for the parents. We recommend that they go to a paediatrician, that they have the child followed up and looked at. As we said, sometimes it takes a while for a parent to understand that there is a problem with their child. Other times, they do not have the capacity to really think about going to a paediatrician. As you talk about the other areas and other schools, yes, they do have that. But we are really fighting with the parents in that battle as well. We really have to be in there to help the parents, whereas other teachers may not have to do that in other areas of New South Wales.

Dr JOHN KAYE: May I ask a supplementary question to that. How many kids do you have, and how many hours a week do you have a school counsellor?

Ms HARDING: We have an enrolment of 400 students, and three days we have a school counsellor.

CHAIR: Three full days?

Ms HARDING: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How many of those kids have special needs?

Ms HARDING: Of the 400, we have two language classes, two classes for mildly intellectually disabled children and one class for moderately intellectually disabled children, plus the children who have disabilities in mainstream classes. So we have quite a few.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You have certainly given us a moving presentation. Everybody has a family member, a relative or somebody they know who has a severe disability; I certainly have one. You have given us a wide picture of various disabilities. What sort of funding are you looking at? Are there specific figures that you have outlined to the Department of Education and Training? With regard to what the Hon. Tony Catanzariti raised earlier in respect of assessment, when a child comes into your school do you get an assessment of the child's various disabilities? Is there any communication between yourselves and the hospital, or the doctors—

Ms NIEDERMAYER: A lot of them come without anything. Often we are the first ones to pick up that there is a problem, which means it then takes time to get the counsellor to assess them and to get them to a medical—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So there is no prior assessment given to you at all?

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Unless they have been to preschool and the preschool has picked it up, or unless the parent has the means themselves to pick it up and to do something about it prior to school.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You have to analyse what the problem is with the child?

Ms FARNHAM: Yes, we do. We have a child at the moment in kindergarten. It is now week eight or week nine, and we still do not have a diagnosis from a paediatrician because the parents find it difficult to have the intellectual ability to do that. So we have to work with the counsellor and get the parents to go off to a paediatrician.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: With regard to the funding, have you worked out—

Ms HARDING: I think that goes back to the functioning ability of the individual child. I do not think you can put dollars on a label or anything like that; it depends on where that child is, as far as functioning level is concerned.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I have two questions, and perhaps we will put them on notice because time has gotten away from us. The first relates to your perceptions of the increase in access to preschool that has occurred. Secondly, you have spoken about the structures of kindergarten classes, the complexity of a kindergarten class, and about kindergarten classes generally. What sort of structures do you think would be preferable to allow your 20 students to get equitable service? Could you please take those questions on notice?

Ms FARNHAM: Yes.

CHAIR: We will provide you with the questions on notice in writing and you will have 14 days to return your answers to us. May I add a question to those questions on notice. I did not understand why Kalani had funding one minute and not the next. Did he have a miraculous improvement? If you could explain that for us. Thank you so much for your attendance today. We could have sat here all day and we would still have so many questions. Thank you for what you do every day, and thank you for showing us a little piece of your world. Would you please pass on our thanks to the parents of those brilliant children? You really have set the scene for us regarding the complex problem we have to deal with.

Ms NIEDERMAYER: Thank you for having us.

(The witnesses withdrew)

CHERYL PATRICIA McBRIDE, Chairperson, Public Schools Principals Forum,

BRIAN CHUDLEIGH, Deputy Chair, Public Schools Principals Forum, affirmed and examined, and

TONI MARIA BROWN, School Counsellor, Department of Education and Training, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: There is capacity if you wish to make a brief opening statement.

Ms McBRIDE: First, we need to table an amendment to our submission. I know that that was sent in last week but just in case that has not occurred or you have not received your copy I do have some copies here as well.

CHAIR: Thank you. We have moved to publish those recommendations.

Ms McBRIDE: It is a supplement to the original submission.

CHAIR: Does anyone want to make an opening statement?

Ms McBRIDE: If there was one story that is told very regularly at principals' meetings, one concern that pervades nearly every gathering of educators, it is the concern that revolves around the teaching of children with disabilities. We hear anecdotal stories of individual cases, some of which are noted and included in the submission, and we hear stories of creativity and ingenuity on the part of educators to access support and resources for students. We often find that the systemic response to those problems is null and void or insufficient. Tony Vincent identified the integration of children with special needs and disabilities in mainstream classes as the most concerning issue for teachers in New South Wales some time ago.

So with that in mind, the Public Schools Principals Forum conducted a survey in March 2009, and we knew from the immediate response from principals that this was an issue that was of absolute concern to every educator in New South Wales. Within a very short period of time—as a matter of fact, within two or three days—we had 800 responses which were collated and the survey results are included in the information contained in the submission. We stopped counting after that because the issues became very clear and obvious; the themes were similar. The findings from that survey revolved around a number of different issues, the first of which of course was the adequacy of funding. Across New South Wales those 800 principals identified 2,500 children who were either not funded or were insufficiently funded, and we have seen some good examples of those types of children who are in every school across New South Wales here this morning.

Without the funding, the children of course cannot participate as they should or access the curriculum as they should alongside their more able peers. Ninety-eight per cent of principals with support units, special classes or with special schools indicated that their children were supported for only one disability despite the fact that many of those children have multiple disabilities, many of which impact very significantly on their extended education. Seventy-eight per cent of the principals ranked the funding as very poor. They complained that the fixed formula that decrees a class size resulted again in a further lessening of the ability of an educator to provide the curriculum the children deserve. I think Jodi Niedermayer gave that example perfectly well.

If there were 10 children with a moderate intellectual disability they would be in that class. We saw 10 children with 25 different disabilities in the one class. That prescribed fixed formula does not respond, does not in any way, shape or form provide or ensure the provision of the curriculum that the children require. You saw extra pairs of hands greatly needed in those classrooms when they are not there. Principals also rated school counselling services not as inadequate but the amount of time as inadequate, and I think we will talk about that a little bit further on. Those rigid class numbers, despite the level of the child, again is not reflected in the amount of counselling time provided for schools. The securing of funding often involves long, tedious time, frustration, breakdown of relationships with parents because we are trying and they are waiting, especially if their child is not the round peg in the hole.

Teachers are struggling. We talk about building the capacity of teachers, but how far can that elastic band be stretched? We have seen classes today, mainstream kindergarten classes, with nine children with disabilities included in them. Can you do that? Can you imagine that, all of you who have conducted kids' birthday parties? Imagine young Anita who is reading at level 29 by the end of kindergarten, far, far, far above the average of any child and in the same class is Johnny [], struggling to put two words together, and all the

range of children in between. Imagine that! As a principal I am embarrassed at times to say to a teacher, "Here is another child for your care who has a special disability."

A breach of the education standards, we believe, has occurred in our schools. I think it will be interesting to see what the department has to say tomorrow about ensuring that those standards are not breached for every child with disabilities in New South Wales. The standards provide a framework to ensure that students with disabilities are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students—I do not believe that is happening in New South Wales schools. We believe the department is not fulfilling its moral and legal responsibilities in ensuring that the standards are met for all students with disabilities. The areas we consider to be breached are in participation, curriculum and the provision of support services.

We who teach in the west and the south-west have been hit by this particularly hard, as you have heard before, and anecdotes that are exchanged between principals who have moved from the more challenging country areas into the city areas where there is more affluence, where there are parents who are prepared and able to put a copy of the Disability Discrimination Act under one arm and take their lawyer with them to approach the department, they have found they have gained greater access. In fact, we can see students that have one disability with similar outcomes here in Sydney, or in the west, or in remote country areas, compared with a child in a more affluent area and we can see very significant differences in the amount of support and funding made available for them. That is not to say that some children are necessarily overfunded; it is just to demonstrate that some are really underfunded.

If the Committee would like to have a quick look at the recommendations, we will go through those, on the first page—principals are recommending these particular areas. The funding inadequacy, or lack of funding, in mainstream schools, in special schools, in special classes prevents children from reaching their full potential. The waiting lists for placement can at times be extensive and frustrating. I am now going to ask Toni Brown, school counsellor, to talk about some of her frustrations and experiences in the counselling role, as the person who does some of the direct assessment of the students and works with the parents in accessing placements for the children.

Ms BROWN: There are insufficient numbers of support classes to meet the needs of children with disabilities, and often children with a disability in a mainstream class are not supported. If you have a child who is under eight years with a mild intellectual disability, quite often they are placed in a mainstream classroom with no support—as you saw in the kindergarten class. There are insufficient IM placements in high school for children moving from year 6 to year 7. I recently had a high school ring me about a year 7 child that had been in year 6, in an IM class, at our school last year. That child has not been placed and, of course, he is not coping. At present we are about to do 22 applications for special placements for high school next year and our local high school has three—so whether those children are placed or not I do not know.

Autistic class placements are very rare. Autistic children in high school suffer greatly because they need a lot of routine and structure; they do not read social situations very well at all. Most parents are very concerned about their child moving from a primary school to a high school when their children have autism. Children have to compete for the positions in a high school and they are rare—it becomes a competition. One parent said to me one day, "There are three positions for seven kids that I know of." And that is how it is.

A lot of the children in that video had language disorders. A language disorder is where they have trouble processing instructions, organising their thoughts and speaking coherently. They really have trouble accessing the curriculum. There is no support for them in a mainstream class. We just hope that the teacher accommodates them. There are some intensive language classes, but very few. A couple of years ago our support classes were reviewed and changed, and the language class also changed as well. What we used to do was to take children with primarily language disabilities of reasonable intelligence, average and above intelligence. Now the children that are being put into language classes are often autistic children, and also children with a mild intellectual delay because there is a proviso there that the child has to have a language disability. Language disability will be connected to autism and also a mild intellectual delay. So a lot of language children are now not necessarily being targeted.

Ms McBRIDE: Just to interrupt, I think that is reflective of the fact that sometimes because there are inadequate places, particularly for children with autism, then anything will do. If there is a reduced class size that is better than a class of 30 so they are popped in there and, of course, it is an inappropriate placement. The curriculum and the support from a speech therapist et cetera are for language students. Every child with autism

has a language disability so, of course, they are going to have that problem, but problems that go on top of that with their social and behavioural issues et cetera are quite dramatic, but any place will do.

CHAIR: I do not mean to be rude by interrupting you. As this is an opening statement I am wondering how much longer you will be. Is it something that could be tabled?

Ms McBRIDE: No. We have probably got about another 10 or 15 minutes. Ten minutes?

CHAIR: Five minutes?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Five minutes sounds good.

CHAIR: The Committee would be happy to take something on paper. Committee members are anxious to ask you some questions.

Ms McBRIDE: We will try and reduce it.

Ms BROWN: Do you want me to keep going?

Ms McBRIDE: Well, summarise it.

Ms BROWN: Very quickly then, 72 IM classes also were closed. The composition of a support class for mild intellectual delay now is very heavily loaded with children with emotional disturbance: autism. That impacts on the IM classes as well that are left. If you want to talk to me about Kalani and John [] I will explain that in question time—I was going to elaborate there. We also have children waiting for ED places and for BD places. ED is emotional disturbance, when it is diagnosed by a mental health professional. BD is children who are acting out with no diagnosis. We had a child waiting for three years for an ED placement and never got one. At present in Campbelltown there is one spot for high school children with behaviour disturbance and there are 20 waiting. High schools are trying to manage really difficult children through suspension, through coming back part-time et cetera.

CHAIR: When you say "one place", that is one place at an ED school?

Ms BROWN: Yes.

Ms McBRIDE: This is going to be the Reader's Digest version, and hopefully the questions will elicit some further information. Functional levels of children we believe to be of prime importance. Whether they have a label here or there, yes we want a diagnosis from a doctor to say there is a particular issue or disability with a child, but what are their functional levels? What can they do? What can they not do? How do we provide support to ensure that they get to the level that they should and achieve their potential?

David McKay, director of disability programs at the Department of Education and Training, has developed a functional assessment tool that we believe was being tested last year by the department's EMSAD, which is something to do with numbers and statistics. It is doing an item analysis et cetera and trialling that functional assessment. We are very interested in that because we believe that is what we need to look at in measuring our support according to what the children can do.

Please ask some questions about counselling services because Toni has a load of information there. We need more. We need a good plan for the replacement of an ageing workforce—the average age of a school counsellor is 54 years. School counsellors are moving out of our system and it takes nine years to train one person in that area at the moment. Some of our schools that have the greatest need, in terms of mental health students, have a councillor one day per week.

We have talked about the issue of multiple disabilities. But we also need to talk about access to a curriculum. Teachers are trying to turn a curriculum that is written primarily for average, above average students or a little lower average students, and it is too tough to make it comply with student needs. I see teachers constantly scrabbling and trying to manage that. Brian, would you like to talk quickly about behavioural schools?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Another area of major concern for us is the behaviour area. There are presently, as best we can ascertain, approximately 4,000 students with behaviour disorders. They are placed in approximately 100 separate schools or classrooms. We are particularly concerned, and would like the Committee's questions to focus, if it would, on 37 of those schools called "behaviour schools" where approximately 30 students are located in each. Approximately 80 to 85 per cent, we understand, of those students are of secondary school age. However, those schools are staffed on—

CHAIR: Primary curriculum?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes. They are staffed on primary formula. They are staffed essentially, unless accidentally there happens to be a temporary secondary teacher there, with largely primary teachers. There is no genuine access to specialist secondary teachers for specialist rooming as in laboratories et cetera. We have some suggestions to make as to how that situation could be improved but, in short, those behaviour schools are excellent for the mainstream school because clearly if they have a severely behaviourally disordered student all it really wants to do is get that child out of its setting. I think questions were asked earlier about the impact of children with disabilities on the remaining children in the regular classroom setting. Say the child is removed and goes into a separate setting and, sadly stays there in most cases until they are of a school leaving age which, up until this year, of course, was 14 years and 9 months.

We now have an interesting problem looming with the extension of the school leaving age to 17 years. Principals of those schools are in a quandary now wondering how on earth they are going to face that problem. What is missing in the behaviour setting is rehabilitation. Again those children do not have any genuine access to the regular curriculum. There is insufficient counselling and therapy services for any real attempt at rehabilitation so more often than not those children graduate to the streets, some are lucky and get to TAFE—I will talk about that later too, but there is not consistency about that—or, indeed, integration back into mainstream schools across our system.

Ms McBRIDE: Access to therapy services, waiting lists, families who cannot afford to get a speech assessment, cannot get an assessment and so children are prevented from getting placements, waiting lists for occupational therapists, physiotherapists, the provision of those services for IDET, minimal. One last thing—the proposed learning support program that the department is putting up concerns me greatly. I think Melissa mentioned what it would do to a school like Sarah Redfern school that provides services not only to the children at Minto but wider services to disabled children. We need to realise, and I do not know what is in the department's submission, but I hope there is some honesty there about that model. It is cost-neutral.

At what cost makes it neutral? The reduction of or the loss of 1,300 current school learning assistants teachers, 43 classes for the most language-disabled children in New South Wales, 65 of the early school support program teachers, the outreach program for children with challenging behaviours and those with autism, the funding for children with disabilities who attract less than \$6,000—I have to say all but one child in Sarah Redfern school falls into that category so the loss would be quite dramatic—and the closure of the intensive reading classes that have such an incredible high-level of success. All of that would then go into the melting pot and create a new teaching position and that person would be expected to provide, with some training, expertise in literacy, dyslexia, autism, behavioural challenges, language disorders and other disabilities in the schools—Impossible!

Mr CHUDLEIGH: And that is with 110 hours of training on-line.

Ms McBRIDE: I don't care how many hours of training they would have—impossible to fulfil that role. I am a special educator. I have additional qualifications. I have worked with children with autism for many, many years. I would still not consider myself to be an expert in one of those areas, nevertheless the half a dozen that are suggested by the DET.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Experts in the field shake their heads and wonder.

Ms McBRIDE: And we would lose so many experts to go into that melting pot.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Totally unrealistic.

CHAIR: When is that rolling out?

Ms McBRIDE: It is being trialled at the moment.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: We believe the trial was to commence at the beginning of this year in the Illawarra region but that was delayed. I assume it is starting next term. I am sure the DET people will be able to tell you that.

CHAIR: The Government's submission is now published by the Committee on the Internet and has several copies of it available.

Ms McBRIDE: That is a little late for us to submit a critique.

CHAIR: I know it is a little late for a whole range of reasons.

Ms McBRIDE: Yes, I am sure.

CHAIR: I refer to the functional assessment tool being developed. We have talked about a functional assessment as looking at, I guess, a student's capacity as well as their disability. Does that need to follow the child if they move from place to place? How should it be allocated?

Ms McBRIDE: Some children begin their school lives perhaps in a SSP and as they grow and develop they may well then be able to go into a class like Jodi Niedermeyer, an IO class in a special school is far more demanding—and that is what we should have said too. This was an IO class in a mainstream school so those children are at a higher functioning level as moderate intellectually disabled children than what you would see in a special school.

You saw in a special school far, far more demanding but with the same number of children. Yes, if a child developed, as some do, particularly those with autism as some of their behaviours come into more normality et cetera and are able to access the curriculum better, yes, then the functioning level of the child obviously increases. There should be transition points. Certainly not being tested every six months or every 12 months but certain transition points along the way for when they are ready to move into a different setting, absolutely and, of course, at the end of year 6, travelling into year 7.

Ms BROWN: Killarney is probably an example of a functional assessment. Killarney was a little boy who was at Claymore early intervention unit and was very difficult. Arrived in kindergarten, his behaviours were out of control so he received some funding for his behaviour but really the underlying problem was the language—language does not get funding. So then after a year he settled down. His behaviours were good and so he only had a language disability and that is why he was taken off funding.

Ms McBRIDE: When we say "only", he was still unintelligible yet no funding disability at all.

Ms BROWN: Yes.

CHAIR: In terms of counselling assessment model, I know that you have talked about reducing the current ratio of 1 to 1,500 down to 1 to 800—

Mr CHUDLEIGH: That is what Professor Vinson recommended.

CHAIR: That is right, sometime ago I think. And you talked about the ageing workforce of counsellors and training et cetera required to be a counsellor. Is there a model in terms of how we could do that better so that all counsellors do not necessarily have the same sort of training or is it optimal?

Ms BROWN: I do not know. If you are going to do assessment you need that sort of training. Some people are throwing around the idea of probably some sort of a welfare teacher or welfare coordinator who might be able to do the more proactive programs like social skills programs or anger management, work with the community and things like that or working in conjunction with the counsellor. But it is very dependent on the school as to what we do, like, it is a range of diverse activities. Where I am, my whole time is nearly assessments because of the demand.

Ms McBRIDE: Which means that our families miss out on some of those therapy and counselling services that they so desperately need and our children as well. It is all very well to help with the assessments

and that is done extraordinarily well but the additional support of a welfare type person to work proactively with the families would be a wonderful addition and makes such a difference, particularly if we can start detecting some of these problems with children at an earlier stage and age. We have a preschool—thank goodness we have a preschool at our school because that makes such a significant difference. We have at least got them that year beforehand. But if we can have that detection at that age of two or three then early intervention programs could take place which, again, have such a significant change in a child's life at that early stage.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: In response specifically to your question about alternate models, the forum believes that given the potential catastrophic supply situation that we face, unless something is done radically differently in the next 5 to 10 years we are going to have an absolute chronic shortage of counsellors on the ground. We believe there are things that could be done. We have recommended in there, for instance, the employment of a social worker-type person of far less qualification to support and complement the activity of school counsellors as one possible solution.

Another that we have investigated partially, and we believe is employed in some other parts of the world, is where you have fewer fully trained nine-year persons who undertake all the psychometric testing and those people are placed not in every school but in groups or clusters of schools. They are accessed for assessment purposes and they hand on their assessments and advice. We believe you could then replace—and this is very contentious and I hope there are not too many school counsellors listening behind my back with long knives, but let us have it out there—we believe over time as the school counsellor population declines because of the ageing process we could replace those people with people of a different and lesser qualification. It would cost less and they could carry out a lot of the social work-type functions that are presently undertaken or not undertaken by the counsellors because their time is fully taken up with assessments.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Have we not already got young social workers in country schools?

Ms McBRIDE: Nothing systemically.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Employed under special programs, yes. Not on an organised, systemic basis, no.

Ms McBRIDE: You will find some cases may be cited of wonderful programs that are happening here and there. As I mentioned before—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I thought that was because there was no one else out there.

Ms McBRIDE: That could be there too but when counsellors go on leave in the country they are not replaced. There is no-one to replace them. Often, some days will go to a school and a teacher will take on a type of welfare role, for which, of course, they are not qualified. You will hear cases cited of individual programs, pilots, et cetera, that give an impression that there is a systemic response to a lot of things. There is not. The creativity and ingenuity of some of our individual educators are to be admired. But those programs need extrapolation and absorption into a system that provides for all children.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I want to talk briefly about the 2009 model proposed Learning Support Coordinator Program that is coming out of the Department of Education and Training. As I understand it, the language addresses the concern about itinerant teachers not being in schools. The intent was to put a coordinator in each school who had a focus on coordination of disabilities education. We heard from Jodi who described what it would mean for her school and we also heard from Rosie what it would mean for Sarah Redfern school. Can you generalise and tell us if the program went ahead what would be the overall impact on the functioning and delivery of special education outcomes? Can you also tell us how you would do it alternately? Would we stick with the existing itinerant teacher model or would we try another model entirely?

Ms McBRIDE: I think the issue of itinerant teacher is fairly misleading. The only program that is itinerant that I can see is going to be disbanded is an outreach program for itinerant teacher behaviour positions and I think a few individual ones. The great majority are permanent teaching positions. The 1,300 Support Teacher Learning Assistance [STLA] are full-time teachers; support class language are full-time teaching positions; Early School Support program are full-time teaching positions; and so on and so forth. Very few itinerants are going to be actually affected.

Having said that, under those programs you have somebody with a great deal of expertise come into your school and provide expert advice and support. I can recall having a young woman come last year to give us some expert advice on the children with autism that we have in our mainstream classes. She came in and worked with the teacher, did demonstration lessons, worked with the parents and worked with the children individually. She provided a level of expertise that we would not be able to access, frankly, on a ready basis anywhere else.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Would that level of expertise disappear?

Ms McBRIDE: That expertise would be absorbed. If you were lucky enough you might get that person back in your school, but bad luck for the rest.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Would that expertise be in one area only?

Ms McBRIDE: Exactly.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And your school would have a broader range of needs than just that expertise?

Ms McBRIDE: Precisely. As mentioned before, there is no way the newly proposed teacher—and they would be the first people to tell you—would be able to provide expertise in the range of areas that the department proposes. The loss of the funding support programs for those children who attract less than \$6,000 is diabolical. As you can see from the children we just looked at this morning, sometimes it is an extra pair of hands in the classroom to guide the child, even though the extra pair of hands may be just willing hands, not necessarily trained or qualified people, to guide Johnny towards getting his paintbrush, holding his pencil or marker, focusing on his work in the classroom. If we lose that in some classrooms it will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. We are at that point now. This is critical.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: I would mention too that the loss of the STLA program, in particular, would be a massive blow.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: STLA?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Support Teacher Learning Assistance. There are approximately 1,200 to 1,300 of those statewide. That would be one of the most highly valued intervention-type programs we have in schools. If that expertise is lost, gobbled up into this generalist walk-on-water position, that would be a great loss.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In the brief time I have remaining, I want to ask you about the created issue of integration. In particular, a great deal of the submissions we have received talk about the need for formulae that deliver more resources to integrated classes with integrated students. There is probably an understanding, from what we saw this morning, that integration needs more support. There are a couple of different ways that support could be delivered. One would be to reduce class sizes. Another would be to employ more school learning support officers [SLSO], the old teacher's aide positions. Another would be to provide more release time, particularly in primary, for teachers to develop specific programs to match the range of needs of students in their classrooms. Do you have a view on a combination of those or do we need all of those for it to work?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: The word flexibility springs to mind immediately for me. Why think in terms of one size fits all here? If we can allow local, who knows best, to make the decisions about what mix of resource best fits their needs in their situation that would be the way to go.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Let's get the politics out of that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Despite the cynical remark from Ms Christine Robertson, I think there is a lot of sense in what you are saying. How would you support principals in making that decision? Would there need to be training for principals to understand the range?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Absolutely, yes, there would be. Principals would certainly appreciate the opportunity to be able to mix and match their resource to best suit their local need, despite the politics. It is apolitical. It is pure logic. The circumstances, for instance, of the young ladies who presented in the first session, at Sarah Redfern Public School and Leumeah Public School two kilometres up the road, show the needs are very contrasting and very different.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Would the forum agree with the statement that the department is not meeting its moral and legal obligations to disabled children?

Ms McBRIDE: Absolutely, no doubt about it.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Would the department agree?

Ms McBRIDE: Would the department agree? I would love you to ask them that question tomorrow.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I shall.

Ms McBRIDE: As I said earlier about those areas of participation, can a child participate if their diagnosis is not there, if their label is not there, and the support is not there? Can they participate alongside their more able-bodied peers? No. If they do not have therapy services and they are waiting for therapy for three years at a time, can they work alongside their more able-bodied peers? No. If they are waiting for placement in a class that never transpires and they are sent to high school after waiting for four years or three years for a behaviour placement, can they participate alongside their more able-bodied peers in secondary school? No.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: My question relates to how you have analysed what is going to happen with the proposed learning support program, where did that information come from? Specifically, what will go and what will not go? Also, in relation to the support learning assistance program, where does that information come from?

Ms McBRIDE: The department has provided that information. The director general actually wrote to every school principal with an indication of what would transpire at their school should the learning support model go ahead. The girls who spoke previously from Sarah Redfern Public School would lose two language classes, an early school support program, \$29,000.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: They got specific advice about those issues in their letter?

Ms McBRIDE: Correct.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: The new program is to be created from a bucket filled with those positions. So, the 1,300 STLA positions go into the bucket.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: They all disappear?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes. And the money from those goes into the bucket and then it is redistributed with the new position.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: For the new program?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes.

CHAIR: Without new money going in?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: No. It is cost neutral.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The same money. We heard that the first time. So we need to actually work through the pros and cons of that, the same as you are doing.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes, absolutely. Essentially it is the loss of expertise, which is the major concern.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: During previous inquiries in relation to this issue of education and disabilities, there was a question that related to the dollars attached to the individual. What is your opinion of the long-term effectiveness of attached dollars? You have given the example of the value of a school being able to make decisions, but if you have that situation it will not work if you have only two lots of dollars attached to a kid and no resource.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: No. But rather than think of the dollars first, think first of the assessment. If we think in terms of some sort of functional assessment model, whereby a child is classified, banded, whatever, not on the basis of having—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I understand the assessments issue.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: So, whether they are at Sarah Redfern Public School, Broken Hill South or St Ives North, they are given a functional level on the basis of their vision, et cetera. They would take that with them, wherever they go. Obviously decisions would be made based on the functioning level, about the sort of support that is required to maintain that child in the mainstream.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: A resource issue?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Well, yes, it would be. It must.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: At the moment, in those services there are the dollars for so many hours that a kid is worth or is going to get, and it follows that person rather than the resource being available?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes.

Ms McBRIDE: That is right. The funding support model actually. The child is identified; it goes to a panel or someone who says that Johnny [] is worth \$1,500 a year. So you translate those dollars into whether it goes to teacher time, away time, purchasing resources, et cetera. We use that creatively in schools. The teacher's aid may not just stand with Johnny for however many minutes he gets. Or he might be with the child next door who needs that pointer as well.

At one stage, in 2006 I think, but the department would be able to tell you this, there was a movement to take away children who had language disorders and a mild intellectual disability, transfer them out of the disabilities funding support program and pop them into the learning assistance program. So we could no longer track what funds the children were individually attracting. So a cap was placed on that type of funding for those children. Even though they have a disability under the disabilities criteria created by the Department of Education and Training, they are no longer in that program.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You are saying that you would like them to have the label of how many hours are attached to them?

Ms McBRIDE: We like to be able to know that those children are being funded, so yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: That does not actually answer my question. The process of saying that you have this label means that this is how many dollars you will have right across disability services. It then follows them around everywhere. Is that really the process for the long term?

Ms McBRIDE: That is the functioning level.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: That is what presently happens.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You want it moved from label to functioning level and you still want the dollars attached?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: That is what we are saying, yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I am not arguing about the reassessment process. I am talking about the process of funding for full service provision.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: On the counselling side, can you give a more detailed picture as to how you see that being improved, given that there are not very many counsellors now?

Ms BROWN: It needs to be made more attractive, and also if you want to attract more counsellors—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Does that mean you want more money?

Ms BROWN: That is right!

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: That is obvious.

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Surprise! Surprise!

Ms BROWN: What you are doing is asking teachers to become counsellors and to study really demanding courses, probably a lot in their own time, for the same money. I was an executive and I took a reduction in wages to become a counsellor. As far as attraction goes, that is one thing—personally, I think a good welfare teacher in high school. We really link-up with welfare teachers, because they know children and they know the executive, they know the school, and they know education. If the person that we work with understands the education process too that would help. But you cannot have a teacher who is locked into a class and welfare teachers who are trying to teach as well as do a broad band of welfare. There has to be some sort of freeing up of a teacher or coordinator, so that they sort of work with us. That is how I would see a benefit. That would be on proactive programs. We deal with a lot of things that are very dicey. Counselling and assessment is the counsellor's role.

Ms McBRIDE: On that note about incentives for people in particular roles, we need to look at attracting quality, experienced, mature educators into the special education area. We visited a couple of behaviour schools where the challenges that those teachers, principals and workers face are absolutely dramatic. They are the most difficult children we have in our mainstream schools and are collectively placed in one area. We have spoken to the principals of two schools in more recent times where, when both principals entered on duty, there was not one permanent teacher in the school. They were all temporary teachers, and quite young and not trained.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: But you are still in numbers.

Ms McBRIDE: There is a numbers theme, but we have to make it more attractive. So often the principals are first-time principals placed in those roles. How helpful would it be if they had some additional experiences? It is a tough job.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I have a couple of questions.

CHAIR: No, the Committee has run out of time. Would you put your questions on notice?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Basically, the question is: Is there a request for the reduction of counsellors from 1:1,500 to 1:800?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: Yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: How many counsellors exist at the moment? My other question is: You spoke about fulfilling the legal responsibility, that is the State Government, or the Department of Education and Training fulfilling its legal responsibilities, to provide the appropriate levels of funding. Is that the general principles of legal responsibilities or are there specific legal responsibilities that those departments and the Government need to fulfil?

Mr CHUDLEIGH: The quick answer is yes. The number of counsellors is presently 790.

CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance. The Committee would be happy to receive any of the introductory documents that you would like to table. The Committee may be in contact with you for further clarification. The Committee will now take a five-minute break.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

MARK GARDNER, Parent,

CASSANDRA RAE GARDNER, Parent,

KARYN MARIA INGRAM, Parent, and

SHARYN LEE FERGUSON, Parent and early childhood educator, sworn and examined:

CORINNA LUEG, Parent, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance today. I know that you have come here when your time is probably pretty limited and you are already stretched in so many ways, so we appreciate your attendance very much. Mark, if you would like to start? I understand you have got a brief presentation and a document that you wanted to table.

Mr GARDNER: Yes.

Document tabled.

Mr GARDNER: Very briefly, Cassie and I made our submission. We have great respect for the choices that parents have made in the education of their kids and we have all got different stories, but we are happy to share our story about Emily. Emily does not exist as a disability; she exists as a person. She has Down syndrome. We have five points we want to make. Children's education is about choice as parents, and a lot in our submission was the difficulty we have had pursuing choice.

Our experience is that mainstreaming can work unbelievably well. Unfortunately, for secondary education with Emily we had to move to the independent system, which is a low-fee Christian schooling, and it has worked unbelievably well for us, so it is a great story—and also for Em. We just wanted to point out the important role that the low-fee faith-based schools play in mainstreaming education of kids with disabilities. So it is not all about the State system; it is almost like the forgotten schooling system.

Mrs GARDNER: We did the State system in primary school and it was incredibly successful earlier on. I have got to say the State system was beautiful. Emily started school at the age of five. She also had cancer at the time, so she was bald, doing chemo and she had Down syndrome as well. So the school should have run screaming, but they didn't; they were beautiful, absolutely beautiful. By the time we hit years 4 and 5 we were starting to get the hang of this mainstreaming caper because we knew what we wanted. The whole idea for Emily was going to be the big picture of her being a giving, ordinary adult who went to work, had friends, has friends, gives back, receives—all the stuff that we want for the other children as well. It was just a no-brainer for us: this is what we wanted for her. So mainstreaming for us was the only option.

We are very lucky she is a very social child. The only time behaviour stuff happened around her was when the environment was wrong. We were very proactive and we would come in and try and assist and work out what was wrong with the environment, and every time it worked. That was primary school. Years 5 and 6 got very, very difficult. That is when IEP—individual education plans—and all that sort of stuff came in, which was just great, but none of them were person-centred. Person-centred planning—if you want to find out anything more about it, it is actually on a thumb drive that I sent in as well, so there is a whole bunch of extra research there if you want to have a look at it or talk to me about it.

You would go through this big planning process with the school and it would be very, very difficult because if you wanted something different to perhaps what the school was capable of giving you would get more professionals sitting there and the power ratio would be incredibly difficult because you were sitting there as a parent with a whole bunch of professionals who had the words, who had the legislation and O H and S and that sort of stuff, the safety thing, and there could be quite a bit of guilt involved in choosing something that was slightly different.

We went to the high school, the State high school, which was a windowless room and it was a school within a school; it had a big fence around the outside but the school was out there somewhere. The teacher there was a lovely gentleman who said, "You know they plateau by the time they hit high school." We both looked at

each other and walked out the door. Then we went to an independent school, a Christian school, who said, "Oh my gosh, I don't think we can do this, but let's give it a go."

We gave it a go and Emily is in year 11 now and she is doing the most amazing things. The teachers do not know how to do this any more than we do, so we all research like mad, get together and do a mind map. We have a goal for Emily and we work from that and we are totally involved. Whenever we suggest something that is a little bit crazy, they say, "Okay, how do you want to do that?" instead of "It's not possible, we can't do it. It's not our system." They really are very open, so that has been such a blessing for us. It has been very good.

Mr GARDNER: The other thing we wanted to point out, having heard you speak about funding in the last session, is that in the independent system Emily receives about \$2,075 a year. That is her total allocation. When we are talking about funding we should remember that kids have funding in the independent education system, and that is all she is able to access. There are a lot of kids with disabilities at Dubbo Christian School, and they are really relying on the goodwill of the school community to fund the aides and the resources. The school cannot take on any more kids because it has to self-fund. If Emily went through the State high school system she would attract significant funding, but having moved to the independent system, although it was a much better choice for us, she receives maybe a tenth of that funding.

From our point of view it would be fantastic if that could change. None of that funding is exorbitant but it does not move through the school system. It was a far better choice for us and Emily has grown in the independent system. That is a big issue. The last issue we wanted to point out is that the schools exist in islands. There was no transition from primary school to secondary school. We had to manage it, not the department.

Mrs GARDNER: There is a very big disconnect between the systems. You think about a child coming out the other end of the system—any child. You want them to be the best person they can be, so there is a transition process from early schooling to mid schooling and you think they are going to be shunted out the other end and be an employable person. That does not happen, partly because we cannot be guaranteed what funding we will get. If we could do something that was more centred around the child—the member was talking about how funding could follow the child rather than be with the school or the organisation. That is great; to me it sounds like parent choice where we can have options.

As you probably know, self-managed funding for adults who come out of school is now a possibility where it comes to the person in a family, but parents do not know how to do that because they have never had the opportunity. We need to be trained in how to manage our kids' worlds because it is a little bit different and a little bit harder. We cannot do it automatically. We are not designed to do that—it does not come innately to us. We need the training and I think the department has a really good role there. I am sorry we have taken up a lot of time.

CHAIR: Thank you. We will ask some questions shortly.

Ms LUEG: You asked us to state our occupations, so I thought I would say first I am a parent but I used to work as an actuary. Due to the very high demands of having to be a teacher and a tutor to my dyslectic child I was forced to leave the workforce. This should be of interest to the Government because I used to be a significant taxpayer and now I only work casually and that is only because I have a sympathetic employer who is willing to be very flexible. I am eligible for both family tax benefits and a carer's payment—I found out I could get \$50 a week.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Yes, great isn't it!

Ms LUEG: The financial effect to the Government is actually negative. They have taken me out of the workforce where I contributed significantly through my income tax, and now I am forced to be a teacher. I am not a teacher, I am not a trained language specialist, and I am not a trained psychologist, but I am 100 per cent sure that one of the golden rules of teaching and psychology is that a parent should not be the remedial teacher or tutor of their own struggling child. A struggling child needs their mother to be a mother and their specially trained third person to be a teacher.

The infant teachers from K-2 in my son's school all taught reading in accordance with best practice, so my son's reading difficulties are not because he had bad teaching. But whilst the best practice in reading is enough for 90 per cent of normal children, my son was born with dyslexia and he has an inability to learn reading normally, so he needs specialist help. I do not think the classroom teacher should be the one to provide

the specialist help. The specialist help should be provided by people who are trained in teaching children with the various disabilities. All the learning support teachers should be trained. Right now my son has learning support teachers and some of them do not know what dyslexia is or admit that it even exists. I had to tell them, yes, it does exist and there has been research over the last 50 years that shows it exists, and these are the best ways to teach them. They do not believe it; they think that if they teach, the children will learn to read.

Oliver is in his sixth year of school and not one teacher, not one learning support teacher, not one principal, not one school counsellor has ever uttered the word "dyslexia" to me. They have suggested reading failure, they have suggested that he might have Aspergers, they have suggested we get private speech therapy, occupation therapy and they have provided tips to me about how to home read. They have suggested that non-fiction books may be better. There are many other amusing suggestions that I will not list to avoid embarrassing the profession. Not one person in the entire teaching profession has pointed me in the direction of dyslexia. It was not even mentioned by the specialist teacher who taught reading recovery. Regular primary teachers should be trained to recognise dyslexia and they should be able to understand the classroom limitations and how to deal with a dyslexic child in the classroom. However, they should not be doing the teaching because that is impossible in the classroom.

My goal each year for the classroom teacher has been that my son survives to the end of the year with his self-esteem intact and that he does not hate school. That is how I judge the classroom teacher. However, I judge the school system very harshly. They have let my quite intelligent son reach year 5 aged 10 with a reading age of six. He is four years behind his peers. He is not nearly ready to read independently and not nearly ready for high school. Each year I have had to educate the classroom teacher about dyslexia and how it will affect his classroom participation. I have had to beg for some learning support and I have been forced to be the main remedial teacher because he is not getting attention in school during his best learning years. Whatever support he gets at school, I have been made to feel that I should be grateful for because they are doing more than he is entitled to. By that I understand to mean that he is not entitled to funding, therefore anything he does get—whether that is because a parent at the school has volunteered—is more than he deserves.

To get some attention I have been forced to become the squeaky wheel. I hate that because I actually respect and admire the teaching profession. My husband is a high school teacher and my mother was a primary school teacher. The beginning of each new school year brings huge anxiety to our household. We go through the whole thing over again: begging for help and educating professionals who should know about dyslexia. I have enormous regrets about not letting him be misdiagnosed as having Aspergers by the school counsellor when I had the chance.

My son is in band 1 for reading, spelling and punctuation and he is in band 5 for mathematics despite his dyslexia impacting his working memory for number facts. Interestingly, he was not technically entitled to have a reader for the NAPLAN test because he was not getting as a reader in the classroom. The only reason he got the reader was that the principal did it under the table. If it were not for my son and the other dyslexic boys in his year, his school would be much higher up the school rankings on the My School website. I am sure that if an analysis were conducted of all the children who are at band 1 and band 2 in literacy we would find that a large proportion are dyslexic, both diagnosed and most probably undiagnosed.

Being diagnosed is completely redundant in the New South Wales school system because dyslexic children do not attract funding, so they do not get any remedial attention. Their results will only get worse as the gap between readers and non-readers is emphasised in years 5, 7 and 9. I will read an exchange between myself and a friend whose son is high-functioning autistic:

I really like this statement "funding should be focused on functioning capacity and not the name of their disability". So true! It is a joke that an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis like Matt's qualifies his school for five hours of weekly aide time when on current indications he will not have any learning problems at all. I admit I am happy to play the system to get that extra pair of hands for his class. But that does not mean I think it is fair, especially when I see you constantly begging Oliver's school for help. As for dyslexia being a low support need, what can I say? Who on earth made that gobsmacking decision? Literacy so self evidently goes to the very heart of learning that I cannot believe anyone would think that a child having a severe literacy difficulty should be a low priority.

I wrote back:

I can't help having this regret that I should have let Oliver be misdiagnosed as Aspergers when I had the chance.

She wrote back:

I get that.

CHAIR: Thank you. So do we.

Ms FERGUSON: With regard to dyslexia, my neighbour's daughter is dyslexic and is in K-6 in a public school and has had no help. When her parents asked whether she could avoid being put through the humiliation of sitting the literacy and numeracy test [LANA] she was forced to sit it anyway. They have now put her in a Steiner school because they are without hope and they do not know what to do.

My daughter Sophie has Down syndrome and a vision impairment. She was born with congenital cataracts, a hearing impairment and autism. She has multiple disabilities. We adopted Sophie when she was one year old and we wanted to give her everything that we give our other children. One of the first questions our little children asked when we brought her home was, "Mummy, can she go to school with us when she is old enough?" We began the education journey when we first approached early intervention. We approached a hearing and vision early intervention service, but that was not her primary disability. We also approached another disability service, but they said that their primary disability focus was physical. We went around and around because Sophie's primary disability is classed as intellectual. However, there are no services for children whose primary disability is intellectual or those who have Down syndrome. There is no specific service. After much fighting we did get her into a service, but that was the beginning of the fight.

We started our children in the public system, but due to bullying and other issues we moved them to a private, independent Christian school. When we spoke to the principal about Sophie before we enrolled our other children we were told that she would be welcome and we were introduced to two other children with Down syndrome at the school. When she was three years old we were told by the principal that the board had decided not to allow any more enrolments of these children because they cost too much money. We then approached a second independent Christian school in our area and we were once again told that she would be welcome and I was introduced to an older girl at the school with Down syndrome.

For that and other reasons we moved our other five children to the second school. Both schools were very eager to accept our other children because they are very academically gifted and they play multiple instruments, which schools always like. The school was very well aware of Sophie because she came to and from the school each day when I delivered and collected my other children. I contacted the school a year and half before Sophie was due to start kindergarten to get everything organised with aides and so on and was told that she would no longer be able to start at the school because we would have to pay for any aide time she required. We were told that the school would not pay for any aide time so they could not accept her enrolment and that all parents paid for the aide time that their child received because the school did not receive funding from the Department of Education and Training for aide time.

Sophie had a full-time aide in the public system. She had contact lenses when she started kindergarten because she had had the cataracts removed. She now has interocular lenses so it not such a big issue. She qualified for a full-time aide because of the contact lenses. At the time, my husband was on a very meagre pastor's salary and I did not work because I had a small baby and Sophie to look after. As a result, we could not even think of paying another person's full-time salary.

We had already trialled Sophie attending a special school two days a week the year before she was due to attend school. That was completely unsatisfactory because she was used to being with regular children—our six other children—and she became distressed because of the large number of severely autistic children in the school. They were screaming and so on and it was very frightening and foreign for her. She was also being hit and knocked and other things were happening that made it unsuitable. We were encouraged by a service provider to mainstream her. As a parent it was overwhelming to start on that track. Even with my education and training it was still overwhelming to say to a principal that we were sure that mainstreaming would work. It was very frightening with a child with multiple disabilities.

We again went through the whole problem of approaching more specific specialist schools other than the one she was placed at. We were again refused by respective schools because her primary disability was not physical, hearing-related or vision-related and so on. It went on and on. In the end, our only choice was to put her in our local public school because they had to take her. It is worth mentioning that these children cannot be enrolled in out-of-area public schools, so there is no choice. If your local public school is not coping, if something is not working for whatever reason, the only option is to put your child back into a special school.

As I said, there is one choice of special school because the other schools will not take them. No-one wants them. We encountered a lot of resistance enrolling Sophie in a mainstream public school. If she had gone full-time to the special school where she was learning two days a week the year before kindergarten—they are allowed to go from the age of 4—they would have kept an aide for that class. By moving her out they lost an aide position at the special school and she got a full-time aide in kindergarten, in the mainstream school. I did not realise what was happening at the time and why there was all the pressure when the department said that it was all for mainstreaming. I have realised now as I have gone through the journey that it is all about numbers. It is always all about numbers.

For me, the first year through kindergarten was very difficult. It seemed ridiculous and upsetting that my little child, who was non-verbal and only a few feet high—she was still wearing size 1 leggings—had to go away from her beautiful brothers and sisters who loved her, supported her, could do sign language and who understood her every need. I had to drop them off first and I would then have to drop her off. She was just like a baby. The first year the teacher did not cope very well, not because Sophie had behavioural issues or anything like that, but because she felt overwhelmed with the number of specialists coming into her classroom. Young teachers find it quite threatening to have all those itinerant people and service providers coming in all the time and watching them teach. She felt very overwhelmed.

Despite that, Sophie flourished and was adored by everyone—by parents and by children—and on many occasions she had to have a roster made up to show who would be her friend on a specific day, as she was getting mobbed. Over the years her aides have been wonderful, but they had not been trained as teachers and they struggled to provide Sophie with what she needed. It is a case of the least qualified person teaching the person who needs the most qualified teacher. In first class she had a wonderful experienced teacher who said to her aide, "You take her for the first term while I get the other kids settled. I cannot manage." That is what has happened throughout the public system. It has been left to her aides to work out some sort of program.

A blessing through it all has been that the itinerant hearing vision teachers have been able to give the aides some guidance. We then lost the itinerant hearing teacher because Sophie had a higher hearing test. Even though she had an electrocochleogram under general anaesthetic—a hearing test given to children which removes behavioural responses—the surgeon said, "She is definitely deaf." The department would not accept that and it wanted us to put her under an invasive test every three years with wires going into her brain. The department would not accept the word of the specialists or the surgeons at the Children's Hospital.

Finally, as we progressed through the process, Sophie's aides were given a heavier load of administrative work and photocopying and they had to try to cope with other special needs children in the school who did not receive funding. Sophie was sitting more and more on her own at the back of the classroom. I realised in third class that she was still using the exact same computer program that I had supplied for her. In kindergarten, when we moved house Sophie went to different public school. In her classroom she was still doing the exact same program that I had taken to her original school in kindergarten. Nothing had changed from kindergarten until the end of third class. As a result, many things happened. I took in plastic bottles for a terrarium. I took in extra for the whole class because it was an area in which parents did not supply things.

Three weeks into the project Sophie's terrarium had not commenced. I said to her aide, "Why has she not done her terrarium?" Her aide responded and said, "I am helping the other kids." This time more confident in Sophie's ability to survive and to be loved in mainstream schooling. With more understanding of the law and my rights as a parent, I went to our independent Christian school, to which my other six children go, and again asked the school to allow Sophie entry. She entered the Christian school 6½ years after the original application. Twelve months after the second application I again approached the school, despite the situation having become urgent. This had never happened before, but someone in the public school had started hurting Sophie. She had handprints all over her and it became urgent to move her, yet the school still procrastinated and took a long time to accept her, which made it difficult.

Children who are now attending the independent Christian school system are not receiving any aide time at all. For example, a girl who has dyslexia and who just started is getting no aide time at all, yet in the public school system she was getting an hour a day for numeracy and literacy. She is now getting nothing. Despite that Sophie now has a fantastic curriculum at the independent school and she is receiving much higher quality education. I think it is worth mentioning that, as a teacher, I did not receive any training in special education at all until I started my Masters degree. As a teacher, even up to degree level, I had not received any training to help me to teach special needs children.

Sophie is now very happy and she does not have behavioural problems. It is working very well in the independent school system. However, we now have the worry, as she is in sixth class, about what will happen to her in high school, as we had originally agreed with the school that she would stay only for primary school. We are asking for aide funding to be attached to the child. When Sophie left the public system all the aide funding went, even though it was cheaper for the department to have her in the private system because it was not paying for all the itinerant teachers, all the support services and everything else. It is cheaper and it takes a lot of the pressure off the public school system by putting her into the private system. We are asking that the dollars be attached to the child, for the child to be allowed to move into different education systems, and for parents to be able to decide what is working best for the child. Funding must move with the child because multiple families are having their children split apart.

CHAIR: You said that the funding should follow the child. Is that how you all feel?

Ms LUEG: I think dyslexia should get some funding.

CHAIR: That is a good point. Today we have already had discussions about assessments based on functioning capabilities rather than on labels. Mark and Cassie Gardner talked about labels. Corinna, there is no funding in your assessment. What about you, Karyn?

Ms INGRAM: I wish to address the assessment processes. You have my submission. We are a bit different. Alexander who is 14 is year 8 equivalent and he is in a school for specific purposes [SSP] in the Macarthur area. Alexander has multiple disabilities and he is fully dependent. He has cerebral palsy, spastic quadriplegia, epilepsy, cortical visual impairment and intellectual delay. The doctors will tell you that his primary disability is the cerebral palsy and the Department of Education and Training will tell you that his primary disability is the intellectual delay. When he was first assessed for placement for school, given that he had such high support needs, we had to go through a district office and he had to go through an assessment process.

The first test that the department wanted him to sit was a Griffith test—a test that required him to be able to pick up blocks and to place them. Alexander has very poor fine motor skills. It required him to answer questions, and he is not vocal. Even at 14 years of age he cannot speak. The test was wholly inadequate. At the time we were going through a term baby study through the University of Sydney, because Alexander was born full term but ended up in intensive care. The university had been doing some studies over five years, and occasionally was doing follow-up appointments with him. The assessment was that he was unable to complete that Griffith test and the Department of Education and Training used that as sufficient evidence that he had an IQ lower than 55 and therefore placed him with students with intellectual disabilities in a school where the primary disability is intellectual.

When Alexander was 10 it was decided that he would be reassessed. The councillor went through a number of options and decided that none of them were suitable, given his level of disability, his inability to use fine motor skills, and his lack of speech. She settled on a test basically that was a tick the box for the teacher and for me. It was an adaptive behaviour assessment system. We were given many pages on which we ticked the boxes. Of course, when it all came back it showed that Alexander was extremely low in all areas, so the department deemed his placement to be correct. He has been assessed by tests that do not allow for his level of physical disability. I grant, as his mother, that he has intellectual disability, but I would really question whether it is severe. He has a wicked sense of humour, he is a great kid, and he is very amiable and sociable. We resent the fact that his placement primarily is due to intellectual disability.

When he is at school, that is where they are catering for him in an intellectual capacity. He does not have intervention in regard to his physical disabilities and his cortical vision impairment and things like that. So, it really is quite inadequate. But the assessment process itself is really inadequate across the board. It is unfair for the kids. It labels them. It does not look at their functioning capacity. There are students in Alexander's school who are very similar on paper, almost identical on paper, but you see these kids and they have capabilities in different areas. That is not being addressed. They are not being funded, they are not being taught in regard to their capabilities. It is all what is there on paper.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: How is Alexander coping with this inappropriate placement, the inappropriate functioning assessment?

Mrs INGRAM: I have to tell you, to be fair, Alexander loves school. He loves the routine of school. He loves being with his friends. Just the fact it gets him away from his mother is good. He enjoys the bus trip and those sorts of things. We have had the occasional teacher who pushes the boundaries a little bit and looks to teach more than just—at the moment they are doing a grooming thing, they are being taught to groom. I have spoken to the teacher. I think it is inappropriate. Once they get to senior school the curriculum changes and it goes to a life skills kind of thing for children with high support needs.

What they are trying to do is teach Alexander to comb his hair and brush his teeth. He does not have the fine motor skills to hang on to a toothbrush and stick it in his mouth and brush. He cannot, because of cerebral palsy, get his arm up high enough to comb his hair. The response from the school is it is appropriate because there are some students—what they are eluding to is they come from disadvantaged families, their grooming is not adequate. I find that offensive to put us all in the same bucket. You will have disadvantaged families, I do not care whether the child has disabilities or not. But this is the expectation. Thankfully we have a teacher who said, okay, if you do not think it is appropriate for Alexander we will not do that with Alexander, we will look for something else, and he is spending some time on a bike. It is a bike that is adapted to the wheelchair so he moves with his legs, a cycling motion, which is important at the moment because he has just had surgery.

I think the answer to your question is we can see as parents the education Alexander is receiving is inadequate. We do not believe we are getting the best from him. We believe he is capable of communication on a far greater level and it is very frustrating when we all fall short, parents as well as teachers, to help them along those lines. What helps is we talk to Alexander a lot and do a lot of work at home. He has two younger siblings who are always in his face. We make sure he is included in everything that we do at home. So we are trying to pick up the slack a little bit there. How he feels about it, you would have to ask him.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: First, a bit of information. Dyslexia now is officially a disability. We had several years of argument in this Parliament and last year two amendments were passed on the definition of special needs, and dyslexia is a disability. It is also included in Federal law. But not everybody within the education department understands that and that is an ongoing battle.

The second thing is tomorrow we have Associate Professor Jennifer Stephenson, Macquarie University Special Education Centre, who specialises in this work. I have seen the activity and it is absolutely brilliant. Also, Professor Max Coltheart, who is head of Cognitive Sciences at Macquarie University. He is also the world president of cognitive science and specialises in disability education programs. We also have today Mr Jim Bond, who is a well-known advocate for people with disability services. After they have all spoken tomorrow we will have all of the executives of the Department of Education and Training and you will have the opportunity to talk with. I do not want to ask any questions.

Dr JOHN KAYE: However, I do. Corinna, in respect of your child I did not follow everything. It ended well? It ended with your child getting some support?

Ms LUEG: No, he does not get any support. I basically pressured the principal and the learning support teachers to give him some support, so every year I have to go in there. Last year he got some left over time from the learning support teacher, who realises he needs help and he is very capable but, again, one of the things was a year-6 boy reads with him. That was very good because I said I need some time in the evening. We spend three hours doing remedial stuff. He is very good at sport and very good at art but we cannot do any of that because we have to learn to read. Everybody has to learn to read, that is a basic thing. At home, we are overwhelmed. My two youngest daughters don't get any attention because it takes so long to do homework or just to keep up with the curriculum.

One of the things they did is twice a week—and this is considered the help he gets—he gets to read with a year-6 student. So the year-6 student basically says to him, "Read." A year-6 student is not trying to teach someone with dyslexia. I have to appreciate that and be grateful for that because it is individual attention but for me, that is good, I do not have to read with him for half an hour in the night because he hates it, and we cry every week when I have to read with him. That did relieve me of it, but it is because a year-6 student is doing it and not a teacher doing it, and he might have twice a week for 20 minutes a learning support teacher.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So the problem here is systemic?

Ms LUEG: Every kid who has dyslexia would not be getting that unless they are lucky or the school has some extra funding or squeezes them in.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That extra funding would be by way of discretionary funding for the school?

Ms LUEG: I do not know. I get probably more help than the next person in year 1 now because the year-1 parent does not know she will have to fight for every five seconds she gets. So, my son now gets it because he is in year 5. I learned I am going to have to push and push and push to get some funding.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Keep pushing.

Ms LUEG: Except that I am here because the best of my son was between age 5 and age 10, and he is 10 now. I said to the teachers and their mouths dropped, I am thinking maybe he will be illiterate, and how will I prepare him for life as an illiterate? How do you go up to somebody and say, "I can't read, can you read that for me?" That is the point where I am. He is not ready to go to high school to learn independently at high school. I have not given up. I have said, if someone can teach him to read at school, I am now going on to the next stage where he has had his best years when you need to attack—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Unfortunately the worst years may lay ahead: 80 per cent of all of our prisoners are dyslexic. I suffered from dyslexia.

Ms LUEG: I know. If I can get in now I can teach him how to deal with it, hopefully. Exactly that, I am worried about his mental health. We have gone through five years of school where every week we cry when I have to be the one to force him to read, and I have to force him read because I know these are the best years when the brain is going to learn it. If I do not do it, no-one will do it, and I cannot let him reach age 10 without him having been exposed to language. I read to him various things. So, yes, I agree. I do not want him to have mental health issues when he gets to high school. Maybe he will be illiterate, maybe I will teach him how to cope with that with dignity.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: All your stories have been important for us to hear, which we did today. Thank you for what you have told us. I would like to pick up on this issue of Mrs Ingram's. I understand this is in relation to the original assessment processes, but in your submission you mentioned the possibility of performance measurements along the way. It would be incredibly complicated and would have to be part of the education plan et cetera for each person, but have you any ideas about performance measurement?

Mrs INGRAM: I do.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Would you give them to us?

Mrs INGRAM: It is a very difficult one. I wish I had brought them with me, but I had a big wad of Alexander's reports.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You can send them to us.

Mrs INGRAM: I will do that. It is called GAS, it is a goal assessment system, I think. It is a paper I found on Spastic Centre New South Wales letterhead. It looks at whether the child actually is attaining goals, achieving goals. It is an issue that I have. This is an odd statement to make, but Alexander has the right to fail. If we say to the child, "You can fail," it sets up an expectation that they will achieve. At the moment they get their School Certificate and their Higher School Certificate but it is almost—I do not know the word—as if there does not seem to be a whole lot of work that goes into it. It is almost tokenistic. How do you set a goal for children who have such varying disabilities? You do not know exactly what they can attain.

I realise we are talking outside mainstream schools but I think parents and teachers should be looking at the expectations, including the students in that role, and setting those goals. As I alluded to, the Spastic Centre has this form and it seems to be quite comprehensive and you have the goals. Do they attain that goal? Obviously a lot of work goes into that. I am not suggesting that we should set up all children with disabilities for failure. I think we have gone past those days, but it seems to me a little bit that our school certificates for children of the severity of disability as my son are a bit tokenistic.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: How do you get past the problems you have had with the assessment tools and actually setting achievable goals?

Mrs INGRAM: I believe there are better assessment tools available. I am not aware totally of what they are. I think the Association of Occupational Therapy may have some more information in that regard. There are better tests out there. We do have to allow for the fact that not every child can place a colour block in a certain area. Just because they do not have speech does not mean they do not have the intellect.

Mrs GARDNER: Could I add to that. We make goals. The education system makes goals for the rest of our children that they will attain this by the end of year 12 or year 10 or when they leave or whenever. It is exactly the same for a child with a disability. You have just got to do these measurable goals and work out the outcomes you want and work it from there. That is where we have to work. The Department of Education and Training has to work with families.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Many families are not as functional as you.

Mrs GARDNER: Therein lies education as well. A little while ago they were talking about some welfare worker or someone like that to be able to work with families about how to get what they want for their child. To help families think about the future is a big deal. You cannot do anything unless you have thought about the future.

Ms FERGUSON: Could I add a comment? I could really hear it in Corinna's voice: the hardest thing I have found with having a child with a disability is having to fight. It is so painful.

CHAIR: You have all mentioned that.

Ms FERGUSON: You walk into a room time and again, as someone else mentioned, filled with professionals and are treated like you are completely stupid. You go to a new setting where you really know your child but they have never met your child, yet they speak to you as if you just do not have a clue. Even though I have qualifications and everything, they speak to me as if I do not have any idea about my child. Many times I have cried in my life sitting in those meetings. I hate, as someone said, being the squeaky wheel. It is horrible to walk in knowing that people are thinking, "Oh no, here she comes again" or "Oh no, she'll want to bring her child to our school." It is very hard; it is much harder than living with a disability. It is very painful.

The saddest thing is my daughter's case: she is just wonderful and better than any values education program. There was a lot about values and education a couple of years ago. Soph's been a much better values education program for the children around her in her school than any values education program could be. That is what mainstream does. Actually, on Friday some fourth class girls ran up to my younger daughter and said, "Georgia, is Sophie your sister?" She said "Yes." They said, "Well, she's the coolest kid in the whole school" because she gets to do cooking and she gets free slushies when she does the ironing for the canteen. So she has got the system totally worked out. But I want to acknowledge the pain because I am educated in the education area. I cannot even imagine how people find their way through this who are not a teacher and do not have any training at all. It is really hard.

Mr GARDNER: I think a lot of families are a lot more functional, but working with the department, battling all the time, makes it dysfunctional. You have to have enormous skills and perseverance to actually get an outcome. As parents, often we are labelled as dysfunctional because no-one listens to us. No-one understands what we are trying to do. That makes it really hard too.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I did not mean to generalise. I meant to say that many persons with children with disabilities and the families actually are not that functional, but not dealing with this specific issue.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: No doubt this is a stressful topic for everybody, particularly the parents, and I understand the stresses that parents go through. I believe Mrs Gardner may have raised the issue about parents needing training. Is there a model or is there somewhere around the world where parents receive training that can address a lot of these issues at home and school?

Mrs GARDNER: I went through several years of not knowing what on earth I was doing, but knowing in the end what I wanted or what we wanted. So I went to university and did a social science degree in

disabilities because I was so sick of feeling so stupid all the time. I now work with families on exactly this issue and I am still in the early days. There is lots of stuff coming up about education for families. I know the organisation I work for is really interested in doing exactly this. But you go to the Department of Education and Training and because it is just this enormous organism of its own, they are not interested in trying to work with other service providers. In fact, they can be quite—I do not know, aggressive is not the word—difficult.

Ms FERGUSON: If principals received training, that would really help because the principal of the school is always the first contact point when you go to have that first interview. Time and again I have been berated, and it can be aggressive with an adult man standing over you berating you when your child has done something. Of course you do not want them to bite someone else or pull their hair, but the parent gets berated as if they have done the naughty thing. It is a very hard power relationship to have an adult man standing over you berating you or even when you approach a principal at the first contact point, "Can my child come to your school?" It is a very unequal power relationship. If principals received training in this area, that would really help parents.

CHAIR: Thank you all for what you are doing every day. You have all mentioned having to fight. By articulating your individual children's issues, you are articulating on behalf of so many families. We appreciate that. You should not have that fight, but our recommendations will try to address that inequity as well as issues for assessment and training for teachers, parents and all of us. We appreciate your contribution today. We look forward to continuing our discussion. Perhaps some Committee members may have other questions to ask. As advocates for your children, you are doing a brilliant job. You have done a great job on behalf of others. Thank you very much.

Mr GARDNER: This is a great opportunity that you guys have got. These inquiries do not come up very often, so it is over to you. Just make sure you make this one count.

CHAIR: We will definitely do our very best and then it is up to the Government to respond.

Mr GARDNER: I understand the processes.

CHAIR: We have also asked whether we can have the Government assessment system [GAS] test to which you referred because that would be very useful. This is two-way communication; if you feel there is anything else we need to know or that we missed today, please let us know.

(The witnesses withdrew)

GEOFF SCOTT, President, New South Wales Primary Principals Association and Principal of Blacktown South Public School, sworn and examined, and

JANET MARSHALL, Chair, Disability Programs Reference Group, New South Wales Primary Principals Association,

CHRISTINE MASON, Executive Member, Secondary Principals Council, and Principal of Dubbo School of Distance Education, and

LILIANA MULARCZUK, Deputy President, Secondary Principals Council, and Principal of Merrylands High School, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: You may make a statement if you wish, but bear in mind that we are all itching to ask questions. Therefore, I ask that you keep your opening statement as concise as possible.

Ms MULARCZYK: I might begin, with everyone's permission. I was listening to the end of the parents and I guess we are all fighting for adequate funding, adequate resourcing and discretionary funding to be given to the system—in our case, the Department of Education and Training. We are all fighting for that because we want the best for all the individual students. It is really important that we do not draw a line in the sand that perhaps it is the department that is not trying to provide adequate funding because that is not the case. So I would like to premise nearly everything I am going to say today on that, that we really do need to speak to the Government about the funding that we need in our schools for all our children.

Ms MASON: I would like to mention a couple of things as well. First of all, I have a sister who has Down syndrome, so I have grown up in a family with that. She was the eldest child of six children so I have had personal experience as well. The school that I run is a distance education school and we get a lot of students enrolled with us who have disabilities and because the face-to-face school, the local communities and rural communities in which they live do not have the resources that are needed to support them in a face-to-face class situation, many of those children come to us.

We work with their parents; we do individual education programs and a lot of planning with the families to cater for those needs. But what that then means is that the child is living at home with mum as their supervisor, not as their teacher; the teachers are based at one school. It works successfully; for some kids it works really well; for others kids, they need more support in the classroom. I fully support what Lila has just said; I see the department really striving to provide for probably a large number of students who have disabilities or special needs in government schools.

I take the point that the Hon. Christine Robertson raised earlier. I understood where you were coming from, that you were not generalising. But, yes, many of our parents come to us without the ability to advocate for what their children need. We as principals in our school are also limited by the very precise allocation of resourcing, often based on labels of children. It is totally unsatisfactory. Throughout the submission I have put in, it becomes very clear that the principals would like to see funding related to functional capacity rather than labels.

Mr SCOTT: Can I state that I am not the male principal that was referred to in the previous answer, the one who stood over people. My school is at Blacktown south, in western Sydney. It has just under 800 students. We do not have any support classes for special needs students, but we do have a huge range of students with a variety of disabilities that come into our mainstream school setting. I think one of the important areas that we are all focused on, from the point of view of school leaders, is how we can, first, increase the level of resourcing, and second, target it most effectively towards the students whose parents are obviously, from this morning and from our experience in schools, really struggling.

We have 1,800 principals in our Primary Principals Association. They are government principals from New South Wales primary schools, central schools and schools for specific purposes. We are very keen to see an outcome from this inquiry that will enable us, as a Department of Education and Training group of principals, to deliver the best possible service for students. We take on board criticisms every day of the week in terms of what we can and cannot provide. Our hands are tied to some degree because of the lack of flexibility of funding. We will talk a little more about that as the time progresses. I might ask Jan if she will say how we found out the information from our principals in putting together the submission you have before you.

Ms MARSHALL: My role in this as the chairperson of the reference group was to put together the submission from the principals. We surveyed principals, gave them your terms of reference, and asked them to comment. My job was simply not to interpret that but to put that together in some form of a submission to you, which is what I have attempted to do. It is interesting to note that across the State, from rural to metropolitan areas, many of the key things were the same from all of our principal members. I would reiterate, together with my other colleagues, that we all work very, very hard to do the very, very best for our kids, and we welcome the opportunity to be here and to have some input into your deliberations and your suggestions.

CHAIR: Am I correct in assuming that you are all of the same view in terms of assessment based on functioning capacity?

Ms MASON: That was the response from the secondary principals.

Ms MARSHALL: However, some primary principals did say that we should not completely dismiss disability as an assessment tool, that it should be that and functional ability—but very much functional ability.

CHAIR: Does context affect that as well?

Ms MASON: Particularly, I think, in rural areas, where you do not have access to the same health professionals. There needs to be more flexibility in schools, because it is the people in the school community who know the resources they can tap into, and at the moment it is very difficult.

CHAIR: There has been a bit of discussion about curriculum, particularly in high school environments and about having a particularly tailored curriculum to children with a disability. There has also been discussion about the separate issue of students in a school for emotionally disturbed/behaviourally disordered students having a primary curriculum and primary teachers rather than a secondary curriculum.

Ms MASON: So that those students are allowed to access School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, they often have a dual enrolment when they get to years 9 and beyond. The schools are able to enrol them as distance education students so that they can access the higher levels of curriculum from teachers in distance education schools. Sometimes it works satisfactorily. But there is a big gap in curriculum availability, partly I think because of the review of the HSC when it was made a lot more rigorous. I think vocational education and training has come a long way to addressing those inadequacies, but the life skills courses should not be used for students who are not life skills candidates. There is a tendency for some schools to choose those courses now, because they do not have other options. There is a capacity, particularly with the increase in the age of enrolment to 17, for schools to use the expertise they have, if they were given appropriate resources, to develop courses more suitable for those young people.

Mr SCOTT: I do not think it is peculiarly a secondary issue in terms of curriculum. One of the points in our submission basically says there is no suitable curriculum meeting the needs of students that are IO and IS, or moderate and severe intellectual disability. It is an area that is coming under increasing focus, particularly in the current national atmosphere of NAPLAN-ing everything—the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy. Many of our principals of SSP schools and teachers in them say, "Look, this is just not appropriate for our children." The curriculum is not appropriate, and assessing them and making some judgement on funding based on NAPLAN results is entirely irrelevant to many of the SSP schools.

CHAIR: Is there a push from other States to have a national curriculum that is appropriate for children with disabilities and special needs?

Mr SCOTT: From the primary perspective, we have major concerns about the national curriculum. We agree that it is a great thing to aim for and strive for, but we believe that the holistic nature of primary education is going to receive less than adequate attention from a national curriculum produced currently in its draft form for consultation by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority set up by the current Commonwealth Government. We think that is a major concern.

Our concern is basically the lack of focus on the holistic nature of primary education, and that it is seemingly totally devoid of realisation that there is this range of students in our primary schools, and in our secondary schools for that matter, that just do not fit curriculum and therefore have to have special needs provision. But do you exclude them from NAPLAN tests? The idea is to encourage as many students as

possible, and parents in many cases want students, particularly with low level disabilities, to access NAPLAN. But when we are talking about severe disabilities and moderate disabilities, the lack of curriculum and the lack of appropriate assessment mechanisms is quite stark.

Ms MULARCZYK: That would be reflected in the views of the secondary principals as well: that the Australian curriculum is really lacking in its integration—a holistic approach to the child in terms of the different subjects at this point. The fact that the curriculum is not enhanced by differentiation for different students' needs is really a concern for us. I will hand over to Chris.

Ms MASON: I recall—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: This is not part of the terms of reference.

CHAIR: I understand we need to come back to some of the other specific issues—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Madam Chair, that is within the terms of reference. We specifically talk about curriculum issues. Ms Mason was about to address an important curriculum issue.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: As long as it relates to the question we are dealing with.

CHAIR: Would you like to finish, and then we will go on with the next question?

Ms MASON: I just picked up on the comment made by the lady whose child had dyslexia and the issues that she had in primary school. When her child moves into secondary school and has up to eight teachers and a non-integrated curriculum they will struggle even more. The new curriculum needs to address that.

CHAIR: Thank you. That is a very good point. In terms of teacher training, we have had a number of submissions from teachers, particularly where they are teaching mainstream classes, saying that they are ill equipped, that their training has not been adequate. What do you think needs to happen in terms of teacher training? I know that there will be some online training, and that is a whole separate issue, but in terms of basic teacher training what should happen?

Mr SCOTT: I think preservice training is critically important. We have said in our submission that at the moment it seems to be patchy at best and it needs to be a broad generalist approach by the training institutions that says to preservice teachers, "These are the students and these are the demands that will be placed on you and here is some preparation for it." That needs to be followed up with intensive work once the teacher's career has started, in service professional learning and so on. However, the preservice training at the moment, we believe, needs to be a focus.

Ms MULARCZYK: And it needs not to be an elective 10-week course; it needs to be integrated throughout the education of the preservice teacher.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Preservice.

CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I am asking for a definition.

CHAIR: That is before they go out to teach—

Ms MARSHALL: Teachers in training.

CHAIR:—rather than ongoing. Can somebody give us your views on the proposed school learning support program changes?

Ms MULARCZYK: There are two of us.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I would like to hear both the high school and the primary school on that.

Ms MULARCZYK: There are two of us, Mr Scott and myself, who are on the reference group, and Ms Marshall is working with it. So I will leave it to Ms Marshall as the expert on the group. We have had a voice in formulating the trial as it is going to play now. We have lots of concerns, but this trial began because principals in schools had identified issues that were not working in terms of support in schools. So there has been a remodelling to see if there is another way to better provide for students with special needs, and that is what is happening with this trial that will begin in about four weeks time. So if you would like to invite us back we could give you more accurate and intent feedback then. I am sure Mr Scott will be clearer, or Ms Marshall.

Ms MARSHALL: I guess I have some knowledge about this project because last year I was, in my role as the chairperson, given the briefing on the school learning support program, but my involvement with that has moved forward and I need to declare here that I am now in the project team for that program to help the trial in the Illawarra south east. As a principal of a primary school and as the disabilities program chairperson, the trial was what was asked for by the primary principals because, as Ms Mularczyk has said, it was in response to issues that we had raised as principals and teachers had raised. It is important that it be trialled so that we can see if it offers some solution and also to help us to inform our thinking around how best to meet the needs of kids with disabilities.

So I would feel fairly confident in saying that primary principals are supporting the trial and it will be very interesting to seeing the outcome of how we can better meet the needs of kids and the teachers who teach those kids. The complexities around this are that it is classroom teachers who are now having in their classroom—and some of the teachers this morning described this very well—a range of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms and they are all working very hard, and the schools are working very hard, to ensure that those kids have the best possible outcomes that they can. So I guess I have just digressed a bit but primary principals will be very interested in seeing how this improves.

CHAIR: There has been some negative criticism of the online education aspect of that. Do you think that is unwarranted?

Ms MASON: I have enrolled in the online course and I am currently doing it at the moment. There is one on Aspergers and I find it very useful. I am with a group of about 16 teachers who are doing it.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I just clarify, you are doing one which is specialising in Aspergers?

Ms MASON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So this is not the 115 hours—

CHAIR: This is extra hours in relation to the—

Dr JOHN KAYE: —for the school learning support coordinators, which was supposed to be general across all areas of disability.

Ms MASON: Is it the same course?

Ms MARSHALL: If I may talk about that, my understanding is that it is 110 hours. It was for school learning support coordinators but that has now been broadened to other teachers and certainly teachers involved in the trial in the Illawarra south east region. It is 110 hours but it is in modules, and one of the modules is on autism and one is on behaviour. Certainly, teachers are involved in the autism part of it and the behaviour part of it. I have heard some of the criticisms of online courses in all of my roles, and anecdotally I would say that people who are engaged in the course are finding it useful and relevant. Other people who may not have engaged in the course have different opinions.

Ms MULARCZYK: I would like to reinforce that because I have certainly heard a lot of people, and this is a quote, "This is the best I've had for a long time". So I think the responses to it are quite extreme, and I have to say I think it is a big indication if a principal chooses to do the online training because we certainly do not need to look for more work. So I think that says it all.

Mr SCOTT: The other aspect about the school learning support program, I think, apart from the training aspect is the fact that principals and teachers, in looking at the proposed model, have looked at the fact that one of the positives out of it is that the model does not impose the need for a disability confirmation, the

paperwork, to enable support to be put in place for a student. So that is a positive, and we hold that thought out there that we do not need to label students and we do not need to have disability confirmation paperwork to access the support under this proposed new model.

The down side to that coin could possibly be—and it is a possible down side—is that it may lead governments that are prepared to do the funding and required to do the funding for students to say, "We haven't got the case in front of us to say we need more support". So there is a concern that while we are removing that degree of paperwork and labelling of students, there is a danger that we do not want to see governments abrogating their responsibility to say, "We've got to fund these students, irrespective of the fact that they haven't got a disability confirmation."

Dr JOHN KAYE: My first question leads on neatly from that. My first question was going to be: Did all 2,228 principals in the public sector in New South Wales caucus or is it just that the situation is so uniform that you call came up with the same views? One of the remarkable features of both the primary and secondary submissions to this inquiry was that the problems were very well defined and very uniform across the whole lot. But that is not really a question; it is more of an observation. My question goes to the issue of functional assessment, and that is a clear desire that is coming through in all the evidence from teachers, the Teachers Federation and parents.

It seems to be that that is almost at the point of being consensus, which is unusual. If we did move to functional assessment—I must say I am personally strongly persuaded by the arguments—how do we then determine the allocation of resources to ensure that all students get access to the specialist services they need? We determine this person has functional issues in various areas but right now our speciality is in Aspergers, autism, language and so on. How do we marry up those two systems? The diagnosis model is designed specifically to marry somebody to a specific service.

Ms MARSHALL: I hope I have understood the question properly, but the diagnosis model has lots of issues. It relies on parents who are willing and able to provide diagnosis for children, and that is why I think we would advocate moving more towards a functional assessment. If you have a child with a diagnosis, two children—one of the parents this morning said there are people at her child's school with exactly same diagnosis yet their needs are completely different. That is what we are coming across on a daily basis as principals and teachers. So I guess we would be very willing, and we would want to work with people to work out how we can make sure that all of the children have the relevant amount of support. I think that is the question you are asking. I would like to tell you that teachers as a profession are really quite adept at identifying children with special needs whether they have a diagnosis or not.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I probably poorly expressed my question. If a child holds a piece of paper that has his or her functional assessment on it, how do we then translate that to whether that child goes to a support class of a certain kind or goes into the mainstream with a certain kind of support or goes off to a School for Specific Purposes [SSP]? Is there a way of doing that or do we need to—

Ms MASON: I do not know that there is. Jan just said that teachers and professionals in schools are very adept at identifying the functional needs of students, and every community is so different that what is available that you can give them is not homogenous across the State. I think we need to rely more upon the professional capacity of principals and their staff in schools to know their community and know their contacts. I think the bottom line is there needs to be more funding in government schools for students with special needs.

Mr SCOTT: I think the other aspect, Dr Kaye, is the issue of teacher judgement—Jan and Chris alluded to it. I think we sometimes undervalue the extreme importance of teacher judgement. Teachers talk to each other and they regularly share issues about a student's learning, about a student's needs, a student's disabilities, where appropriate, and the judgement of teachers has generally proven to be very accurate. So those students with those needs will be the focus of the whole school in terms of putting the appropriate support into place.

Ms MASON: There are mechanisms in schools to address a situation where you might get a particular teacher whose judgement needs some help. There are mechanisms in schools to address that.

Ms MARSHALL: If I might just add, perhaps flexibility to me as a principal to meet the child's needs. So if you give me a huge amount of money, and within my school context I can make those decisions about how

to best meet the needs of the children in the school, that might go some way towards matching the functional assessment to the support that the children need.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you think the functional assessment needs to formally take account of teacher-professional judgement and principal-professional judgement, or could that be part of the way the funds are spent once they come to the school?

Mr SCOTT: I think we have to identify a quantum first. I think in identifying the quantum of need we would need to take that into account school by school. Certainly it then translates into how that is distributed within the school and that is where flexibility is the key important factor, but we have to get that funding identified into schools. There would be very few schools, I think, judging from the comments we get regularly from our principals, which do not have students with special needs in every mainstream class. It is irrespective of the type of suburb, the type of family background, rural, regional, metropolitan, North Sydney, far west; every school has these students with special needs and teachers are coping with that on a daily basis.

Ms MASON: And one of the areas of growing special needs is the mental health of students as well.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Is that a labelling issue or a reality issue?

Ms MASON: I do not think it is labelling.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I think Christine was asking whether that was a diagnosis issue? Are we getting better at diagnosis?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: She knew that.

Ms MASON: I am sorry, what was your question?

Dr JOHN KAYE: It was not my question; it was Christine's question. My question follows on from that question, to the issue of school counsellors. Given that we were told this morning that the average age of school counsellors is 54, so it is likely there will be a lot of retirements, would you describe the situation that we start re-training school counsellors as being urgent?

Ms MULARCZYK: Unanimously, absolutely.

Dr JOHN KAYE: There is already a shortage of school counsellors.

Ms MULARCZYK: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How is that playing out in schools and what are the consequences?

Mr SCOTT: The ratio of counsellors to students is too low. I have a school of nearly 800 students at Blacktown South, in western Sydney, and I have a counsellor for two and a bit days per week.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So it is lower for primary school than high school?

Ms MASON: No, it is lower in high schools than primary schools.

Ms MULARCZYK: There are other issues as well.

Mr SCOTT: There are issues about counsellor supply. One of the issues is obviously it is a very expensive business to train counsellors. If we are going to have a large hole in the number of counsellors because of the early retirement age, as Dr Kaye alluded to, that is quite true. One of the aspects we looked at is to try and look at the workload of counsellors and say: What is the critical and key issue for the professional school councillor to do? What else can we do as a government and as a system to maybe have some paraprofessionals who will be able to come into a school and work on some of the lower level issues, to allow school counsellors more focused time on the area that they need? That is just one thought.

CHAIR: So you would have a separate assessment counsellor to deal with assessment issues et cetera?

Ms MASON: I think there is a real issue about the time counsellors are spending on assessments, which is tacked to the need to label people in order to get resources. So if we reviewed the need to label and spent less time doing administrative tests, like the lady whose child had multiple disabilities—she described perfectly how inadequate testing is—why are we spending so much time and resources on that?

Ms MULARCZYK: I would like to add, in terms of the counsellor allocations, my school has 3½ days of counsellor allocation, which is still not adequate, but I have three different people doing that. So therein lies another multitude—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You have got no consistency?

Ms MULARCZYK: I do; it is the students who do not.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: When you read through the submissions received from these hundreds of parents, you get the submissions that come from highly motivated and competent parents, and everyone somewhere along the line tells the story about how they have pushed, fought and promoted their child but they always reach lack of school, lack of class, lack of special place. What do you as principals advise parents to do when you have to say to them, no?

Ms MASON: They need to put pressure on governments to put more funding into special needs resourcing. It needs to become a significant voting issue and maybe that is an issue because in the whole of society they are not a big enough lobby group.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: The trouble is we have not got much left to sell.

Mr SCOTT: I think it is also an issue, based on my experience as a principal, which is fairly extensive stretching back more than quarter of a century, that the degree of services provided outside of the school system has fallen dramatically in that quarter of a century. So that where at one stage you would be able to have community services provided for families to support them, many times that load now falls back on the school. For that reason it is a very frustrating interface between parents and principals, often when the resources are not adequate you can see the need. You do not need an assessment to talk to a parent or look at the child. The accounts given by the parents this morning that we sat at the back and listened to were very moving but, again, that is the tip of the iceberg because they are erudite, well-read parents. Out there are a whole stack of parents that do not have those capabilities and confidences.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: The bottom line of my concern is that you have got to say no to these people. They feel absolutely helpless. What do you say to them? Where do you say they ought to now go?

Ms MULARCZYK: I am actually going to go back to the word "no". No does not come up as the final outcome. What happens is that we stretch, we pull, we trade-off and we move around, we shift where the resourcing is. None of that is acceptable, and I understand that, but that is the position that we are in as well, and that is certainly the position that the families are in within a school system, and also in the public sector where they are looking for further support as well.

Mr SCOTT: I have to say that our public education system takes all comers. So if parents present with students for enrolment we try, as Lila has said, to massage the limited resources we have to do that. But that is not the fault of the Department of Education and Training, the school or the parents, it is basically a case of saying there is an increasing demand and need, and it is a very expensive need. Governments, I think, have to be approached strongly and firmly by everyone—parents, principals and teachers—and say "This is what is needed".

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Earlier today parents spoke about training. One of their significant concerns was feeling intimidated when speaking to teachers. They felt there should be training, particularly with principals of the school, to overcome that intimidation. What do you feel about that?

Mr SCOTT: Speaking as the sole male principal sitting here.

CHAIR: Don't feel intimidated.

Mr SCOTT: I get intimidated by the demands of this, more than me trying to be the intimidator. What Reverend the Hon. Dr Gordon Moyes said earlier was basically quite true. We are the interface where we have got to try to stretch the demands that we have. One parent this morning said the school scraped up a bit of additional time. That is what we do. If there is no additional time available we scrape together what we can. We would like to think that we are not intimidatory but I can understand if a parent does not feel empowered as a person and they come into a systemic structure, such as a school, in a formal interview situation most often sitting down with the principal, teachers concerned or the executive, whether it is enrolment or a regular review of process. One of the things that we try to overcome is, as I believe in schools, to make parents feel welcome, at home and part of the partnership. Sometimes they will go away feeling that that has not been provided sufficiently and that is regrettable but I think we are doing our best.

Ms MASON: I do think there is a place for some additional training. I think we do that in our schools but there will always be someone who makes an insensitive comment to a person who is coming in with a lot of angst and rejection over the years.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: This morning I saw a letter from a head office departmental officer in the field of access and equity, I think the title is, which was really just telling a parent plus their support staff, "You are going around this the wrong way, don't do that again."

Ms MASON: That should not happen.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The Primary Principal's Association's comment was children should not be in mainstream classes because they cause disruption and cause distress to teachers and other children. How do you reconcile that with other submissions by parents who want as a choice to have their child in mainstream school? It comes across powerfully that teachers want to have that choice but parents also want a choice as to where to put their children.

Ms MARSHALL: And they should and that was just an illustrative comment by one person. I guess the challenge is that within the school system we need to provide the very, very best of education for all of our children, and that is what we strive to do continually on a daily basis. The challenge comes—and one of the teachers this morning eluded to it—when you have, for example, in a class of 20 kindergarten children, nine children with significant learning needs, if I can use that broad term, to make sure that you are catering for all of the children. Every parent has the right to have their child educated in the public system in their local school and that is an absolute right. Our job as a principal is to ensure that that can happen to the best of our ability for all of those children.

But we do have teachers, like our colleagues this morning, who say that they are struggling to provide the best for all of the children. I think there was a question from a woman who said "What about the parents of the children that do not have those? Do we get pressure from those parents?" Yes, certainly we do from parents who are just as anxious about their children and their children's education and how that is being impacted on. But we also have concerns from parents of children with disabilities about how their child's disability is impacting on the whole class. So it is a whole issue for us all to tackle. I think what we need is the wherewithal to be able to do that to the very best of our ability. We are committed as a public education system to provide the very best for all of our kids and that is what we are trying to do.

Mr SCOTT: The level of support is widespread from high-needs students in schools for specific purposes [SSP] through to support classes in mainstream schools, through to mainstream classes that are not support classes but have additional resources, usually school learning support officers—they used to be called teacher's aides, special—who are most often local parents who work with the teacher in the classroom to provide support. So there are varying levels of support available.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: We have not heard much about the support structures but we will later.

Mr SCOTT: This is critically important because there are a whole variety of different levels of support available but one of the difficulties is trying, with the parent, to work together to say, "This is the best of that range of settings possible position for them". Parents might say, "But I really want my child in a mainstream class." The school might say, "Well, look, based on everything we have talked about, discussed and looked and assessed and so on, it is probably not the best placement." So that is where that tension, I guess, comes in.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: This morning the Committee heard interesting definitions put forward of what kindergarten is all about. Do you believe there should be some separation of children at preschool level, or kindergarten where it is a really a mixing pot where things are worked through for the future? Has it changed as a function? The Committee heard about how hard it is to have these huge mix-ups but I believe kindergarten has always been like that. Has it changed?

Ms MARSHALL: Perhaps if I could start that because I am a primary school principal and a kindergarten teacher, that is my background. We have always had a range of children coming into kindergarten and the whole idea of kindergarten is to look at every child, see where they are and move them onto where they need to be. At any school setting you have got a range of abilities coming into kindergarten. The difficulty for us arises when children come to kindergarten without us knowing that they may have a learning disability or a disability of any kind. That is when the challenge arises, when children come.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: That is not new. That has always been the case?

Ms MARSHALL: That has always been the case. I certainly do not have any figures, but in my teaching career I would suggest that we are having more children certainly with mental health issues coming into schools and in kindergarten and certainly other significant learning needs coming into kindergarten. So the change seems to be that there seems to be more children coming in with significant needs. There are a lot of children who are coming that we do not know until they come and then there is that time factor of finding out what their significant needs are and how we can best meet their needs. If we can have some structure to do that before school so that basically, to use a colloquialism, the children can hit the ground running when they come to school, then that would help all schools to cater best for those little kids.

Mr SCOTT: There is a program that the State Government has introduced called Best Start, which has just come into being for all schools this year across the State. We had 18 months of trials before that. My school was on one of the early trials. It is not a baby NAPLAN; it is not a kindergarten NAPLAN. It is an assessment process that enables the parents and teachers to sit down and talk together with the student and try to determine the needs of those students before they actually come into the kindergarten. It is proving to be highly valuable for our teachers in our schools to get that information prior to the children actually starting so that we can map out programs more accurately.

The other aspect, I guess, is preschool education. We currently have 100 preschools attached to government primary schools. Our Primary Principal Association position is that in any school large enough to cater for a group of students we want and would like to see a government preschool attached to those government primary schools. From age 3½, 4, it is critically important that the early years are covered at the local school level. It really is a push that we have had for many years to try to get more preschool focus.

CHAIR: Would you elaborate on that last issue where you want more Department of Education and Training preschools attached to schools? Is it the case that the department preschools do not get the level of assistance in terms of extra supports—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Federal dollars.

CHAIR: —yes, that other preschools or long day care centres might get or even Department of Community Services involvement?

Mr SCOTT: I think there are 800 of them or thereabouts. Most of them are Department of Community Services run and operated. The 100 preschools that are attached to government public schools run exceptionally well. I am not sure of the comparative funding levels, Madam Chair, of those two. But certainly it is an area that future governments should look at.

Ms MASON: I have a preschool attached to my school. One of the issues is the requirements for the physical environment. I think that is an inhibitor for the Department of Education because they are very strict.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I can tell you a result of that. When I was due to go to kindergarten just after the War there was a lack of places in the public school kindergarten, so I was sent to Miss Cherry's School for Girls.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: That is probably why you are so sensitive.

Mr SCOTT: It is good to know, Madam Chair, there is somebody here who is as old as I am.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contributions today. The Committee secretariat may be in touch with you to clarify issues or obtain further information. I know you will watch our inquiry as it progresses and as we aim to unravel this issue and come up with recommendations to Government.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Luncheon adjournment)

GEOFF NEWCOMBE, Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools New South Wales,

CATHERINE ANN PINNINGTON, Director of Professional Services, Association of Independent Schools New South Wales, and

ROBYN MARGARET YATES, Director, Association of Independent Schools New South Wales, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Welcome to the afternoon session of the first day of this inquiry. I welcome representatives from the Association of Independent Schools New South Wales. The Committee has the capacity for any of you to make a brief opening statement before questions commence. The Committee has received your submission and is keen to hear all you have to say.

Dr NEWCOMBE: I will start with a couple of brief remarks and hand over to Cate Pinnington, who will carry on with the submission. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee. I represent the Association of Independent Schools New South Wales, which is the peak body for a very diverse range of independent schools in the State. The schools include faith-based schools—and we have about 80 per cent faith-based schools—Aboriginal schools, cultural group schools such as Turkish, Armenian and so on and, of course, there are special schools. We have 25 special schools and that is the highest number for any non-government sector in the country. Of course, non-government picks up both Catholic and independent schools.

However, the majority of students with a disability in our sector are included in mainstream schools. Of those students with disability, both in the special schools and the mainstream schools, about one-third have what we term "high and complex support needs". It is important for the Committee to realise how those students are funded in the independent sector. We thought we would give a very quick example of a student whom we have costed for this year, 2010. The student is enrolled in kindergarten in an independent school. The student has high-support complex needs and we estimate that the total cost to the school for educating that little child is about \$81,000. The total amount of funding from governments will be \$16,000. So there is a clear shortfall of \$65,000.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: There you are, John. Were you listening to that?

Dr JOHN KAYE: How much would that kid get?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Sorry, was there a question?

CHAIR: No.

Rev the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I am just making sure that the Greens understood that financial position.

Dr NEWCOMBE: I can repeat it if you like.

CHAIR: No, that is fine.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I did hear it. We will not start playing politics.

Dr NEWCOMBE: I was saying that the shortfall is \$65,000. It is very important that the Committee realises—and I am sure it does—that the school community meets this shortfall, which is the parents. Parents of other children, through fees and fundraising, will meet this extra \$65,000. That is just for one student at that school. Clearly, it demonstrates two things: first, be in adequacy of the current funding levels, and, second, that this applies only to the non-government sector where the shortfall has to be met by other parents. I will hand over to Cate, who will walk you through an actual example, a case study, so that the Committee can get a feel for one of the situations we deal with and briefly highlight the main issues that we see facing all schools in this area, and just comment on a suggested funding model.

Ms PINNINGTON: Thank you. I take this opportunity to talk to you for a couple of minutes about one particular student, a student who, for the purposes of today, I will refer to as William. I cannot reveal his name due to privacy and I will not reveal his particular school. However, he is a student who is enrolled in a secondary school in regional New South Wales. He would be a student that we consider to have complex and

high support needs. He presents with very serious mental health issues. He presents with some quite significant and challenging behaviours. He has very high levels of anxiety. His functional needs are the most important things to note in that he is very rigid in his thinking. He has a great deal of difficulty understanding what is going on around him with his peer interactions. He experiences a great deal of difficulty accessing the curriculum as it is delivered in a class of 25 students. He also has a diagnosis of autism. Having said that, he is a very, very intelligent young man who has great aspirations for when he leaves school.

Having said that, it was very important for this school to address this student's needs, because he was engaging with a number of very serious issues and behaviours that were of concern to his family, himself, his medical practitioners and the school. He was engaged in self-harm, he was engaged in hurting and harming other students and the teachers and the other students at the school felt at risk at different times. In order to address these needs, the school worked in very close collaboration with his family, his medical practitioners and with the support of the Association of Independent Schools to develop a plan for that particular student. That involved conducting a number of risk assessments across the course of the school day, looking at each curriculum area that he was engaged in, each class, looking at the practical nature of those classes and the implements that might be used in subjects such as design and technology and PDHPE. There had been an incident with a javelin at one point in time.

Having said that, this student, as I stated before, had very clear academic abilities and post-school aspirations. The school decided, in conjunction with the family, that it was necessary to work very closely to develop a number of the adjustments that were required. There were adjustments made to the curriculum so that he could access that. There were adjustments made to the assessment timetable so he could access that and demonstrate his skills and knowledge when he was in a healthy situation to do so. Further, a number of professional development opportunities had to be made available for the teaching staff to look at how you address the needs of the student with such mental health issues in a class of 25. How do you balance the needs of the other students with your duty of care requirements and the O H and S issues as well as having a clear desire by the school to meet this student's needs and also maintain their compliance under disability legislation?

The outcome for this particular young man was very positive, but it was only achieved by the school, the family and the medical practitioners, together with the support of aides, working very closely in conjunction with each other and applying a number of supports in order to achieve that. It was not a one-off process; it was ongoing, it needed constant review, it needed constant changing according to this young man's needs. However, the outcome of this story is that it was achievable, but at substantial cost in both human and financial resources to the school.

William is just one student that we are referring to. However, it is important to note that there has been considerable growth in the number of students with disabilities within the independent sector. As referred to in the submission, in 1992 there were 820 students with disabilities in the sector and in 2009 that number had increased to 3,391. There has been growth in both the special school settings and also in mainstream settings. However, it must be noted that the greatest growth has been in the area of mainstream schools. Where in 1992 there were only 250 students with disabilities educated in the sector, in 2009 that number has increased to 2,305, and at this stage for 2010 we know that we have a further 350 students at least. This increase represents an increase of 900 per cent.

The growth, of course, places enormous pressure on the available resources to address the needs of these students. That is not to say there is not a great willingness in order to address those needs. In some cases two special schools have been closed due to the increasing costs. The needs of these students do not go away. In this situation many of those students were then transferred to the New South Wales government sector to be educated and the cost to address their needs in the area of disability would be met by the taxpayer.

The independent sector alone is not the only sector experiencing significant growth in the number of students with disabilities. In fact, we believe that the disability community is unique in that there is good cooperation and collaboration across the school sectors and parent groups. In addition to the increase in numbers we share a number of other issues: inadequate funding to support the educational needs of students with disabilities; we are all challenged by the increase in complexity of the needs of students we are working with; there needs to be a continuum of support services and this continuum is critical to address the diverse needs of students; and there needs to be access to tailored, relevant and timely support services for students in all schooling sectors and settings. The New South Wales curriculum, however it may eventuate, needs to be fully inclusive of all students in New South Wales and all schooling sectors are working towards addressing that area.

Finally, an issue that is faced by the sectors is that we need strengthened teacher education and training to equip teachers to respond to the needs of students with disabilities. Having talked about the common issues there are some issues that are specific to the independent sector, and I would like to take a moment to refer to those. By choosing a non-government school a parent realises that they forego a substantial amount of government funding in order to address the needs of their child as they relate to disability. That cost, as was mentioned before, must then be met by the school community in which that student is enrolled.

A way forward: There needs to be new and substantial funding based on the functional needs of students. An additional payment for students with very high and complex needs should be provided, as is done in Western Australia by the State Government of \$28,500 for those students with the highest level of needs. There needs to be additional funding for schools to access buildings, equipment and support services that specifically address the needs of the students in which they are enrolled. Hand in hand with this goes teacher education.

There needs to be preservice education for all teachers regarding teaching and learning so that they are able to cater for and be responsible for the learning of all the children in the classes they teach. We need to look at postgraduate special education courses to equip special education to be able to support and consult with schools and their wider communities. There need to be also specialist courses to respond to the higher support and complex needs of the particular students and also those students with sensory impairment. We thank you very much for the opportunity to open today.

CHAIR: There has been almost heated agreement from people who have presented today, whether they be teachers, parents or representatives, such as associations of principals, about the assessment of funding or our allocation of funding and whether children with disabilities or special needs should be assessed based on their level of functioning rather than on a label or a disability. What is your view on that? I know you mentioned two cases studies. How were they assessed and do you see it as a functioning level or is there a difference in the independent system?

Ms PINNINGTON: In response to the second part of your question, the two students referred to in the case study were assessed in two ways, both with the diagnosis—we use the same criteria across the three schooling sectors of New South Wales—and also on their functional level of need. A panel determines that functional level and applies funding accordingly, so the functional level of need is very significant. Certainly, we see that best practice is to work towards the functional level of need in order to address these funding issues. That would be the best way forward.

CHAIR: You talked about curriculum and we understand that with the exception of the new life skills curriculum for high school students all other students with special needs are expected to follow a New South Wales curriculum. Can you discuss from your perspective what the implications are of a lack of specialised curricula?

Ms PINNINGTON: We see that the current K-10 curriculum in New South Wales is fully inclusive of all students. In that regard there is provision for adjustments to be put in place and for students to enter their education at a level that is appropriate to their stage of development whilst applying age-appropriate content, which is also very important. Having said that, with the 7-10 curriculum there are now life skills, outcomes and content that fit under the key objectives in each syllabus area. We see the introduction of that as a great step forward in New South Wales. We want to ensure that that flexibility in being able to provide a curriculum that meets the needs of all students is maintained with any changes that might be forthcoming. We also acknowledge that life skills courses have been available for those students in stage 6 and their ability to achieve a credential has been very significant. Once again, we would like to see that maintained.

CHAIR: You have talked about access to funding for children with disabilities or special needs. Do you subscribe to the view that funding should follow the child?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Yes we do, but we do not necessarily subscribe to a voucher system. We have had problems with that in other areas and Robin Yates could comment on that if you like. We feel there should be funding per student and that would allow the parent absolute choice of the sector to which to send their child. We feel that funding should be paid directly to the school, so it is a form of voucher but not to the family.

Ms YATES: The issue of funding definitely needs to be with the child. We all agree on that. The issue is about the partnership between the school and family working together to make sure that the services provided

do meet that child's needs. We have had feedback from our member schools and from other sectors, such as early childhood, about some of the issues when funding is not paid to the main service provider. The ability of a service to exist is challenged because they can have no long-term planning. That is where the issue arises. If the funding goes to the school and children and parents plan together they can access the services that are provided to support them.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I am a bit confused by that answer. On the one hand you are saying that the funding should go with the child but on the other hand you say it should be with the school. If a child moves schools, under your model would the money go with the child or stay at the school?

Ms YATES: Yes, it would go with the child. We are talking about the payment point only.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: On that point, because of limited resources in your school sector, I gather—correct me if I am wrong—there is a difference in funding levels. The level of funding would be significantly different for the same child going to a State school or to one of your independent schools, as you have outlined. There must be a limited capability in some of your schools to accept children with moderate to severe disabilities.

Dr NEWCOMBE: Yes, there is a limited capability. Remember, there is anti-discrimination legislation, which requires schools to accept the children. I guess that puts an additional burden on parents, as I have said. Without a doubt, with the example I gave, if a child is in the government sector that \$65,000 is not met by government sector parents, and neither should it be, but in the independent and Catholic sector it has to be because there is nowhere else to get the money from. If it is a small school—often the small schools do this extremely well and they have a reputation for looking after these children extremely well—it puts a massive burden on them.

Ms PINNINGTON: To give you an example of that, there is a smallish school in metropolitan Sydney where the student was previously enrolled in a specialist unit class with the government sector. There was a choice to move that student to an independent school. The school was willing to support this student within the community but was not able to provide the necessary resourcing to manage the student's self-help skills, self-care. As part of that the principal has taken on the responsibility to manage the toileting for this particular student. That is the length that some schools go to in order to address the needs of the students and to ensure that they are included.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: I suppose in discussions a parent might say they have a moderately to severely disabled child and they would really love to enrol their child in one of your schools, but would it not depend on the ability of the school to provide the support and resources the child needs? There would be circumstances where, with all the good intentions in the world, sometimes you cannot do that.

Ms PINNINGTON: There is no doubt it is very difficult in certain circumstances. However, we work very closely with schools within our sector to work carefully through the individual planning process to identify the issues and then determine the adjustments that need to be put in place. In doing so we sometimes need to be extraordinarily flexible in the way we respond to the needs of students. Sometimes it is schools with few resources that work out very flexibly the way to address that student's needs. I could not say per se that that is the way it goes because many schools try to respond very flexibly to the needs of the students and there would be several cases that we could outline where such a student is enrolled in the independent sector with very limited resources to address their needs.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: There seems to be a growing proportion of children with disabilities. Do you know of any audits that have been done over time to show that this is a real concern? That is what I am hearing and reading. I cannot understand whether it is better identification, whether these problems have always been there and we are now assessing and identifying them better, or whether there is a growing incidence of children with disabilities and special needs. Do you have any feelings about that or have you done any reading, research or statistics on that?

Ms YATES: There is probably myriad documentation over the years going back to the National Health and Medical Research Council in the 1990s right through to the Monash report from the Federal Government in 2007. I think there is a range of reasons. Certainly, medical improvements mean that children survive and are then educated. There are also better diagnostic services. We have improved our educational services and

children are being educated. When I first started in school, a lot of the students I was working with—as were my colleagues across all three sectors—were institutionalised. They are now in schools.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: That is right. They are surviving and they are being educated.

Ms YATES: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In response to term of reference No. 1, recommendation No. 2, you are advocating a funding system that applies the same level of funding for a child with a disability regardless of whether they are in a public or a private school. If we implemented that system, a child who, for example, attracted \$10,000 a year of support in the public sector who went to the private sector would have that support plus whatever parental contributions were made in addition to that. To some extent, you appear to be advocating two classes of children with disabilities: those in the public sector who get the basic level of funding and those in the private sector who get the basic level and whatever their parents contribute. Are you concerned that that would create two classes of children with disabilities?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Surely you are not suggesting that we now limit parents' ability to use their after-tax dollars to help their child who has a disability?

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, I am not suggesting that.

Dr NEWCOMBE: I am glad.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The question put to you had nothing to do with that. I asked whether, if we provided the same level of funding in the public and private education sectors for children with disabilities, is it not true that a child with the same disability in a private school would have more money spent on his or her needs than one in the public system?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Is it not true that parents with children in a public school could spend more money on their child in that school if they wished? We have seen with the latest figures from the Federal Government that the wealth distribution in our sectors is very similar. There are many parents in with children in the government sector who could well afford to contribute. If they want to contribute more money, surely we would embrace that. That is what happens in our sector. We are saying there should be the same level of funding from governments. If parents want to contribute more from their after-tax dollars instead of taking a holiday at Manly, they should be allowed to do so.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I do not know whether they would go to Manly. The issue I am raising is different from the one you have addressed. I am not saying that parents in the private sector should not be allowed to supplement whatever funding they get from the Government. Your submission wholeheartedly praises the non-government sector in the way it provides this ability. The New South Wales Government states that it provides \$330 million a year—that might be an inflated figure—to the non-government sector. Effectively, that means that children with a disability in the private sector are provided with twice the amount spent on children in the public sector.

Dr NEWCOMBE: We do not think that is an issue and we have a hell of a lot of catching up to do.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer to the same recommendation and the level of funding you are advocating for children with disabilities or special needs in the non-government sector. Government funding of non-government school children generally—not specifically children with a disability—is indexed federally through the Average Government School Recurrent Cost [AGSRC] and in the State under section 21 of the Education Act—that is, the 25 per cent rule. Both of those are based on the average cost of educating a child in a public school, which includes children with disabilities. If this Committee were to advocate your recommendation No. 2 funding model, would you then be prepared to forgo the component of funding of non-special education children in non-government schools that comes about because of the funds that the public spends on children in public schools with special needs?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Dr Kaye, both you and I know that the AGSRC figure is significantly flawed. You should look at that compared with the Productivity Commission figure and what is really spent on government schools. Former Premier Bob Carr gave us a figure many years ago that was much higher than the AGSRC figure. We have known for years that that figure is not truly representative. So I do not think it is an issue.

Ms YATES: One of the issues we have raised is that there is not enough money in any sector. While the current government cost of schooling does exist and it includes some contributions for students with special needs, we are well aware that all students with disabilities are underfunded.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Ms Pinnington, you spoke about the principal who took upon himself the role of toileting a disabled student. That led me to think about how you handle the health needs of many disabled children, for example, those who have to have blood sugar levels taken, catheters managed, hourly medication and so on? How do you cope with that?

Ms PINNINGTON: At the beginning of a school year, the consultants with AIS who deal with special education are kept very busy with those matters. Students come to school with a range of healthcare needs that compromise their ability to access school—that is, to walk in the door—and to participate in the education provided. We need to look very carefully at addressing that. We start with a healthcare plan. We sit down with the family and get advice from medical specialists. Where we can, we get the medical specialist into the school or on the phone.

We work with the school and an AIS consultant is often involved in working with the school to develop a plan. Usually within that plan we must get specific training for school staff. You referred to catheterisation. That requires very intensive training for teachers—not nurses—or teacher assistants to carry out that process so that the child can access school. That is done on a regular basis in schools in New South Wales. We have a similar situation with diabetes and epilepsy. I was at a school two weeks ago for that very reason. There was a student with uncontrolled epilepsy and the school had to work out how it could deal with that and ensure the student's safety and wellbeing while at school. It takes a huge commitment on the part of the school. It also takes a lot of funding and a willingness to address the needs of those individuals to ensure that they can be educated appropriately in that school setting.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I was sure that was the situation. Dr Newcombe, once you start accepting increasing numbers of disabled students in schools you are faced with huge capital costs, everything from widening corridors, to toilet access, ramps and perhaps even lifts in multistorey buildings. Do you get any special funding for that from anywhere?

Dr NEWCOMBE: There is limited funding.

Ms YATES: The Commonwealth provides a small amount that can be used for minor capital works. That might be for a ramp. When a student with a physical disability enrolls in a school, we work with the school to develop an access report. That often involves far more than a ramp. It might mean provision of accessible toilets, relocating classrooms or moving timetables. We will look at every lateral approach we can. We will move a class rather than do building work. However, where it is required, we can usually get a small contribution from the Commonwealth under targeted programs and possibly through the block grant authority capital program. In many cases schools must meet the cost.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: It falls back onto the parents.

Dr NEWCOMBE: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Is your submission asking for the cost of capital works?

Ms YATES: Our submission suggests that all students with a disability need funding for school services, such as teachers' assistants and so on. There is also a need to provide for capital works. Specialist equipment is not necessarily covered and can also be extremely expensive.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I am not usually a rationalist. However, I am from the country and I recognise the need for resources everywhere. Are you suggesting that schools with 15 or 20 students—which is the case in many schools in country New South Wales—should undertake these extensive capital work for one student who may well move on next year?

Dr NEWCOMBE: The real problem with the disability discrimination legislation is that we do not even have the flexibility to suggest that children would be better serviced in another school. The interface between the different statutes makes it extremely difficult.

Ms YATES: What we need though is—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: This is more of a question than the other issue.

Dr NEWCOMBE: Yes, it is more of a question.

Ms YATES: It is a serious question. One of the issues around it is the planning process that Catherine spoke about earlier, and the skill level that is needed to do that well so that you are not doing major modifications that are useless. They have to be effective and, wherever possible, if there is an easier alternative we take it. It relates to being rational about the way we do things and ensuring that we look after the needs of that student.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I have another question along the same lines, but it relates also to education for disabled persons. Often an extensive skills base is required to get the best outcome for the student. This morning we had examples of parents being able to work with the schools to achieve better outcomes for students than has occurred in a number of other areas. In your school system how do you monitor the quality control process for access and movement, and also for educational outcomes? What happens in those areas?

Ms PINNINGTON: I think we need to recognise the need for specialist support services in certain circumstances. We need to have access to the people with the skills and knowledge to support schools and to address the needs of these students. It means that if we need to look at access for a student with a physical disability we need access to occupational therapists that can do an audit of the situation. For instance, if we have a student with a sensory impairment we need to have access to those people and to personnel with the specialist skills and knowledge in order for them to be able to work with school staff to give them specific knowledge so that they are able to implement a curriculum that is suitable for students.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: From where do you want that specialist service to come?

Ms PINNINGTON: It needs to be available in both the government sector and in the private sector.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You want it to be contracted out or something?

Ms PINNINGTON: That is right. Schools need to have funding in order to do to be able access the service provision that they require for students with disabilities.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: If the funding process attaches to specific students with a specific label or function and an assessment is done—you have three students in one of your schools, which means a fair whack of resources—and three students leave next year, what happens to the school structure? Do the dollars follow the students?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Yes, definitely.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: What happens to the school structure?

Ms YATES: Are you talking about the funding contribution from governments?

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Yes. You are asking for that to be increased but you are also asking for it to follow the student?

Ms YATES: That is right. Referring to the funding, that will be paid annually, which is the current method to support a student. That would travel with the student to the new school.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Would you just accept that?

Dr NEWCOMBE: That is what happens with Commonwealth and State funding, yes.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Mr Newcombe, how many counsellors do you have throughout your schools?

Dr NEWCOMBE: I cannot answer that question. I will have to take that question on notice and try to obtain the information for you. Not every school would have a school counsellor. The larger schools would, but the smaller schools certainly would not, so it is a bit difficult for us to determine.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Would you say that there was a shortage of counsellors?

Dr NEWCOMBE: We have a shortage of funds to employ counsellors, yes. Ideally, you could use a counsellor in every school, but the smaller schools just could not afford that.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: This morning some witnesses said that there was a shortage of counsellors and that in their view that number would diminish. What is your view?

Ms YATES: Certainly there is not a large number of counsellors, and there is a need for more. But in our sector our real need is qualified special education teachers. Our schools are finding it difficult to locate suitable teachers to employ. There are people who are willing to do it, but this is a specialised field. We need the best people in the field to be working with students who have the highest needs. At the moment that is our highest need. That is not to say that we are not short of counsellors; we are short of counsellors. If we had to prioritise, we have a critical need for people who will help with the planning and implementation of the programs.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: My next question is: How many professional people do you have to look after these children or to help them with their needs?

Ms YATES: Within the independent sector, schools employ their own staff. The majority of schools would have a support person part time, if not full time. However, the difficulty is getting someone who is qualified and experienced. The Association of Independent Schools [AIS] strives to get people with Masters qualifications that are really experienced. For many years at some stage or another we have had some vacancies because we could not even get the staff that we needed to support the schools. The feedback that we are getting from schools is that they are having the same problems.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Forgive my ignorance, but do you commence with kindergarten, or do you go higher than that?

Dr NEWCOMBE: Our schools start from kindergarten.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: When you first find out that kids who are starting off in kindergarten have a disability, who makes the first approach to parents?

Ms PINNINGTON: Typically, the schools will identify the level of need for an individual student, if that has not been identified before a child enters school. The school can then access support services, such as the services that are available from the Association of Independent Schools, to work with them more specifically to identify exactly what are those needs, the way forward, and how to address those needs. We use the individual planning process. We get together with the families, with the teacher, with the school principal and with whatever other support services are involved, and collaboratively work together to establish what are the issues. The most important step is to identify what the school needs to do in order to address those needs. The important step is that the school needs to do something rather than just expecting the family to go off and do something separately that is not part of the student's holistic education. That is why we have that essential planning process.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Is it at that point that you would get in a counsellor?

Ms PINNINGTON: If that was the area that was warranted. But we would always do that in consultation with the family and whatever other medical or specialist services they were working with. For instance, if a general practitioner is linked in, we might suggest to family members that they go back to the general practitioner and talk about those sorts of issues.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Will you obtain those figures to establish how many counsellors you have at your schools?

Dr NEWCOMBE: We will do our best to obtain those figures, yes.

CHAIR: How many counsellors children have access to.

Dr NEWCOMBE: Okay. Earlier we referred to AIS support services. I thought that Committee members might wonder how we fund them. We fund them in two ways. Firstly, we fund them from Commonwealth targeted programs. With the funding review we are concerned to ensure that those targeted programs continue. At the moment we have up to four, led by Catherine, in our special education area. They are literally run off their feet. We subsidise that with our own subscriptions from member schools, which are basically fees from parents. That is how they are funded. If that changed it would be a massive problem for us.

CHAIR: Thank you. I have one more question that I would like you to take on notice. You might have referred to this issue in your submission and I might have overlooked it. I refer to the impact on students of having to stay on at school until they are aged 17. How has that affected services in your schools for children with disabilities?

Dr NEWCOMBE: We will take that question on notice and get back to you on that.

Ms PINNINGTON: We referred to that issue in our submission, but we are happy to take that question on notice and to provide you with more detail. Of course, it means that the available resources are stretched further. However, there certainly is a willingness to do so and there is support for an extended school age for students.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I hear what has been said and it is a pretty significant submission. It seems to me right throughout the morning there have been issues of funding. It is going to be a struggle to try to get the funding and the allocation of that funding into the various school sectors, and so forth. But I hear what has been said.

(The witnesses withdrew)

DIANNE CHRISTINE GIBLIN, President, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, and

HELEN MARGARET WALTON, Publicity Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, affirmed and examined:

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

Mrs WALTON: I would. The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations endorses the affirmation contained in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations of the right of the physically, intellectually or socially disabled child to the treatment, education and care required by his or her condition. The federation is committed to a belief that all students have the capacity to learn. The Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular, and schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

The federation supports the provision of services determined by individual educational and developmental needs. The individual need shall be met by a range differential services expressed through appropriate, well-planned curricula and programs conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents and families. All people working in the field of special education must have an understanding of and commitment to the concept that every individual is of value. The special needs of all children must be recognised. For those with higher support needs, that support commences with early identification of needs and there should be a continuum of unbroken patterns of support throughout the child's school life. Where multiple disabilities exist, support must be provided to fully meet the needs of the student, and each case must be assessed on an individual basis.

Parents must be notified of and their permission sought for any assessment of the child. A multidisciplinary team should make the valuation and may include specialists such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, paediatricians, physiotherapists and other medical personnel as relevant to the needs of the child. Educational services for children with disabilities should be based on the recognition of levels of need, which include but are not restricted to specialist advisory services, specially trained teachers, support class options and specific education centres, including schools for specific purposes. School education group support must be given to schools in the preparation of resources, policy-making, programs and curriculum design for children with special needs.

The curriculum is intended to recognise and take into account the diversity of learners, which acknowledges the different rates at which students develop. Priorities of funding and training of teachers must be organised to maximise the outcomes for all children but especially those with special needs. Within the constraints of budgets, appropriate funding for students must be provided for recurrent and capital needs, including additional human resources such as school learning support officers. The Department of Education and Training should ensure that students enrolled in mainstream classes with integration funding should have that funding continue for the duration of their enrolment unless it can be demonstrated that such support is no longer needed. All students with special needs in regular classes and students in support classes in a regular school must be an integral part of that school.

Parents as partners in the education process have the right and responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children. There should be parental involvement in all processes, including representation on planning working parties at school, regional and State levels. There is a need for continuing independent public assessment of program effectiveness, with essential parent and carer input. State education authorities have the responsibility for implementing innovative educational programs that enhance the learning experiences of all children.

CHAIR: We have asked everybody the same question. It is probably fair we ask you the same question about assessment of needs and whether you see that as being ideally on a functional capability with children with disabilities and special needs or whether there is a better model of assessment that you are aware of?

Mrs WALTON: There is a range of assessment models used at the present moment. Obviously there is a position for all of them but the difficulty you have is the assumption is that because a child has a specific disability the assessment tool you use will automatically give you the answer to what their support needs are

within a classroom. Our belief is that students have a variety of needs. Just because a child may be diagnosed with a disability such as autism, it does not mean one size fits all, and often it is probably the functional assessment that gives you more information about the strengths and weaknesses of that child and may give you some indication of what their needs are within the classroom.

CHAIR: We have also heard varying views on the proposed school learning support program. Are you aware of that proposal? Does your federation have a view about how you think that might work?

Mrs WALTON: We are very much aware of that particular program. We were involved in the working party around the development of the program and, particularly, we are looking at the pilot study that is about to be rolled out in the Illawarra. Our involvement is basically to be part of that whole process, to look at what that pilot says. Obviously, you need a pilot to understand how the process will work across the State. So, we look forward to the evaluation at the end of that pilot. We want that to be very open and transparent and to help us understand what the needs are that so we can support our schools when the program goes out across the State.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: We heard much evidence today about the importance of choice for parents, students and schools. What is your opinion of appropriate funding based on functionality assessment, that is, travelling with a student to the school of choice by them and their parents in collaboration with the teachers? What is your opinion of funding to follow the child in the care of the school, whichever school is the ultimate choice?

Mrs WALTON: Are you talking about particular funding for children who have been identified with specific funding needs? There are actually a couple of lots of funding within schools. There is a generalised low support needs funding, which each school is allocated. Are you talking about that?

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Disabilities funding?

Mrs WALTON: Yes, for low support needs.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Whatever funding is associated with that student?

Mrs WALTON: For the individual child who attracts funding support to allow them to access the curriculum across the school, we support the fact that that child needs that support and, therefore, that funding allows them to continue to access the curriculum. Obviously, we are in support of that funding continuing with them. We also support a review of that funding regularly with parental input. There is a mechanism whereby every year schools review how that child is travelling, their academic process and how well they are accessing the curriculum. Our concern is that quite often there is no parental involvement in that particular process. We also then do not have the ability of the parents, if they are not involved in the process, to indicate if they have concerns about what is happening with their child, whether they feel that funding is adequate or whether the child's needs have improved over a period of time.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: You believe there should be an increased involvement of parents in that ongoing assessment?

Mrs WALTON: We definitely advocate for the increased involvement of parents.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Do you believe there is sufficient choice between a government and non-government schools for parents having the greatest ability to choose where their child goes? Often we hear stories of an inability to choose a particular school because they could not accommodate the needs of the child or funding was not adequate or support services would not be adequate. Is that an issue?

Mrs GIBLIN: From our perspective, obviously, we would like all children to be able to attend their local public school. We would see that, first and foremost, the funding and support needs would be able to be addressed within that school.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Has the value of preschool functionality assessments been adequately dealt with or can we improve on them, so that when the child gets to kindergarten they virtually hit the ground running with their needs being met?

Mrs WALTON: I think there actually is a place for preschool assessments and early intervention. Obviously, early intervention offers children the opportunity to move into the school environment with a much better outcome. If they need an early intervention program, it is because they have a recognised difficulty. We definitely see the value whether that is a difficulty that is a disability or just a difficulty that can be addressed by having an early intervention involvement in a program. We truly believe that at the moment there probably are not adequate early intervention programs available across the State. It would be an area that perhaps may need to be addressed.

Mrs GIBLIN: We need to be mindful also of those young people who do not access prior to school services and how we would provide early intervention for them by looking at the whole-of-child work with any medical practitioners and other people involved.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: You see the need to have intervening mechanisms?

Mrs GIBLIN: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: To make it absolutely clear, you do not support the concept of a child who leaves the public sector and goes to the private sector taking their support money with them to the private sector?

Mrs GIBLIN: That would not be something we would support.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Nor would you support a child in the private sector getting the same amount of government funding for a disability as a child in the public sector?

Mrs GIBLIN: The New South Wales Parents and Citizens Federation supports the prime priority of government to have been a public school system in New South Wales.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is the learning support program the same basic design as the version that was going to go ahead last year and then was put on hold? Have there been changes?

Mrs WALTON: There has been discussion around alterations and I think that is the reason the pilot is going ahead. There has been discussion across many agencies expressing their concerns about certain aspects of it. To the best of our knowledge there have been some slight changes, but until the pilot comes back with the report on how it went in the Illawarra and the evaluation they are undertaking, we would rather not comment at this stage.

Dr JOHN KAYE: There is no public information on what is being trialled in the Illawarra?

Mrs GIBLIN: Currently I do not believe it is out there. I believe we are aware of it and I believe that our affiliates are aware, through us.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But that is not yet publicly available?

Mrs GIBLIN: It would be in the Illawarra south-east.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is probably a question I should ask of the department and put it on the rack over it. Earlier the Chair asked you a question about functional assessments. We have had serious agreement from almost everybody that functional assessment ought to be playing a role at least to some extent that displaces the medical diagnosis model of disability assessment. Do you see functional assessments completely replacing medical diagnosis or do you see medical diagnosis remaining part of the blend?

Mrs WALTON: What has to be acknowledged is that for every child disabilities are different. As I think I commented, no one size fits all. When a child enters your school you really do not know their disabilities. Some disabilities can be acknowledged through a functional assessment that the child has additional needs. There are still children out there who have vision impairment, hearing impairment and genetic-related disabilities. The understanding of those disabilities often may require a medical report or response. Obviously, you cannot just say let us get rid of the medical response. You also need a combination of the two, depending on the disability you are looking at.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is there a large degree of frustration amongst parents? We heard from a number of parents this morning who suggested they were quite frustrated with the schools they went to. We heard evidence also from teachers and principals that they really are trying hard to match what resources they had to the range of needs that present. You probably were not present this morning, but you would have to say that the overwhelming view was one of frustration. Is it your view that that is how parents of children with disabilities feel?

Mrs WALTON: Parents of children with disabilities become very frustrated when there is lack of communication. They are the primary carers for these children. They have the most understanding of their child's needs, abilities and disabilities. They should be included as part of the process. By inclusion, we mean actual communication that is open. We do not mean someone giving a parent a piece of paper saying, "We want to apply for funding for your child, here, can you sign this", which is what parents are reporting often happens. As we have talked about, there are things called school learning support teams. The notion of that school learning support team is that you have a number of people involved with the child in the school discussing that child's needs, discussing how well the curriculum actually is supporting that child—but you also have the component of the parent involvement.

In having that parent involvement, as I said, you bring in the background of that child, their parents' knowledge of that child, and the medical and behavioural knowledge; a whole range of information that can be brought forward for discussion with a school. The school learning support team involves the teacher, executive members, school counsellors, and possibly school learning support officers if they are part of the child's school world. Therefore, the opportunity exists to all those people to talk about this child's needs in an open forum. The frustration of parents is, unfortunately, what happens is that they are often not included, apart from just the piece of paper that says, "Please sign this". Our frustration is that lack of communication.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I would like to follow up on Dr Kaye's question. Does the Parents and Citizens Federation have an advocacy role on behalf of parents who may be having problems with either the Department of Education and Training or with the local schools?

Mrs WALTON: We do have an advocacy role. We have 2,000 affiliates across the State who have parents and citizens associations within their schools who also can get information from the Parents and Citizens Federation. We have the ability to answer questions. We have the ability to refer them to people who may be able to support them.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Would a local parents and citizens association advocate on behalf of a parent with a disabled child?

Mrs WALTON: They would probably act as an advocate in terms of a support person if somebody perhaps needed a support person to go with them or, once again, they could contact the federation for information about another service that may be available that we are aware of.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Going the next step, parents and citizens associations do so much within the school working as voluntary aides with teachers and so on—I have seen so many different ways—would members of parents and citizens associations get involved as mentors or support persons with disabled students?

Mrs WALTON: I think it depends on the structure of the individual school. It does come down to the grassroots and what has happened.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Or if you are a friend of somebody?

Mrs WALTON: That maybe the situation. It would not necessarily be a role that the local parents and citizens association would take on as a matter of course.

Mrs GIBLIN: And many parents and schools, after a long time of volunteer time, may actually become employed as school learning support officers, but our organisation strongly supports the professional development of all school learning support officers in ensuring that they are not only experienced but trained.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: In your submission you identify a number of overseas education systems in the United States, England and Germany. What aspects are you calling for here? They differ in their service to the public sector. What aspects are you asking for?

Mrs WALTON: The reason that we included those was just to give you a view of the different systems and how they compare to ours and how they are different. We are not necessarily saying we advocate for one system above another because our view is that New South Wales is the State which has the education system that it does have and, therefore, we have to work within that education system to offer the best support that we can to the students within that system and the parents within that system. We want to make sure that being aware of what other countries actually offer may be beneficial and it may be something that we can use but not necessarily advocating that we change our system purely for the sake of change.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: For example, in England they have a Department for Children, Schools and Families, which oversees special education. Would you advocate for something like that in Australia?

Mrs WALTON: It all depends, as I said. We need to look at what works for us. Even though we may support that notion of something like that perhaps being incorporated, what we would need to look at is whether it fits in with what our particular policies are and bring that forward because we are an organisation which is based on people coming to us with motions of what they would like us to do and it may be that they would like us to advocate on behalf of people to the Department of Education and Training to introduce a certain type of program, but we would look at them coming to us first and providing that information.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: We have heard parents this morning talking about how they have had to fight all the way. What do you think would be a better way to do this to achieve change?

Mrs WALTON: I suppose, as we have already said, what we are really advocating for is a lot of communication because the more you can communicate between family and home—we know that school-home partnerships are the best partnerships you can have in relation to getting a positive outcome for the child in a school. What we would look at is the more communication there is between the school and a parent, the more both are aware of what the needs of the child are and that there is consistency and support from the parent, from the home to the school to address the needs of the child. We would strongly advocate for continued communication and involvement of parents in the whole process.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I would like to ask a question with regard to rural and country schools, particularly smaller towns. A suggestion was put to me from one of the schools the other day that they would like to see a smaller class in the town attached to one of those schools rather than having one or two people just in one school or three or four in another school. What are your thoughts on that?

Mrs WALTON: We obviously support options for parents. We would like parents to be given the choice of what happens with their child. One of the options that is available may be in that particular town a support class, and I think what you are talking about is probably a multi-categorical support class, which is the sort of pattern that a lot of regional areas are now finding is very good to support the needs of their schools.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: It is the only thing they could do.

Mrs WALTON: The option is we have support classes for children with moderate intellectual disabilities but when you have a child who has perhaps autism and a child who has some mental health issues, they do not fit the category to fit into those particular units, so the department actually introduced the multi-categorical class, which then meant that students—particularly in a rural community where there are perhaps two children with autism, one child with a mental health issue, maybe a child with a moderate intellectual disability—were then able to access the one unit instead of having, say, three separate units within that town, which there were not adequate numbers for, so they were looking at something that was more in line with the needs of particular rural and regional areas.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: What is your organisation's view of the role of counsellors in these areas?

Mrs WALTON: School counsellors are a vital part of this whole process because they have the ability to offer support to both the school and the parent. What they can offer is the ability to do some of these

functional assessments, which have been discussed before. They also can be a liaison with external agencies to offer support to parents to maybe access a medical intervention or refer to a speech therapist if a child needs a speech assessment. They have an integral role in the parent-school partnership as well and they are a part of the school learning support team as well. They bring that knowledge to all of that.

Mrs GIBLIN: Something that has been a priority of the Parents and Citizens Federation is to lobby for more school counsellors. We believe there will be a shortage at some point in time and there is a necessity to increase the number that we have.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: You believe that is one of the important issues facing you?

Mrs GIBLIN: We think it is one of the many elements that are part of the whole support of that young child.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The implementation of mainstream education to students with disabilities has meant massive capital works investment right across the State. Do you know if many parents and citizens associations have been involved in the process or has the funding come through the department and you have just know it is happening, like the big grants, huge access issues, and those sorts of things?

Mrs WALTON: The involvement of the parents and citizens associations would be more in line with supporting parents to lobby at their school level to allow access for their child within that school.

Mrs GIBLIN: Particularly if it was the school of choice for that parent and if those facilities were not available, then their parents and citizens association would be supporting that lobbying process.

CHAIR: Have parents raised issues about behaviour schools, particularly with a view to the curriculum and whether it is appropriate, particularly for those high school students who, we have heard, are being taught a primary curriculum by largely primary teachers and also if parents are expressing concerns about the school leaving age being raised to 17 and the consequences of that for children with special needs or disabilities?

Mrs WALTON: For children who access behaviour units, the difficulty with those students is that often what needs to be looked at is their curriculum but also the needs that they have. Sometimes for some of those students the curriculum is not the primary need; the primary need is addressing what their issues are. For example, if they have mental health issues, which some of those students do, if they do not have stability with their mental health needs they cannot access the curriculum anyway. Sometimes it is a matter of saying at the time: Is the child in crisis? Therefore they need to have the support to work through their crisis before they start pushing them to try to access a curriculum which for them, at the time of the crisis, is probably of the lowest importance in their life.

You need to then also have a look at the relevance of the curriculum to those particular students. Often they need to have a curriculum that looks at where they are. If they have a long history of having behavioural difficulties, they have often missed the earlier curriculum, so sometimes having access to a primary teacher who can go back and teach them the basic skills that they have missed is of value. However, obviously for some students who do not have those needs, it can be very upsetting to be looking at a curriculum which is basically very low, too low for them to be benefiting from. It is a bit of a Catch-22: find out what their needs are first and then have a look at how that fits in with the curriculum being provided.

Raising the school age has created some difficulties. I would say that schools are saying that their students, particularly those with mental health issues and behavioural difficulties, now need to have more support in terms of supporting those students through a pattern of study that will work for them when they are looking at the next step in their lives, their transition from the school to the workplace. Because they are staying at school for that longer period, sometimes they need to be looking at a pathway that perhaps in some areas is not as available as it is in others. We are looking at TAFE, VET options, and all those sorts of options. We need to make sure that for those students there are a number of areas that they can look it and a number of areas that they can be supported in.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance. I guess you will be watching our progress. If there is anything—

Mrs WALTON: I am sorry to interrupt. One thing we would like to see is that in order for special education and children with disabilities support needs within schools, we need professional training of staff, in their pre-service, but also through the time that they are working within the field. They need continually to have professional development opportunities, in the same way that we were saying that the school learning support officer needs professional development. The more development you have, the better chance you have of providing for the needs of those children in your care.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

DIANA LAURA MURPHY, Management Committee Member, New South Wales Schools for Specific Purposes Principals Network, and

IAN GALLAN, Management Committee Member, New South Wales Schools for Specific Purposes Principals Network, sworn and examined, and

ANNE FLINT, Vice President, Management Committee, New South Wales Schools for Specific Purposes Principals Network, and

JILL DEAN, President, Management Committee, New South Wales Schools for Specific Purposes Principals Network, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: We have the capacity for you to make a brief opening statement before we get into questions if you would like to do so.

Ms DEAN: In 1973 I began my teaching career in a mainstream kindergarten class of 42 students. This class today would now have 20 students. Two years later I moved into special education and since then in terms of class sizes little has changed, despite the changing nature of students and the requirements of delivering the curriculum. Today students who enrol in schools for specific purposes [SSPs] are often some of the most challenging, presenting with multiple and complex sensory, physical, learning and behavioural needs. Challenging behaviours which cause injuries to staff, students and themselves are too frequent and require intense, long-term funding to support them. Students with high medical needs require high levels of time and support from other agencies and professionals as well.

Current staffing levels remain inadequate to meet the higher concentration of incredibly complex students in special schools in terms of their intellect, behaviour, autism, sensory, and health needs. There is a need for access to meaningful professional support for students, such as community nurses and therapists, to assist teaching and learning in schools. Currently, special schools rely on the goodwill and professional dedication of staff. SSPs, although K-12, may have a significant number of secondary students, even all secondary students. However, staff may only receive a primary school allocation of two hours a week release to take on the myriad of tasks to support students, from planning, learning support team meetings and multi-disciplinary teams, case management, executive support for other staff, overseeing transitions and many more.

In addition, without an inclusive curriculum much time and professional learning is required to support teachers to adjust the curriculum and make the necessary individualised resources to support the programs as few can be purchased over the counter. Very few SSPs are purpose built and many still require significant modifications to cater for the needs of our students, from wheelchair access, safety fencing, dual exits, classrooms of adequate sizes and safe communications systems or even specialist rooms to deliver the Board of Studies specialist curriculum. Ultimately, the SSP principals network strongly advocates that all curriculum programs, resources and funding must be inclusive of all students, especially our highest support needs students, and we await a time when these are built in, not bolted on as an afterthought, and there is adequate time to support our children and family without compromising teaching and learning.

Despite the evident need for systemic improvement, SSPs provide an outstanding educational service to students with disabilities in New South Wales. With a truly inclusive curriculum and improved staffing to meet all the special needs of students, facilities that meet the twenty-first century learners and the ongoing goodwill of principles and executive, teachers, support learning officers and other school support staff, the provision of education for students with a disability or special need can only improve. I take this opportunity to thank everyone here for allowing us to raise our concerns, and we would like to extend an invitation to anyone who would like to visit a special school to please let us know and we will make that arrangement for you.

CHAIR: The Committee has plans to make a couple of visits but that is yet to be finalised. Thank you for those introductory remarks. I was particularly struck by your phrase "funding built in, not bolted on"—that is a very good phrase. Will you tease that out a bit as to what realities you are referring to?

Ms DEAN: I give the example of the Best Start program run by the Department of Education and Training. That excellent program identifies the needs of children coming into the school setting in kindergarten; it helps to understand where the children are at and then provides feedback to the teachers on how to take the next step forward in the teaching and learning program. When it was first introduced students with disabilities

were excluded. We went to the department and we raised the issue and it was taken back and reviewed, but ultimately it still does not provide a similar program or process where teachers can be supported and get that information right from an early step. It still goes back to relying on the professional understanding of these children for teachers to make up the teaching and learning programs. If it had been built in right from the word go perhaps we would have had in special schools, or schools for children with disabilities, programs to support teachers to identify where the next step of the child's learning path should go. Does that make sense?

CHAIR: Yes, I understand that and I am sure we will hear more about that program tomorrow. Are you saying that you think it should be a funding right from the continuum, so you are looking at a child's needs at the beginning and then setting a plan right through?

Ms FLINT: Our students can access Best Start and our kindergarten teachers go through the assessment with our students. Invariably the students in my school have very high, complex support needs and invariably score zero. If a student in Best Start scores zero, a letter is produced to send to parents to tell them that their child requires an individual program. Every parent whose child is enrolled in a School for Specific Purposes [SSP] already has a strong understanding that their child has a disability and that they will need an individual program. What it does not give teachers in our schools is a point at which to start teaching. It just says you need an individual program, but it does not tell you what should be in that individual program.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: And you do not have the time set aside for you to develop individual curricula?

Ms FLINT: That is right. If we have a look at the kindergarten to year 6 curriculum and take mathematics as an example, the earliest outcome in early stage one under the strand of number is orders and counts numbers to 30. If some of my year 12 students could reach that level of attainment we would be doing cartwheels around our school. We can use assessment tools to tell us where a student might be but there is no link in terms of teaching steps or resources for teachers to use to work towards that. My school and Mary Brooksbank School—another school in south-western Sydney—had 12 teachers working together all of last year putting together a learning framework that sits below early stage one. There are 15 assessable steps in teaching structures and we had to develop resources so that we can truly say that our kids are working towards that very first outcome. But that support is not there in the curriculum and it is the same across all KLAs—it is very time intensive.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It does not need to be done on a School for Specific Purposes by School for Specific Purposes basis; it could be done across the whole system could it not?

Ms FLINT: We are hoping through our network that the numeracy framework as it is will go out across all SSPs, and it can be made available to other teachers in support classes who may have similar students, but that support is not coming from the Board of Studies or Curriculum Directorate.

CHAIR: We have had lots of discussion today about assessment based on functionality for children with disabilities or special needs and there has been great consensus about looking at functionality. Some people have said functionality with a diagnosis. Do you hold a view as an organisation or individually?

Ms FLINT: In the past we have supported a number of the attempts at providing some kind of functional assessment for students rather than just resources being allocated according to a student's primary disability label. I guess one of the problems that we saw with some of the past models is that they have been limited in the types of things that they assess. The behaviour of students has been one of the areas that has been left off, yet the behaviour of a student can have a huge impact on a child's ability to learn as part of a group and access the curriculum, and even provide a safe environment for students.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Do you have assessments for the behaviour of students that remove the value base that is often utilised when people judge behaviour? Do you have tools?

Ms FLINT: There are tools used by school counsellors that can measure a student's capacity to function within behavioural norms, yes.

CHAIR: We have also had discussions today—as you have raised school counsellors—about the ratio of school counsellors, the role of assessment, the ageing workforce and the need to address all of those issues as

to who should be assessing students. Do you hold a view on what is happening out there, from your experiences, as to the school counsellor debate?

Ms DEAN: Because our current system is so labour intensive our school counsellors spend most of their time assessing to get the next piece of paperwork done. I have always wanted a school counsellor that could counsel and not just do the paperwork and that is the problem. The current system is so over-intense where we get a special consideration of 12 months and then we have to reassess or put the paperwork in again and have to go back over it every time. It is a paper warfare out there and this happens over and over and over again so that our counsellors are not being used, and the moment you do get them to actually work with you to help us with programs for our students with challenging behaviours welfare issues that may occur in the school, it is wonderful. But there is a severe lack of time in counsellors to be able to provide that support to hundreds of students.

CHAIR: It has been suggested dividing up the role between specialist counsellors with teaching and psychology qualifications and then welfare-type counsellors. Do you have a view on that mix?

Ms DEAN: Or just get rid of the paperwork so we can do both.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: I am trying to get my head across the increasing rate of identification of students with disability educational needs and SSPs versus mainstream integration. Do you have a view on outcomes? Where should we put in more resources? Do we need more SSPs, particularly on a regional basis? What is your opinion about the value of increased resourcing of SSPs?

Mr GALLAN: I think we are—in our experience at the table here—catering for more and more very complex students. I think the message that is coming to us is that we do have a very vital role in that special education continuum. There has been an increased prevalence of students with very high complex medical needs and very difficult behaviour situations that find that they are not able to function appropriately maybe in a special class in a regular school. I think all of us have experienced almost maximum numbers. There is a great need and usually a waiting list for students to find placement in our schools. I think the need is there.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Are you getting the higher end, the more difficult and complex—

Mr GALLAN: Yes.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Where they can be accommodated in mainstream are you getting accommodation?

Mr GALLAN: Yes, we also have a flow through. I think that is one of the joys and the sadness sometimes, our higher functioning students invariably will move on to a less segregated setting which is, I suppose, an indicator of our success. Sometimes those students may, when they reach their high school years, even come back. I have seen that cycle where they will start off in a special school, move to a less segregated setting, maybe go to high school for a few years and then for some students that environment does not meet their needs around years 9, 10 and 11, and they come back and complete their schooling in an SSP.

Ms MURPHY: SSPs provide the options for families because families sometimes know, "I can't see my child in a mainstream setting. I really want that high level of support." Even if we feel that they could be in a mainstream setting, it basically is options for families.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: If you thought a student could handle being in a mainstream school, and would benefit from it, would you advise the parents?

Ms MURPHY: Certainly you would raise it with parents, particularly, we have the opportunity in the formal and informal review process but basically often parents want their child to be happy and to be learning. If they find that that combination is working at a special school they do not want to risk moving. And that is what happens, you can advise them but ultimately it is their decision.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Geographically where are your greatest needs? Do you identify where you are getting a lot of requests for SSPs to be established? Are there easily identifiable areas of need?

Ms DEAN: I do not think we can answer that question, that is more a regional decision.

Ms FLINT: There is high demand for SSP placement. Holroyd is the largest special school in the State. For the past four of five years it has sat on 27 classes and this year I have established three additional classes and so have colleagues in SSPs in the south-west Sydney region established additional classes.

CHAIR: Do you have a waiting list?

Ms FLINT: I do not at the moment but my school always sits on full enrolment. We do not hold waiting lists, regional placement panels would have that information on how many students are still seeking placement in the assessment panel.

CHAIR: There is a plan to integrate some of these SSP schools, is there not?

Dr JOHN KAYE: You have just created it.

CHAIR: I may be wrong.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you have inquiries from regional areas to come to your schools?

Ms FLINT: For professional learning?

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Students.

Mr GALLAN: Recently one of my students came from Moree because he had vision and hearing issues and the parents found that the health needs of that child just could not be met and rather than them making continuous trips to Sydney to the Children's Hospital at Westmead that they, as a family, relocated. You get that happening at times, yes.

Ms MURPHY: This year I had a similar case of a family relocating from Port Macquarie because of their child's very complex medical needs.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I know of a family that has moved to Melbourne to be near a special school.

CHAIR: Some have moved to the United Kingdom.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: Because the numbers are growing do you have enough resources for specialised teacher training?

Ms MURPHY: No. I am really committed to supporting students at universities and learning about special education, and also post-graduate teachers learning about that and getting the qualifications of special education. I would say every week that I devote a number of hours supporting those students. Because of my commitment I realise if they know about it it will be beneficial for them later on, and it is a very big and, I feel, increasing responsibility on special schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I compliment you on your excellent submission. I was interested in the fact that your in-service training budget almost entirely disappears into occupational health and safety and there is nothing left over for professional development in the skills for special education. Is that a comment we should take as uniform across all SSPs? Should we be worried about that, and if so, why?

Ms FLINT: It takes up a significant proportion of an SSPs professional learning budget that would not need to be applied necessarily in a primary school or a high school. To train my staff in either part of non-crisis violent intervention [NCI] training, for example—

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is NCVI, is it not?

Ms FLINT: Yes, but it is just called NCI, I don't know why. It takes a lot out of our school professional learning budget and, of course, it does not account at all for half of my staff who are school learning support officers and do not receive that type of professional learning grant in the school budget.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is there no budget for professional development of SLSOs?

Ms DEAN: No, not directly no.

Ms FLINT: It is taken out of our global budget.

Ms DEAN: It is how we use our budget.

Ms FLINT: And all schools would have to take some money out of their global budget for the training of school learning support officers. In my school that is 35 people.

Ms MURPHY: There is training for school learning support officers in the administration of healthcare procedures that is done outside the school and does not mean that we have to commit from the global budget. So that is done externally and that is really important.

Ms FLINT: It does because we have to release those staff and pay a casual school learning support officer to replace them to allow them the time to go to training.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The take-home message for this Committee is that there is a major issue with the professional development at schools for special purposes. It requires additional resources to secure the time and money for special education training.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The replacement cost.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The replacement cost and the cost of buying the in-service training.

Ms FLINT: The cost of the training package is usually the smallest part. The cost to the school is in releasing staff and replacing them at school to be able to do that or to provide more and more training out of school hours. Of course, school learning support officers are not paid for that time.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Could we talk briefly about the issue of behaviour schools? In particular, issues have been raised by a number of people with this Committee about young people in behaviour schools not having an opportunity to continue with their education at the same time they are in the behaviour school. In your submission you raised the issue of students not having access to specialist subject teachers and in many cases inappropriately being put onto a life skills program when their issue is not an intellectual disability, it is a behavioural problem. You exercise the argument about the need for a vigorous academic curriculum for some students to keep them engaged. Could you comment on how broad that is and expand on your submission?

Ms FLINT: The majority of behaviour settings are catering for students in the secondary age group, upper primary into the secondary age group. They are SSPs and they are staffed like all SSPs—on a primary formula. So there is no reliance on them having any secondary trained staff there. They may have. I have a trained textiles teacher on my staff, not teaching textiles, but that is just chance. So for someone to have the expertise around science, maths or any of the other subject areas could be a problem.

Mr GALLAN: Also there is the issue of facilities to go with that to meet the need of the curriculum. Quite often our schools do not have access to specialist rooms that support the curriculum and the learning needs of students. Basically we have a home-based classroom and maybe a kitchen area or hall. We certainly do not have the range of options that regular schools would have.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In the context of schools like yours, your staffing formula is not a primary staffing formula but your access to resources is a primary formula. In a school such as yours, for example, Ann, many of your students have severe intellectual disability and lots of other issues as well.

Ms FLINT: Yes, 75 per cent of my students have a severe disability and 43 per cent of them have autism on top of that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In that context, what are the consequences of the primary funding formula?

Ms FLINT: The thing of greatest concern to me and my staff is the lack of release time for my executive to provide mentoring and support to teachers, often who do not have special education qualifications or experience. They might be first year teachers—and several of my teachers are first-year out of university this year—or they have just come from another area of teaching but without that experience. Providing time for those people to sit in on individual education plan [IEP] meetings with teachers to make sure that families are involved and that we can discuss a range of options; providing time to support students whose behaviour can be challenging in the extreme. The list goes on.

Ms DEAN: Secondary high schools are funded on a 1.4 teachers per class—one teacher and two extra days. In our system, because we are primary funded, we have one teacher. So we are missing out .4 on every compared to secondary. We are unable to run programs such as industrial arts or textiles or the things that may engage our students, those practical subjects because we do not have that flexibility. It has to be done within our school, which is your general primary staffing model. In terms of a secondary budget, if you look at the global budget there is a difference between secondary and primary per student capita, per staff and those sorts of things with secondary being much higher than primary. Again, we are missing out on a level there. That also impacts across the schools.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: I am interested particularly in the use of assisted technology in your schools. I have visited technology centres, such as Quantum Technology, which has marvellous equipment. We have become used to people using hearing and visual technology to assist them. At Macquarie Laboratories I have seen the most incredible technology—materials that read to people who have all kinds of difficulties, highlight words or help people who constantly mirror read and materials that help people write assignments. I know it is expensive. Do you have any hardware or software like this that can be used?

Ms DEAN: We have just introduced the interactive whiteboards into most of our classrooms. The change in engagement for our children is amazing. We have children who are non-verbal, they cannot hold a pencil, but they can go up and touch their own name. It can pop up and do funny little things. The amount of the engagement our children are now doing with these interactive whiteboards is amazing. I am talking about children with very, very high support needs into severe intellectual, autistic and everything on top, and they are engaging.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: You are talking about a whiteboard, which is in a class situation. What about individual teaching modules?

Ms DEAN: The modules all have to be made by the teacher. Again, it is about adjusting the curriculum, the program, against this time factor that they need because we cannot go out there and get one off the shelf and put it in. It does not exist. Every child in the class has a different need. Some child might touch the board, some child might actually read one word or recognise it. So the whole class program is around the varying six or seven students and they will do it differently according to their needs. While it is a class resource, the amount of time and energy that staff put in to modify it is all basically individual.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: How is that type of assisted technology funded?

Ms DEAN: Beg, borrow, steal. Parents and citizens associations—

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Parents?

Ms DEAN: Parents have basically bought all these.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: New South Wales clubs have promised to help, if you ask.

Ms DEAN: A club has given us one too.

Ms MURPHY: Special schools are very fortunate in being able to attract the support of community groups, such as Rotary clubs. We do use the money from those groups to buy assisted technology. It does make an enormous difference for our students in accessing. My school is very well resourced in terms of technology support.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Excellent.

Ms DEAN: Often one of our problems in special schools, and it came out in the BER program we have just had, is if it is funded on per student capita. In a mainstream school you have 30 children, say, in a class. That produces X amount of dollars, which gives you something you can really hang your hat on and buy something with. In our situation one class may be six children. That is not a lot of dollars, it does not buy very much, especially in terms of new technology and the costs associated with it. When the department does have some funding agreement that is on a per capita basis we lose out significantly. If it is on a class basis, that works well for us. It depends on how funds are allocated too.

Ms MURPHY: In terms of the digital education revolution, principals have the option of not having the laptops and students choosing more appropriate technology.

Ms FLINT: There is some flexibility around that.

Ms MURPHY: There is flexibility.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: There has been some discussion about resources following students' movements from one school to another. How do you think schools will cope when students change schools if the resources follow them, using an assessment tool? How will that ensure that there are sustained services in place?

Ms FLINT: We are funded differently. My establishment has 30 classes, so I have the staff of 30 classes. At the moment I have two student vacancies, but I still have the funding for 30 classes. I have two vacancies at the next placement panel. They will be filled.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You are not funded per student?

Ms FLINT: No, not per student. We are funded on establishment of classes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So this policy will not affect you?

Ms FLINT: No.

Ms MURPHY: It is just a different way of staffing. Staffing for students in mainstream. There is the functional assessment so that money is allocated. But with support classes and special schools, we have the staffing.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: It is a strange mixture.

Ms DEAN: So that reduces the possibility of funding and the way we allocate our resources in the school, in terms of simple things like a learning support team meeting. We cannot use that funding and make it then direct. We have to go to our two hours a week, and that is our problem. We are set in this release time of two hours a week, whereas when you have that funding that comes under the State support funding, that does enable the school to perhaps say, "All right, we will use some of that funding to run the meetings, to do these things, to support the child".

Ms FLINT: To release the participants to participate.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: So you are not arguing—

Ms FLINT: No, our learning support team meetings are usually popped in at the beginning of a school day before school starts. You rely on the staff members' goodwill to come an hour earlier than perhaps they need to.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Very early today the Committee was talking about the Start program. I may have missed something. How do teachers fit in with that? Can you elaborate on that program and how it fits in with teachers?

Ms FLINT: Currently all kindergarten students in my school require an individualised program and with Best Start we can assess students and it will tell them that. It just does not tell our teachers what should go

in it. If you look at the curriculum documents and the lowest, earliest, outcomes across the KLAs, that does not give teachers much of a clue either. I gave the maths example: count in order numbers to 30. When you have a student in a wheelchair being gastro tube fed, who may be visually impaired as well and have a significant intellectual disability, how to teach that student to count in order numbers to 10 requires a great deal of imagination.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Regarding learning goals, this morning the Committee heard of an example of a parent whose child is fairly disabled. Are you structured into a curriculum?

Ms FLINT: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: You are? So through the process of review you cannot pick up an issue that that young person may be able to deliver on and adapt for success of some sort?

Ms FLINT: We look at meeting the learning needs of our students. For some students that might be to be able to stay inside a room for five or 10 minutes, or to sit on a chair for two minutes during a morning circle activity. But we build all of that within the curriculum framework. We look at the outcomes, and we try to find places where we can link that. Or we use curriculum activities as a vehicle. If you are teaching a morning circle and there are some songs happening, the student may not understand what the song is or what it is about, but we try to use that as a point of engagement to teach them that other thing, which might be to learn to sit on a chair for a minute, so that they can start focusing on other learning activities as well.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The person I am referring to had been classified as a living skills requirement person.

CHAIR: Life skills.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: No, that is not the issue. The person had cerebral palsy; that is the term I was searching for. They tried to teach the person to comb their hair and brush their teeth, which was physically impossible for this human. I am not having a go at you about that. Do structures exist for that not to happen?

Ms DEAN: It is called our learning support team. We have individualised plans for children, so we meet and discuss personal goals. We ask the parents what do they want to see their child achieve in 12 months. So those goals we set with our parents. For many children it is about communicating, about toileting or other self-care areas. It may be at that level, but these are discussed with the parents so it should become very clear on what sort of goals we are trying to imbed in the broad curriculum framework.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: If the thought process is locked in somewhere, do you reckon that sometimes you have the skills to bring enough communication for that to happen? This person was physically disabled.

Mr GALLAN: You would sit down with a range of people at the individual education planning meeting. Maybe sometimes you would have a dozen people, therapists, and you would look at the priorities and quite often our students, because they are learning, are slower. You have to prioritise them, particularly as they get older. All of a sudden you have to look at the more functional aspects of the curriculum that you are going to have so that they can make a sandwich by themselves, or go to the toilet independently, or communicate with symbols. You often do that in collaboration with parents, who quite often come with a wealth of knowledge about their child and experience and they have been through Health and the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, input and early intervention. Quite often it is a matter of sitting down and negotiating learning needs and what you can achieve in a given amount of time, whether it is six months or 12 months.

Ms MURPHY: And also setting realistic goals for the child. Someone with cerebral palsy combing their hair may not be realistic.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Poking their eye out.

Ms FLINT: Yes, that would be more around counselling. Someone in the school spending time with the teacher who was putting that learning plan together, to talk about whether that is a realistic goal or something that is achievable even with therapy intervention.

Ms DEAN: Those types of meetings take time. If they are overlooked it is the rushed nature of them, unfortunately.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Yes, that was the information that I had. Thank you.

CHAIR: Do you have anything to tell the Committee, or any particular outcomes you might want the Committee to take on board as we go forward towards writing our report?

Ms DEAN: We would like to move into a functional model of funding, definitely we have been pushing for that. But we do not want to see the existing resources spread the same way. It has to be a realistic functional model that comes out that recognises the needs of the children, the students and the teachers and what goes into teaching and learning. Time is an incredible factor. At the moment we rely on the goodwill of staff and their professional dedication is what gets us through as principals. Without that I do not know where we would be, because there is an incredible amount of time required to mentor, to do these learning support meetings, to bring in the resources that will allow our children to learn. Time is a huge issue that we will always be strapped for. If we can get some sort of resourcing funding that recognises what we have, just even the time it takes to do the OHS side of things to keep our staff safe as well as our children safe is immense.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Are you pushing to remove block funding?

Ms FLINT: No.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: The Committee has had many conversations about functional resourcing.

CHAIR: No, they did want some more funds.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I know they want more.

Ms FLINT: At the moment our students have a factor of needs. A student whose primary disability is severe intellectual disability has a factor of need of 1.666. A student who has a moderate—

Ms DEAN: Which means six children in a class—

Ms FLINT: —disability and a pervasive developmental characteristic aligned around autism, has a factor of need on enrolment, if they are already in the school it does not apply, of 1.428. For a student with a moderate disability it is 1.111. We add all those up and that is how we know how many staff we have. But it is not enough.

Ms DEAN: But it does not take into account the variation within that. You could have one child with incredibly challenging behaviours and put him into a class with nine students—or you could have nine students with incredible issues with challenging behaviours and put them all together—that is where it is not working. We need that flexibility to be able to create the size of the class and provide it there.

Ms FLINT: Too significant a part of the teaching day in an SSP is spent on personal care and behaviour management.

Ms MURPHY: And toileting.

Ms FLINT: Yes, and personal care.

Ms DEAN: Our teachers just want to teach.

Ms FLINT: Just encouraging a student to move from one end of my school to the other can take significant human resources to make that happen.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You sort of sit outside of the issue of the school learning support program put forward by the Department of Education last year. Can you comment on that from the outside looking in?

Ms FLINT: It is a fantastic concept but it is not being resourced. There is no time allocated for people to meet to raise issues and to have that collaborative discussion around meeting a student's needs, and then there is certainly no time allocated to have the recommendations of the learning support team implemented. In my school the learning support teams are nearly always around kids and challenging behaviour. A child, as a result of that, might need a sensory assessment, a functional assessment; they might need a social story made; they might need a whole range of other things developed to keep that child in the class and keep people safe. But that just adds on top of the work of, generally, my executive staff.

Ms MURPHY: Can I just finish by saying that one of the things that I particularly think would be good for SSPs is to have a level of flexibility in how you use the staffing—having a base formula but then some flexibility so that principals of special schools can in fact address some of the learning needs a little bit better. So much teacher time is taken up with the personal care that I feel that I could do a lot better for my students if there was a little bit of flexibility.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Are you saying you have got a formula that actually says—

Ms MURPHY: There is, in a class. In all my classes the students have severe levels of disability so it is six students with a school learning support officer and a teacher. But in the school day a lot of time is taken up with feeding and toileting and you cannot have the school learning support officer doing that because—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: They would fall over.

Ms MURPHY: Yes. So the teacher assists as well, and that eats into learning time.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation both in your submission and in your answers today, and thank you for what you do every day as well with great challenges. We appreciate it very much. The secretariat staff may be in touch with you at some point if there is clarification needed. Do not forget that if there is something that you think we need to know please let us know. Thank you very much for coming in today.

(The witnesses withdrew)

IAN GEORGE BAKER, Director, Policy and Programs, Catholic Education Commission NSW,

GERALDINE MARY GRAY, State Coordinator, Special Learning Needs, Catholic Education Commission NSW,

DANNY JAMES RANKIN, Senior Education Officer, Diocese of Broken Bay Catholic Schools Office, and

ANTHONY WEIR, Principal, St Brendans Catholic Primary School, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming to present in our last block of discussions today. There is a capacity for one or some of you to make an opening statement if you wish.

Mr BAKER: I will make a brief opening statement just to remind the Committee, because we are reasonably regular visitors to the Committee, what the commission is and what it is not. The commission does not own and operate Catholic schools in New South Wales, rather it represents those authorities in New South Wales that do own and operate those schools. The commission represents the owners and operators of schools and, to that extent, it presents a synthesis of policy positions. We have with us representatives from the diocese of Broken Bay, who obviously have a particular perspective. But that may be an issue in questions on the matter of perspective.

The other point I want to make is that we strongly believe this inquiry needs to be seen in the context of earlier related and important inquiries. That is to say, we participated in the 2001 to 2004 legislative inquiry into early intervention for children with learning difficulties and responded to its 2003 report "Realising Potential". The commission in its own right and for the National Catholic Education Commission responded to the 2002 Senate inquiry into students with disabilities. More recently the commission has engaged with this council's inquiry into 9 to 14 year olds, and we are of the strong view that this inquiry needs to be seen in the context of the issues and recommendations which are to be found in those earlier parliamentary inquiries both of this Parliament and of the Commonwealth Parliament.

I would like to make the point that our focus and purpose, and we believe it is yours, is to unlock the capacities of all the children enrolled in all New South Wales schools. We need to avoid an exclusively deficit focus on student needs. All students, all human beings have needs. Unlocking their capacities is our common goal. Our task as educators is to identify those barriers which prevent any child from achieving their full capacity. Once the barriers are identified, response strategies—or, in legal language, adjustments—need to be identified and implemented. Resources are important to the identification and implementation of appropriate response strategies—adjustments—but resources are only a necessary precondition to successful intervention. Resources are not a sufficient strategy in themselves. Beyond resources, schools and the wider community require a belief in the learning capacity of all children, and schools in particular require the services of committed and appropriately skilled staff.

Our vision for the future locates Catholic schools as partners in a coordinated community effort to realise these aspirations and to realise the wider aspirations that led the Australian community, through the Commonwealth Parliament, to recently adopt the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It also locates Catholic schools as advocates of new processes for identifying student needs for the purpose of unlocking student capacities. We believe our submission addresses the resource issues, looks beyond the resources, suggests new processes for identifying and responding to students with special needs, supports parents' choice of service provider, recognises the critical role of teachers and school staff, acknowledges that challenges transcend any single school sector, understands the equity divide is significantly geographic in nature—rurality in New South Wales reduces support options, and seeks to focus policy options and development through the identification of 11 recommendations, which we have set out in our submission. We are happy to discuss the recommendations.

CHAIR: Thank you. We have talked a little bit about early intervention and the need to get that assessment right at the beginning. How does early intervention work in your system?

Mr BAKER: I will make a few comments and my colleagues may have some specific on-the-ground comments in relation to early intervention. We think the policy environment should be joined up. We make a recommendation that early childhood should be part of the Education portfolio. We think it is dysfunctional that

it is not. As the Americans would say, there is no contest. Early intervention is the best intervention; it is how you support that and how you make it happen.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And how to identify where it is needed, or is that not a problem?

Mr BAKER: No, that is an issue. The recent Australian Early Development Index [AEDI] process, which is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government, has been helpful. All schools in Australia participated in that through their kindergarten classes. We think that is useful and important.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is that the Best Start program?

Mr BAKER: No, the AEDI is a Commonwealth initiative for the assessment of all students coming into kindergartens around Australia. It is an initiative borrowed from Canada, as I understand it. Best Start and Family First are New South Wales initiatives. There are similar initiatives to Best Start in Catholic schools, but there is a range of them.

Ms GRAY: In terms of assessments, we have quite good collaborative arrangements with the Department of Education's early intervention centres. Our issue would be in terms of accessing assessments for students coming into our schools, which is a requirement of meeting the criteria for the Students with Disabilities funding for both State and Commonwealth—the criteria are the same. Our issue is that where there is not an assessment it is sometimes quite difficult and costly to gain that assessment, which includes such things as a psychometric assessment and a speech therapy assessment.

Mr WEIR: Commenting on the AEDI, that is completed by the kindergarten teachers in the first year when the children are already in kindergarten, so it provides a range of factors about their prior-to-school environment. However, as I have said before in discussing the AEDI, for me personally at the school when the teachers filled out the checklist on the children before them they kind of knew the children anyway. It was useful at that level. What I think is really useful about that index is that gathered together across the nation it is going to provide a lot of hot spots and cool spots, and will provide funders with a much better picture of where the concerns are.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Can you give us an indication of what AEDI looks at?

Mr WEIR: AEDI looks at such things as how many days they attended preschool and what sorts of things they could do prior to school, their family situation, and a whole range of factors around readiness for learning at school. That is filled in by the teacher in a one-on-one interview with each child, sometimes by having to collect information from the parents or from the school.

Mr RANKIN: It really looks at the factors of success that have been world researched. As to whether it works or not, we will all find out later. From my point of view, you have early intervention prior to school and early intervention in the younger years at school. For the early intervention programs that we participate in, as do our State colleagues, we have excellent relationships with those providers. They willingly give of themselves and their reports—

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Preschool and Family First.

Mr RANKIN: Preschool and Family First, Department of Education centres.

Ms GRAY: The Spastic Centre, the Institute for Deaf and Blind Children's early intervention—the non-government organisations as well as early intervention in the Department of Education. There is a very good collaborative process across all those groups. The problem is when the student or child is not part of one of those early intervention processes and where you require other mechanisms.

Mr WEIR: From a school's point of view, that can sometimes involve, in my particular case, having relationships with up to 20 or more different centres where children come from, not just one or two. It can be 20 different preschools, so that is a time and resource issue.

CHAIR: Do you have a transition period when that sort of information is collected?

Mr WEIR: We do, yes.

CHAIR: There have been a number of recurring themes today as we have explored some of these issues. One ongoing theme, and I think you have mentioned it already, is teacher training and preparedness and ongoing in-service training. Is it your view that there is insufficient, inappropriate or inadequate training in the area of disabilities or special needs?

Ms GRAY: The standards that have been worked on with the Institute of Teachers over the last few years in terms of teaching students with special needs have come a long way. There are always differences in the way those standards are implemented, so in the universities there would be different ways of implementing them. There are, as you know, universities that specialise. Generally there is improvement, but there is a way to go. With pre-teaching there is improvement in that area, with more collaborative support across the sectors.

We certainly talk but if we join together a lot more when we are setting those standards in place we can continue to improve. That is in place. With the existing teachers, there is obviously a change in their needs and that requires training, teaching and professional development. We would agree that the quality teachers partnership—the national partnership—perhaps is the mechanism whereby we could do more work in this area. If you are looking at teacher assistance, bringing together the training of teacher aides and learning support officers and training teachers to work effectively with teacher aides is an area that could grow a lot more.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: We have heard a lot today from parents about the importance of choice and adequate funding based on functionality rather than simply a diagnosis of a major disability. What do you consider are your limitations in terms of providing adequate funding for parents who want to bring their children with moderate to severe disabilities into the Catholic school system?

Mr BAKER: One issue is the sheer complexity of funding. That is partly an artefact of living in a federation with a mix of State and Federal funding. Of course, in our case there is also private funding. At the moment in order to access Federal funding you have to pass through the gate of State definitions. They will recognise a student with a disability for the purpose of Commonwealth funding only if the student is recognised under the State definitions. We think they need to be reviewed. They are too narrow with reference to the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act and standards, to say nothing of the international convention that the Federal Government has just ratified.

One of the anomalies that I am sure parents do not understand—it is difficult to explain it to professionals—is that you can have a student with a recognised disability at law but not recognised for funding purposes. That is one of the issues that needs to be tackled. To progress that there needs to be cooperation between State and Federal governments. At the moment, there is no agreed process for assessing students with disabilities to determine whether they have a high, moderate or low level of disability. As our submission points out, we are trying to develop a process that would allow for some better discrimination as to the needs of students. I am not sure whether that answers the question. At the moment it is all too complex and there are significant numbers of students who fall outside the definitions.

The Hon. MARIE FICARRA: There have been many requests from parents, both today as witnesses and in submissions, for funding to follow the student; that is, not for parents to have control over it but for it to go with the student to which ever school they choose, whether it be government or non-government. What is your view?

Mr BAKER: We are open to exploring that possibility. However, the definitional issues would have to be addressed first. Then there is the very difficult, tricky issue of attaching dollars to particular levels of student assessment. We have an open mind, but we want to work through how it could be done and how it could be done in such a way that allows for individual schools and systems of schools to plan delivery. If funding is bouncing all over the place, it becomes very difficult to plan. We have an open mind, but a number of prior questions need to be answered before we get to that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer to page 13 of your submission, recommendation No. 3 and the statement that the resourcing needs of all students with disabilities and special learning needs, irrespective of school sector, need to be addressed to ensure that each student can achieve the agreed national goals for schooling et cetera. I am not sure what that means. Does that mean you are saying that, as the Association of Independent Schools said, every child with a particular diagnosis and a recognition of support needs should receive the same amount of funding whether they are in a public or private school?

Mr BAKER: The short answer is, in essence, yes. However, the longer answer is that all Australian governments, and through the governments the community of Australia, have endorsed the Melbourne Declaration and a set of goals for all young Australians. That is not qualified by "some" or those who do not have a disability. Those goals are nothing if there is not realistic resourcing to allow children to achieve them. That is basically what we are saying. If Australian governments collectively are serious about the Melbourne Declaration, to give effect to it for all young Australians the simple reality has to be addressed that some young Australians will need more education resources than others to achieve those goals. On the other hand, as a community we will have to say those goals are only for certain young Australians. I do not think anyone wants to say that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is not part of the funding to achieve those goals already reflected in the recurrent funding you receive for each student through both the 25 per cent rule in New South Wales under section 21 of the Education Act and also the enormously complex but from your perspective highly effective Federal funding scheme, which is indexed on the AGSRC? Both the AGSRC and the underlying measure in the 25 per cent rule in New South Wales are based on the average cost of educating a child in public education, which includes the 7 per cent, 8 per cent or 9 per cent of students in public education who have an identified disability and who are funded at a greater rate.

Mr BAKER: All that is true. However, at the end of the day we receive only a percentage of it; we do not receive 100 per cent of the cost of educating a student in a government school. By the way, we have never asked for that. The net effect—we have set it out in the table on page 12—is that a low-needs student, on average, costs \$3,300 or approximately 71.5 five per cent. For a high-needs student we get approximately 6.6 per cent. Somewhere between that and 100 per cent is where we really need to move.

In relation to State funding, while obviously we acknowledge the significant contribution that the taxpayers of New South Wales make through the State Government to our schools, we are mindful of the fact that while approximately 30 per cent of the State's students are enrolled in non-government schools less than 9 per cent of the State's school budget goes to non-government schools. I do not think that the argument that somehow or other all our funding needs are already met is sustainable. We certainly do not see it that way.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Quite so. On page 18 of your submission at 5.2 you refer to the students who are in the autism satellite classes within the Catholic education system. You say those students are not included in the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] Catholic school enrolment statistics and do not attract funding for the Catholic schools that host them. Is it not also important to point out that they do attract funding through Autism Spectrum Australia [Aspect] and that it is recognised by DEEWR and attracts funding? Therefore, those children are funded, but the money does not go to you—it goes to Aspect.

Mr BAKER: That is true.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And at a higher rate than if they were your students.

Mr BAKER: Obviously we are comfortable with that situation because it helps to deliver a better service for the students. Apart from anything else, it illustrates the unnecessary complexity we have all arrived at. As I said in my opening remarks, leave aside the quantum of funding, I think we would all agree that special education funding is too complex. It is a prisoner of its history and it is time it was liberated.

Ms GRAY: We think that the satellite classes work well and we really appreciate the support we get from Aspect. However, it should be pointed out that the host school must pay for quite a lot: the basic structure, the classrooms and the mechanisms involved.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: For capital works?

Ms GRAY: For anything like that I will pass over to Anthony. The Catholic school pays for all that and no recurrent money or no targeted money is coming in for those students. Having said that, this is a way of managing it. We appreciate it and would not like to lose it because it is certainly functioning for us.

Mr WEIR: I have about 15 students with autism at my school. Autism Spectrum Australia, or Aspect, provides a satellite unit within the classrooms. In fact, of the nine children who come under Aspect's funding—all those except the children in kindergarten and in year 1—are placed inside the regular room, sitting alongside the other 20 kids or so, and the staff go into the classroom. For those children to be able to access what might be

called a mainstream experience, Aspect is working closely with them to provide that support. It is a wonderful model that works really well, and I sing its praises.

The funding issue for us relating to those children is that we do not want to segregate them from the mainstream by having them looked after purely by Aspect staff and for the regular teacher not to have anything to do with them. The two people have no time to talk to one another, to plan and to work out collaboratively how that model will work in the classroom. If there is no release time, or no resourcing is given to my staff, how would they sit and talk to the Aspect staff member who is in the room and design the program to better meet the needs of children so that they can be integrated? I do not want to see Aspect set up a satellite unit within the school to isolate the children.

Mr RANKIN: From a system point of view, we have 84 students who are being hosted currently.

Dr JOHN KAYE: "We" as in the Diocese of Broken Bay?

Mr RANKIN: The Diocese of Broken Bay.

Mr WEIR: I am in the Diocese of Broken Bay.

Mr RANKIN: We consider it a wonderful relationship. However, it is only for students, for which we do not enrol. Anthony cannot have any more than X number of kids in the classes in his school, so we do not enrol extra kids who could head off to Anthony's school, in particular, or at St Peters at Tuggerah, a secondary school campus that hosts 15 students, because they are integrated into all the classes and, as you would know, there are certain occupational health and safety issues about how many kids can be in certain rooms and so on. We deliberately limit the number of students that we enrol in those schools so that the classes are small enough to cater for them, and so on. I suppose it is a commitment that we are making to educating students with autism, whether or not they enrol with us naturally.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Mr Baker, following on from what you just said, it is part of our goal to integrate children with autism and so on. I appreciated you saying that you identified the barriers as one of your goals that prohibits the full development of a child. Has the Catholic Education Commission yet recognised dyslexia as a disability?

Mr BAKER: It is not a matter of whether or not the Catholic Education Commission recognises it as a disability. My understanding—and I will defer to my expert colleague—is that dyslexia fits within the Disability Discrimination Act, or DDA, definition of disability, but it does not fit within the funding definitions, which is part of the dilemma. Every school hopes to address dyslexia—and I said, "hopes to address dyslexia" because there are a host of definitional issues, or a spectrum as it were. Some led themselves to more reasonable and accessible interventions than others. My hesitancy is because I do not want to mislead you. I do not want to make out that after my speech no child will have dyslexia, just as the earlier statement about which we are all aware related to no child living in poverty. Dyslexia is a real issue. We recognise it and we address it as best we can. However, it illustrates only part of the problem. While it is a disability for the purposes of the Disability Discrimination Act and the standards, it is not recognised for funding. I will defer to my expert colleague.

Ms GRAY: Quite a lot of work is going on relating to how to teach and support students who are recognised as having learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Certainly, with the move in schools to use technology, smart boards and packages, there is an increasing understanding of the needs of students and what sorts of provisions can be put in place for them to show what they know and learn. Most certainly we support the diocese in its efforts to understand these major changes in technologies. Spectronics is a major conference that is coming up in May. Quite a large contingent from the Catholic sector in New South Wales will be attending that conference.

The aim is to improve in that area. However, there is a difficulty because of how much it costs. The equipment that we can access now is expensive. Schools are aware, under the second round of the Computers in Schools Digital Education Program, that there is flexibility to utilise funds for students with disabilities. Where that is known they try to do that. However, again the funds are limited because the cost of the equipment can be a lot more, as can the cost of some of the packages. Having said that, we sit on the Digital Education Standards Panel, which is a part of the Commonwealth effort in this area at the moment. We are certainly showing our support in any way to improve access through the web. In doing that we put quite a lot of effort into understanding working with different groups.

Reverend the Hon. Dr GORDON MOYES: Who is the key person who makes that decision?

Mr BAKER: The Commonwealth funds on State definitions. At the moment I think the ball is firmly in the State court. As we understand it, the Deputy Prime Minister has set the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Child Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA] a challenge to come up with a single national definition for students with disabilities. There is no common Australia-wide definition. If we were in Western Australia, the profile of students who would be funded would be different from the profile here. The Commonwealth currently funds from the State definitions. Going back to Dr Kaye's question, to be absolutely frank, the majority of the funding comes from the Commonwealth, but the gatekeeper of the State definition really comes back to the State.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: I want to ask about rural and regional areas and, in particular, the smaller towns. I visited one of the schools where it was suggested that it might be a good idea if a class were attached to one school—it did not matter which school—so that kids from all other schools could go to that class. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr BAKER: First, as I said in my introductory comments, the big equity divide is not between the school sectors but between schools located in the metropolitan areas and schools located in rural areas. One of the challenges that we all face is how to bridge that service gap for schools in rural areas. We are strong supporters of working collaboratively. As we pointed out in our submission, we partly fund the Palm Avenue Centre, and we have been doing so for 20 years. So, yes, we would be interested in models of cooperative service delivery.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: Do you see that as an outcome as far as the students themselves are concerned?

Mr BAKER: Yes. Anything that optimises the access of students with disabilities or special needs to expert services has to be. Education cannot solve this on its own. A lot of these services are health services. We understand it is not realistic to think that every rural or remote school will be able to duplicate services and it would not be a good use of scarce resources. All I can say is yes, we are seriously interested in models of cooperative service delivery, and we think we have a history of that illustrated through the Palm Avenue centre.

Ms GRAY: Can I just add, whatever sector we are we would take on the view of the parents and parental choice, going back to what we suggested before. We have an example at the moment, and I was just discussing this today, of a family that has moved from one area—I will name it, it is Griffith—to go to a school with the satellite arrangements in Albury. That seems to be a good idea. However, the whole family has now moved from the Griffith area to go to Albury, and that brings with it all that loss of support mechanisms that they had back in their original community. So, yes, we want to work together but we want to take on board the needs of the family in doing that. I am speaking for a different dioceses here but it is doing as much as it can to support needs in that area, but it is extremely difficult and you cannot always cover that area.

Within another rural area you have the access issue. So, backing up what Ian was saying, in setting up something in a rural area, I know of at least two cases where students have arrived at the school—not just one but possibly two or three students coming into a school. They had early intervention and they had caseworkers through the Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care, and those caseworkers have not yet been able to come to a collaborative meeting at that school. So, I think the need is to get those people who are supposed to be supporting those families to be able to follow through with that process.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: By way of information, I know of two other families, one has moved to Melbourne and one is moved to Sydney to be near a special school, and the whole family had to come down, but that is another story. The other question I had was the role of counsellors in the schools themselves. Do you have many counsellors who support your schools?

Mr BAKER: We do not have a single model of service provision. My colleague Danny might want to make some comments in a minute. We have various models. In some schools the counsellors is an employee of the school, like teachers. Some Catholic schools access counselling services provided by Catholic Care or Centre Care, as it was previously known. So, there is a range of models. Only the minority of Catholic schools would have full-time counsellors, but that begs the question for what roles, so I am not sure.

The Hon. TONY CATANZARITI: What I was looking for is that early intervention again, when they first come to the schools to get recognised for what sort of disabilities they may have.

Ms GRAY: The counsellors in Catholic schools will vary in their backgrounds. Some of our counsellors are psychologists—if you are alluding to being able to test—but not all of them. So, the availability of a psychologist varies dramatically across the State. A large number of our counsellors—I am leaning towards some secondary schools now, are not attached to primary schools. In the secondary schools they might be of social work, welfare background, so they have a different role in the schools.

Mr RANKIN: Every school in the diocese of Broken Bay has the appointment of a secondary school counsellor, whether it is two or three days. All of our primary schools, probably the ratio is half a day for 150, 200 students on average. So, we are certainly not up to best practice levels. None of our school counsellors will do psychometric assessments. They are purely to deal with students' mental health concerns, and we have made that very clear.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Who does the psychometric assessments, then?

Mr RANKIN: Our diocese is very fortunate in that we have decided some years ago to outsource that to providers and pay for those assessments externally.

Mr BAKER: At significant cost.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I was going to say, it is, presumably, more expensive than in-house?

Mr RANKIN: No, it is actually cheaper. We had in-house and we have costed that, surveyed extensively. For us in our diocese it is cheaper than an in-house service. In fact, we are able to do more and our waiting list is shorter. Only our diocese, I am only speaking for our diocese.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I ask who your provider is? Not the name, but the nature of your provider, is it a Catholic agency?

Mr RANKIN: No, it is private practice and we would have 15 to 30 on our list. So, the parents choose the relationship and school that they want. I can go through them all, but basically—

CHAIR: No.

Mr RANKIN: Good, I will shut up

CHAIR: I did not want to know about all the different groups but the model is what is interesting.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: Could we ask from you on notice for a bit more about the nature of the counsellors and psychometric testing process? Is that too much trouble?

Mr BAKER: We can provide it, but there will be models, plural.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: I recognise different dioceses are different but that particular one would be interesting to look at. I have two issues. One is that I am very impressed with your recommendation 10—I do not know about the New South Wales State Plan, that is in relation to the skills of the teachers aides, special learning. It would appear from what we have heard today that there are quite good resources for that to occur but an incredible problem with relief of staff in time for that to occur. Is that the same problem for you?

Ms GRAY: Yes.

The Hon. CHRISTINE ROBERTSON: My other question relates to having a national definition for determining students with a disability and the pros and cons of whether it is national or statewide or whatever. We have also heard a lot of evidence today about issues in relation to labelling. Is having a national definition going to make that even more difficult than it is now? Like the medical model, labelling in comparison with the functional assessments issue—how difficult would it be to negotiate national models that reflected the needs of the people rather than reflected the needs of the medical model?

Ms GRAY: It is not easy. However, over many years now since the late 1990s, there has been an effort to have a national definition, so a lot of discussion. While that has so far not been successful, the internal discussion across the States has resulted in some worthwhile discussion around how you would approach a functional assessment. So, I think in terms of the work that is going on, not only with us but across States and Territories in identifying levels of need related to student adjustments rather than the diagnosis is what everyone is trying to do. Perhaps bringing together people who are doing that and having them further in that conversation, we might proceed quicker. Certainly, the effort is there in the belief that that is a better way to go.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You have provided us with a broad spectrum of recommendations for our purposes and our recommendations to Parliament. Which ones do you see as the most pressing that we can carry forward?

Mr BAKER: I think the one we have just been talking about, definitions. While all of us would like to move away from the categorical approach—section 3 of our submission sketches how we are trying to do that with what we call a profiling instrument—the funding facts of life, and this goes back to the question about dyslexia, for resources at the moment is driven by definition. So, I suggest numbers one and two of our recommendations. Because we are all agreed that early intervention is the best way to go—I understand there are different ways of interpreting and applying early intervention—but recommendation six about joining up early childhood services in school services. In acknowledging that work has been done, I think they could be brought to some finality.

The other thing runs through recommendation five, about ACARA. As increasingly as education policies are nationally driven, we do not actually want to lose things we already have. We think the New South Wales curriculum is not perfect but we think that Board of Studies' curriculum and lifestyle courses—we are talking about secondary schools here—is something we should not lose as we move from State-based curriculum to national curriculum. There is a similar issue there for teaching standards and the work of the Institute of Teachers. As the New South Wales Institute of Teachers yields, if I can put it that way, to the jurisdiction of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership and its standards, we do not want to lose the hard-won focus of State level on standards or addressing the needs of students with disabilities.

CHAIR: Thank you for attending today. We have asked you to provide more information on your counselling and referral process and agencies. We just need general details. We look forward to continuing dialogue. I am sure you will be interested in our outcomes and recommendations. No doubt we will see you at the next inquiry.

Mr BAKER: That is right. We are always pleased to be here.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 5.24 p.m.)