

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

(Reference: Teacher numbers and recruitment)

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

Friday, 7 May 2004

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms K McGlinn (Ph: 6205 0137)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry which have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

The committee met at 9.38 am.

JOAN KELLETT was called.

THE CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to the inquiry of the Standing Committee on Education into teacher numbers and recruitment. You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections, but also certain responsibilities. It means that you are protected from certain legal action, such as being sued for defamation for what you might say at this public hearing. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter. Please start by stating your name and position for Hansard.

MRS KELLETT: My name is Joan Kellett and I am an executive member of the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations.

THE CHAIR: Joan—if I may call you Joan—would you like to make an opening statement on the inquiry into teacher numbers and recruitment?

MRS KELLETT: I would just like to thank you for giving the association the opportunity to put some information into this inquiry. I have been involved for a long time as a parent in the ACT government schooling system.

THE CHAIR: The P&C does not have a written submission as such.

MRS KELLETT: That is right. We do not have much to do with teacher numbers and recruitment in our policy documents, but we do have some things to say about the training of teachers in the ACT. I would like to say that the ACT teaching service is one of the most highly qualified in Australia. In fact, staff are nearly all four-year trained, and are not eligible for promotion unless they are four-year trained. That gives us a very highly qualified teaching service.

If I could be personal, I would like to say that I have been in many schools, and there are differences among teachers. I suppose they range from what you would call “educators” down to classroom technicians—and you will find that in any profession. I, and the council, think that teaching is a profession, which, very often, it is not regarded as. This is probably because most people think that they are professionals themselves in regard to education because they went to school. Because they went to school they think they are highly qualified to talk about it.

In some ways, because of that, in our society teachers are not given the respect they deserve, whereas in some southern European and Asian cultures teachers are very highly regarded. I could ask a kid, “What’s your brother going to do?” and he would say, “He’s only going to become a teacher.” That’s a bit sad.

MS DUNDAS: Do you think that lack of respect and complacency in the community has an impact on how teachers fill in their day-to-day job? What impact does it have on the educational outcomes of students if teachers are devalued?

MRS KELLETT: It must have an impact, Roslyn. You know yourself that if you feel valued you do a better job or your morale will be higher. That is probably what the teaching service lacks at the moment. Their morale is not high.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any suggestions as to how the ACT government could address the lack of respect and low regard for the profession and thereby be a leader and get the rest of the country to follow us?

MRS KELLETT: That is a difficult one. It is like asking how you would get respect for real estate agents or used car salesmen. It depends on the way teachers handle themselves. It also depends on the principal. The principal plays a very important role in the school. The principal is the linchpin between the community and the students and staff. As such, we are overloading our principals. I refer to them as having to wear a “clerk of works” badge when it comes to looking after minor maintenance, and things like that, in the school.

In fact, we had a northside forum at Easter for a targeted number of people: the principals, the school board chairs and the P&C presidents. We got a fantastic response: almost 100 per cent of schools on the northside, including Black Mountain school and the Cooperative School. It was totally inclusive. It was excellent for principals and community members to be able to sit down and talk.

We did more than talk. We employed a facilitator. The question asked was: what makes a school accessible to the community? What came up was very interesting, and some of it had to do with respecting and valuing teachers. It also had to do with the onerous role of the principal, which is how I started on this. They have to look after so much, when they are really promoted to look after teachers, the community and their students.

An idea was put forward to have a couple of people with expertise—in a cluster of schools, which is how we were thinking about north Canberra; the system could not afford somebody for every school—looking after the electricity and the plumbing and all those things. Especially when schools are a bit old and are being refurbished it is a tremendous job to expect principals to do.

THE CHAIR: Somebody to act in a bursar type capacity, but for a cluster of schools, to take maintenance off the hands of the principal?

MRS KELLETT: That’s right—taking that heavy load off. You will know that there is a review of school-based management, and it will be interesting to see how Hugh Watson reports on that.

The other thing we think should be included in teacher training is an element of parent participation. Parent participation is one of the cornerstones of the system, and it is really important that parents feel comfortable in schools. Of course, there are tensions. Teachers feel nervous about parents and, on the other hand, parents feel nervous about teachers. Parent participation should be included in the training. Parent participation is more than a phrase. It has been extensively researched, and the research invariably shows that students achieve better when their parents participate in their learning and in their schooling. The highest achievers are usually students from a high socioeconomic background whose parents participate in their education. The least achieving students are

usually the children of lower socioeconomic background parents who don't participate in their schooling at all. Parent participation is an important part of learning.

THE CHAIR: With that in mind, does the P&C have any ideas for encouraging parent participation within the school community?

MRS KELLETT: Yes. This was one of the reasons we were going to hold all these forums. We are hoping to hold forums right through, like we did for north Canberra. We'll move on to the next street. There are ways of encouraging parent participation—just social functions. I came out of a school—North Ainslie—that has always had very strong parent participation. Not everything we did was allied to fundraising. When people think of the P&C, the corollary is fundraising, whereas you can have social nights. One of the nicest things I heard said about North Ainslie was when we had an inquiry, and the guy who ran the inquiry said that at North Ainslie you could not pick the staff from the parents. That's really something, isn't it? If you go to some other places, the parents will be here and the teachers will be here. That's pretty sad

THE CHAIR: I am interested to hear your comment on that, but it doesn't really relate to the inquiry we are conducting. I shouldn't go down that path; we'll be here for the rest of the day.

MR PRATT: Joan, which area of schooling needs the next best concentration of teacher development? I've heard members of your association talking about their concern for early high schooling.

MRS KELLETT: That's right.

MR PRATT: On the whole schooling spectrum, from kindergarten up to college, is that the area you think the community needs to focus most attention on?

MRS KELLETT: It is, and I don't know why. One of the things is that parents are really worried about sending their children to high school. They think little Johnny—or Mary, or Tommy—is going off to high school and it's a terrible place. It isn't, and high schools themselves know it isn't. It's convincing people that they're not terrible places! Of course, they are dealing with young people who are more interested in the colour of their nails than they are in their Spanish lessons, and the boys are more interested in sport. The gender equity thing in high schools, which was rampant at one stage, has largely been addressed. Girls now don't feel they have to hide in the toilets. I can remember saying to one of our daughters that I'd never been in the toilets. "I wouldn't go there, mum." A lot of girls actually hid in the toilets.

MR PRATT: In the early high schooling years, what shortfalls would you identify in teacher performance that could be addressed in teacher training? Is teacher performance an area of concern in the area of early high school? Is there more development that can be undertaken by teachers?

MRS KELLETT: Cooperation between faculties could be addressed better. Teachers—maths teachers, social studies teachers, whatever—are inclined to sit in their own little group or even in their own little staff room. Some of that has to do with distance in schools; you have to travel a long way in schools at times. I say more cooperation

between faculties because it is a very different atmosphere for young people to be thrust into, when they are maturing. It is a very difficult time. Hormones are rampant. They are going from being big fish in primary schools. I am never amazed at it, but it is wonderful to see the maturity that year 6 primary school children can have. Then all of a sudden they are thrust into a bigger community, and they are the little fish in the big pond. That is very difficult for them. Keeping up the self-esteem they gained in their primary education should be concentrated on because they become nobodies when they first go to high school.

MR PRATT: I have heard members of your association raise the question—they weren't necessarily stating a position—of whether teachers should be better equipped in their training to undertake pastoral care duties, particularly in early high school years, to address lower self-esteem in children?

MRS KELLETT: I think that should happen. We've been doing things in middle schooling. I don't know if Bill Maiden has talked to you at all. He runs a very successful school at Gold Creek. I see Gold Creek as a kind of lighthouse in the system. This isn't P&C policy, but I just want to say that I was really saddened to see an advertisement—and I don't watch much television—for Catholic education. I am not against Catholic education; it's fine. But in terms of primary education it was really sad to see them talking about the advantages of Catholic education when over there in Nicholls there is such a good example of cooperation. From a global point of view, to have kids sort themselves into Catholic ed and government ed is a bit sad. I think that Gold Creek is a really good example of cooperation. In fact, the principal of the Catholic primary there, who had previously taught up Kambah way, said that there was a real spirit of cooperation and not competition. That is what I believe should exist.

THE CHAIR: That's a fair comment. Gold Creek is a fantastic example of a collaborative approach between the two systems. It would be wonderful to see it being extended to other schools.

MRS KELLETT: That's right. For the Catholic Education Office to put out this advertising is sad. The mothers in those schools work cooperatively on canteen. That's fantastic. In the early days of Lyneham High School, when there were no Catholic high schools in the city, the canteen manageress used to have to put the Catholic parents on one bench and the government parents on the other. Surely we have progressed from that.

THE CHAIR: You were talking before about the forums that the P&C is running, which you started with on the northside. The committee is interested in obtaining a copy of the issues and outcomes of that.

MRS KELLETT: I'll see that it is sent to you. The facilitator is currently doing the report.

THE CHAIR: That would be wonderful, and we would be interested to hear of any future forums. We might get you to come back and talk specifically about those.

You were talking at the beginning about the ACT having the highest standard of education for its teachers. I know it is the policy that you cannot advance unless you

have four-year training. Do you think that is a good thing, a bad thing or a mixture of both?

MRS KELLETT: Ideally, it's a good thing. That needn't be the case. There are some very good people who are just born teachers and relate so well to the students. On the whole, it's a good thing because we are living in an age where a little piece of paper is so important. If you haven't got that piece of paper, you are not as highly regarded.

THE CHAIR: As someone who has had the opportunity to be involved with the education system as a consumer and who has participated in the system for a long time, do you think the pressures have increased and the respect has decreased? Has that changed significantly in the last however many years?

MRS KELLETT: The pressures have increased enormously. Some of that is due to social changes. One teacher said to me once, "Some of my students greet me of a morning as if I'm their mother." They're dropped off at school at an early time, there's no conversation except, "Come on. We've got to get to work/school." There are huge social pressures.

THE CHAIR: Teachers are saying that they're taking over the role of parenting?

MRS KELLETT: That's right. They are.

MS DUNDAS: Are we asking too much of our teachers in terms of the curriculum? It's not just reading, writing and arithmetic; we're asking teachers to teach almost everything under the sun. Teachers are almost taking on a parenting role. Are we asking too much of our teachers?

MRS KELLETT: The curriculum has become very crowded. Parents in the ACT aspire for their children, and they want everything taught. I can see that. It is a lock-key thing. You lock everything in, but you never drop everything off. If you concentrate on IT, you don't drop off anything. Teachers are constantly under stress to fit in the curriculum, and they are constantly under stress because they act as counsellors to a lot of kids. They're not trained to be counsellors; they are on a steep learning curve about the problems students have these days. That's not just primary children; it's high school children and, to a lesser degree, college students—and I haven't even mentioned CIT.

There is a lot of stress on teachers. They are expected to do more. People will say, "They get to work at 9.00 and they finish at 3.30." I don't think there is a teacher in Canberra that would do that these days. They're there until 5.30, and then they're taking work home. They work very hard.

MR PRATT: Given what you identify as curriculum choke because of the demands of people, and given that teachers seem to be expected to undertake more counselling than in previous years, would it be a good thing to create more capacity so that teachers could undertake those counselling duties? Do you think that's what the community wants, or do you think the community would prefer that you take away from teachers those extraneous duties and allow them to go back to core activities?

MRS KELLETT: Whenever there are budget cuts for schools, there are two things that

get cut: career advisers and school counsellors. There are not enough counsellors in our schools, and that is the problem. Because they are often there only part time—in the distribution of staff—they don't develop rapport with their students in the same way as teachers develop rapport with their students.

MS DUNDAS: We'll put that question to the department, but I am sure the answer will come back that they have put all this money into the youth workers program in schools to support the counsellors and teachers in meeting the diverse needs of the students. Do you think shaking up the mix of people who are in a school, not just having teachers, principals and counsellors, but having teachers, principals, youth workers and other sectional experts come in—a diversification of people taking on different roles—is a positive thing for our schools?

MRS KELLETT: I think it does help. One of my daughters is a teacher, so I guess I have a vested interest in teaching. She did some of her training in South Australia and taught in a low socioeconomic area in South Australia. They had an area where people could go and see the social workers as part of the school budget. She said that worked. I think the Canberra community can be a bit stand-offish about things like that. It's a difficult one because we've got a lot of people who need some help. People don't like to admit they need help. It's a catch-22 situation. The mix can be quite good. It's educating the community as much as it's educating everybody else.

THE CHAIR: I'll let Mr Pratt ask his last question, but then we will have to finish up.

MRS KELLETT: Yes, I'm sorry I've rabbited on!

THE CHAIR: No, it's been very interesting. I'll let Mr Pratt ask his question, and then I'll ask if there's anything else you want to add.

MR PRATT: Regarding the mix and types of teachers we have in schools, is the association satisfied about the question of student fitness and the issue of obesity, which is being raised? Are you satisfied that there are enough PE teachers in the system, either as stand-alone PE teachers or teachers who are equipped to be PE teachers as well as teach other subjects?

MRS KELLETT: In one way this has to do with school boards, when they are looking at the skills they want on their staff. I don't know if there are enough PE teachers around. My daughter teaches in a small school in Victoria at Porepunkah, which is near Bright. She is a PE teacher and a mainstream teacher as well. She makes sure that her students are fit. In primary schools it depends on the mix of skills. I know that in one high school in this city PE is not compulsory in year 8. In fact, I don't think they can even do PE in year 8. Yes, that's true. I know that personally.

Obesity also comes from the home. You can tell. Parents have to take some responsibility for some things. You can always run a healthy canteen, and I've always been dedicated to that, but you can't teach all children altogether those things in life without some cooperation from the home. In fact, those things should come from the home.

I had an experience when I went to a high school, which will remain unnamed. It used to

sell soft drink, and I asked them why they didn't sell milk. They said that the kids wouldn't buy it. I said, "I think we should try it." It ended up that the only time soft drink was sold was sports day, from a van. So there was milk evermore. Some of it was flavoured, which was not all that good. But that's okay. It's much better than soft drink as a regular diet. Healthy canteens should be compulsory.

THE CHAIR: You don't think it should be a choice!

MRS KELLETT: Yes, that's right. I don't think there should be. But then parents will go shopping at the weekends and the kids will take a packet of chips to school. It's a difficult one, but obesity is a big problem. I know that de Castella is talking about all these kids being measured, but you pay. It's not accessible to all the kids, and it is usually children of parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are the most obese in our society. That's the fact of it. It's pretty sad.

THE CHAIR: It's low knowledge of nutrition and of the necessity to get out and do exercise—not a massive amount of exercise, but some activity.

MRS KELLETT: Schools have done very well with sun hats. I do not know if it will be as simple with good nutrition practice. The no hat, no play stuff is excellent. There are kids who say to their parents, "We can't go outside without our hats."

MR PRATT: So the school does have an influence in developing young behaviour.

THE CHAIR: Is there anything you want to say in conclusion?

MRS KELLETT: I think I've gone on long enough.

MR PRATT: It's been extremely interesting.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming, Joan.

The committee adjourned at 10.15 am.