

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

(Reference: budget 2002-2003—service delivery)

Members:

**MS K MacDONALD (The Chair)
MR S PRATT
MS R DUNDAS**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 22 MARCH 2002

**Secretary to the committee:
Mr D Skinner (Ph: 62050137)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The committee met at 9.42 am.

IAN MORGAN was called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome to today's hearing. The committee's inquiry is part of the budget consultation process. The committee will examine the evidence before it and make recommendations to the government. The committee does not make decisions about budget matters.

You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections but also responsibilities. It means that you're protected from certain legal actions, such as being sued for defamation for what you say to us today. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell us the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

I'm going to keep you to a fairly tight timeframe, but don't feel disadvantaged. I was doing that with everybody else.

Dr Morgan: I was here for the other session. First of all, thanks to the committee for giving us the chance to discuss our submission. I want to expand on a few points in our submission. Clearly what we put together is a package of measures that addresses the needs of government high schools. We have placed some priority on high school development for some years now. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is that if you look at surveys of parents and students, you find the lowest satisfaction rate in the high school sector. People are generally happy with primary schools, happy with colleges, not so happy with high schools. That's across all sectors—government and non-government.

MR PRATT: Pretty natural, given those critical years.

Dr Morgan: You can say it's a problem with difficult years, but there is a concern where students say that they don't feel their teachers take them seriously and don't treat them sufficiently in an adult manner. As parents, we know the complexities of what that means, but there are certainly some issues that need to be addressed.

In the submission we put a lot of emphasis on three areas. There is a need to improve pastoral care, counselling, getting teachers to take their roles in advisory groups as leaders of groups of students or to exercise those roles more effectively. There is an important need for career advice and support for students in the high school years. It is a disturbing but constant report that students feel that the curriculum is not relevant to their needs. Sometimes it's because they need to discover its real relevance and what the outside world needs, sometimes not. We therefore feel there's a great need for curriculum reform, not just in what's written down on paper but in what is actually done within classrooms—the material that's taught and the way in which it's taught. At a later stage, as part of the budget process, we'll provide the committee with a quite detailed paper on high school development and what we think should happen.

Overlapping with those concerns—and this really picks up most of what else is in the submission—is a concern that I think is pretty generally shared about the group of students you can call students at risk. At risk of what? At risk generally of not completing year 12 satisfactorily. It's very clear that that's an area of special attention. It is particularly acute in the high school years. That's why we've put the emphasis on counselling, career advice and support. But it's obviously an issue for the college sector and for the primary sector as well.

Once again, an overriding issue is that of parent participation. We believe that many of the problems need to be addressed by more thoroughly engaging whole families in the process of education. Schools need to be able to reach out to parents, involve them and give them a say in what goes on in schools. So a number of other measures we propose in the budget submission are to encourage parent participation, once again from primary through to college. It's not exclusive to the high school sector, but it certainly reaches a peak there, in that parents feel less engaged in the secondary sector than they are at primary school. It's got a lot of complex dimensions.

They're realities that need to be addressed in government high schools. We believe that they're pretty general across the high school sector. We don't think the independent sector or the Catholic sector do very much better on these sorts of measures.

But there is a problem of perception. There is a perception that perhaps non-government schools do better. That's marked by the fact that the enrolment share of government high schools is down relative to primary schools and to the college sector. There seems to be a perception that revolves around issues like values, standards, discipline, pastoral care. We would certainly argue that it's a perception and not a reality. We'll be actively campaigning on that. But there is no doubt that one of the ways to address the perception problem is to address the reality problem. When action is seen to be taken, then I think that will start to address particular issues.

I'd like to make a few comments about some of the claims about funding which appear to be coming from other sectors in relation to the budget. We have a particular concern with claims that non-government schools are not properly resourced to support disadvantaged students, students with disabilities. I have emailed members of the committee on this particular issue. The core of our argument is that when you receive government funding you take on social obligations like those of government schools. The figures we have are that, on average—and it's very variable from school to school—the independent sector receives from government 41 per cent of the funding level that government schools receive. The Catholic sector receives about 60 per cent. There's some debate about those figures, something that we hope the funding inquiry will clarify.

THE CHAIR: Are you talking specifically about disabled students?

Dr Morgan: No, I'm talking in general about overall funding. The funding that an independent school, on average, receives from government is 41 per cent of what a government school receives. It is much higher than the general perception. It is 60 per cent for a Catholic school. We believe that carries social obligations, because that government money should be spent in the same way that government schools spend it to support students with disadvantage. That would set a performance target for the non-government sector that they ought to be doing at least 40 per cent, or 60 per cent for the

Catholic sector, of the job that government schools do for students from disadvantaged groups. The reality is that they don't.

We would estimate the performance of the independent sector in relation to students with disabilities at about 30 per cent, compared to the 40 per cent they ought to be delivering. It is only 20 per cent for indigenous students, compared to the 40 per cent they ought to be delivering, even though the funding they're getting from the Commonwealth for each indigenous student is twice as much as a government school gets. The Catholic sector, which should be performing at about 60 per cent of the level of government schools on equity grounds, is performing at only 30 per cent for students with disabilities. They get close to it for indigenous students.

This has two implications. It first of all has implications just in terms of the performance and what value government is getting in equity terms for the money it puts into the non-government sector, but it also means that when we start looking at funding levels and resourcing levels as part of the funding inquiry we have to look at what the non-government sector is actually doing with the money it receives. If they are under-enrolling high-cost students, as they clearly are, then equal resourcing would be greater resourcing, as they won't be there in the high educational costs. That's an issue on which we'll come back to the committee through the budget process but more generally later in the year.

MR PRATT: You're claiming 41 per cent for independent versus 60 per cent for Catholic of the allocations to non-government schools. You say that's a debatable issue in some quarters. What's your perspective about that debate? What do you think is real and unreal about it?

Dr Morgan: These figures are taken from the Productivity Commission and from the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, so they're pretty solid figures. There are two sources of dispute. First of all, the Catholic Education Office tends to use raw figures from the ACT budget, which in our experience is not a very wise thing to do.

MR PRATT: Tail versus teeth?

Dr Morgan: Yes, whereas the national figures from the Productivity Commission and MCEETYA are reported in a standard format of what is actually received and what is actually spent. They provide a much more reliable database. The divergence—and there is some difference between the MCEETYA figures and the Productivity Commission figures—largely comes in through the treatment of superannuation. Superannuation is clearly a cost that the Catholic Education Office and independent schools have to take into account, so it is an important factor in the equation. But equally, when comparing resource levels, we have to take into account that government schools carry very high historical superannuation levels because of the involvement in the Commonwealth superannuation scheme and then in the public service superannuation scheme. That also needs to be taken into account.

You need to compare the costs with and without superannuation to get a proper picture of what's going on, because the superannuation-free levels of resourcing actually tell you what the systems have to spend after their superannuation commitments, but equally

superannuation has to be taken account of because it is a cost to the school authorities. So you need to look at it in two ways.

I think when those differences are taken into account there will be in fact no real difference in the interpretation of the figures. But there is certainly a tendency for people to use the set of figures which looks most favourable to their case.

MR PRATT: I was pleased to see in your submission that you value a high priority on doing something about counselling or pastoral care. Personally I think that's where our priority must go, regardless of whether we're talking about the government or the non-government sector. That is the weakest area that needs a budgetary application. But can you explain how you would see additional funding for that priority area being broken down? What sorts of activities?

Dr Morgan: If we just stick to pastoral care, then there are probably two main areas. There's first of all a need to provide professional development for teachers and for school counsellors, because they are, if you like, at the front line—teachers first of all and then the counsellors. Our teachers need to have more professional development for identifying kids with problems and knowing how to help them and how to refer them on to the appropriate authorities where necessary. That certainly needs to be backed up with the provision of additional counsellors and other sorts of student welfare support staff. There is no government high school in the ACT—indeed, I think no government college, or perhaps one government college—that has a full-time counsellor. This is quite an unacceptable situation. It often leads to significant delays in handling the issues that come up.

The same applies to the central services. We will be seeking information from the department and the government about the delays in dealing with major cases of referral of students to outside services. They too seem to be under-resourced.

MR PRATT: What's going to be a better fit for that—a centralised departmentally controlled resource which is capable of deploying to back up principals or allocations directly into schools, or a mix of both?

Dr Morgan: A mix of both but with a heavy concentration on dealing with problems within schools in the sort of normal environment of the student, if at all possible. There's certainly a need to be able on occasions to refer students to services outside the central departmental services or even services outside the framework of the department, but the first emphasis has to be on early detection, which has to take place within the school, and early assistance in the most normal environment, and that means putting resources into schools. We'd advocate that approach as the priority and also not taking a sort of blanket approach across the board. In other words, we need to look at schools.

There are some predictors of where you're likely to have significant levels of problems, and we should preferentially put resources into those schools that are likely, on socio-demographic indicators, to have more problems than others. Departmental information on the numbers of referrals of students to departmental and other services would help in targeting those resources most effectively.

THE CHAIR: We might wrap up there. Thank you very much for your attendance today.

Dr Morgan: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 9.59 am.