LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

(Reference: Educational achievement gap)

Members:

MS A BRESNAN (The Chair)
MS J BURCH (The Deputy Chair)
MR J HANSON

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 20 OCTOBER 2009

Secretary to the committee:
Dr S Lilburn (Ph: 6205 0199)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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WITNESSES

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Amended 21 January 2009

The committee met at 1.03 pm.

McCONAGHY, PROFESSOR CATHRYN, Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Canberra

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Cathryn McConaghy, for coming here today to meet with the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs in our inquiry into the educational achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table. Please make sure that you are aware of that and understand what is contained in it.

Prof McConaghy: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Before we go to questions, we invite people to make an opening statement, if they would like to do that. I invite you to do that today.

Prof McConaghy: I am the Dean of the Faculty of Education and the Director of the Centre for Research on Education, Poverty and Social Inclusion at the University of Canberra. I have prepared a presentation. I would like to flick through some of the highlights of that, if I could.

Basically, education in the ACT is of high quality compared with other jurisdictions but I think it is possible to note a slight decline relative to other jurisdictions, particularly from 2000 to 2006. There is sufficient evidence for us to begin to examine why there might be a decline in achievement levels relative to other jurisdictions.

If you look at page 3, you will see the 2000 PISA data, and you will see in the PowerPoint presentation that the ACT was in fact ahead of Finland on the 2000 reading literacy results, even though it has quite a significant spread. I have included some state-by-state comparisons, and if you then look across to page 8 you will see the ACT in comparison with other national and international results. You will note that the ACT is not performing as highly as Finland and in fact is in the quadrant to acknowledge the fact that it does have higher than average gaps in educational achievement compared with some other jurisdictions. We can see that between 2000 and 2006 there was a slight drop in overall achievement in the ACT and a widening of the gaps.

On page 9, Thompson and De Bortoli acknowledge the higher, above average impact of socioeconomic background than for Australia as a whole, particularly in scientific literacy. So the ACT is performing similarly to Australia as a whole in terms of it being high achieving but low equity. The slide on page 10 gives Australia as a whole in relation to some other countries.

We have done some research in the ACT to begin looking at the gaps, but there is contestation in the evidence generally around what the factors are that contribute to educational gaps. On page 12 I have summarised some important research from John Hattie, who has done a major analysis of all of the quantitative studies of educational achievement and tried to quantify what the major variables are. I noticed in the ACT department of education's submission the focus was on the quality of the teacher as the major variable, but I think that is contestable. I think that the quality of

the teacher in general accounts for about 30 per cent of variation and other factors account for about 70 per cent of variation. The Centre for Research on Education, Poverty and Social Inclusion is very interested in examining what the factors are that contribute to the 70 per cent of variation, and the relationship between teachers and the sociological factors, if you like.

We have entered into an agreement with the ACT department of education to analyse their school achievement data. We have done some preliminary analysis of the K-5 literacy data. We have found that the results in kindergarten are predictors of the results in year 5, and the results in kindergarten are negatively affected by low socioeconomic status. So there is a correlation between the low kindergarten results and low socioeconomic status, and those results do not pick up by year 5. So we need to look at the types of schooling interventions that will address the disparities in kindergarten right through.

In other work that I have done in New South Wales, I analysed the New South Wales schooling achievement results in 2003 and 2004, a dataset of about 300,000 students. We observed a widening gap between year 3 and year 12, which we attributed to a range of sociological factors. So we have got evidence here of a gap at kindergarten level in the ACT achievement scores.

I have included here a range of other data which attempts to understand and quantify the various factors that impact on student results. Some important research that came out of the longitudinal studies on Australian youth very squarely found a correlation between a range of factors, including parental education attainment, housing type, gender and ethnicity. There is very clear evidence of locational factors. I have included on page 26 a summary of some of the major factors that correlated with low scores in New South Wales, including lower attendance, lower computer usage at home, Indigeneity, lower internet usage at home, high socioeconomic disadvantage indicators, the type of school that a child attends, whether or not there is equity funding in the school and the higher than average levels of teacher turnover. These all correspond with lower student achievement results.

There is a range of evidence about the sociological impacts. If we turn to page 30, we see a map of poverty levels in the major Australian cities. We can see from the work done at the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling at the University of Canberra that Canberra has significant poverty, and this would be contributing to the variable achievement results of children. Further, if we look at numbers of children in jobless families and a range of other data, it would not be surprising to see growing gaps in ACT achievement results.

In conclusion, the University of Canberra is attempting to address some of these results in its partnership with the ACT department of education. We have established the Centre for Research on Education, Poverty and Social Inclusion specifically to look at these types of educational and social challenges. We are working towards the identification of ACT-specific indicators of social disadvantage and their impacts on educational disadvantage. One of the things that we would really like to see is a reconnecting of educational policy with social and economic policy at the regional level.

There is only so much we can do about improving the quality of teacher education, which we are doing in close partnership with the department of education. We have a large range of programs and projects that we are working on there, including establishing new courses with the Australian National University to focus on the quality of science, maths and Asian language teachers, and new five-year programs, so that we will have five-year qualified teachers in the ACT, which is in line with the model of teacher education in Finland and Canada, where there is a move towards five-year trained rather than four-year trained, which they consider to be quite significant in their high achievement results. So we are moving that way.

We are moving to a more formal relationship with the department of education around their postgraduate qualifications—the skilling up of their school leaders and expert teachers. We are partners in school centres for teacher education excellence with the four new early childhood schools, which are very innovative in their approach to linking education and social service delivery through schools and also addressing the digital divide, which does correlate with lower student achievement, through the new InSPIRE Centre, which was an ACT government initiative.

We would like to see more research to identify the specific factors in the ACT, because they will be quite different from the specific factors in other jurisdictions. We need to identify the contemporary practices and the impacts that they are having, and areas where they are not making an impact. We would really like to see a closer relationship between educational, social and economic policy. I think it could be useful for the department to report on differentials in educational achievement, in addition to publishing the means in its annual reports. If they developed KPIs and provided data on specific equity groups and equity challenges, I think that would also be a useful step.

One of the other ideas that we are working on is the fact that we do not really understand social exclusion. We are following, I guess, the United Kingdom models, and we really need to be identifying what constitutes social exclusion and social disadvantage in the ACT context.

THE CHAIR: Thank you; that is wonderful. You mentioned the indicators which you have been looking at in terms of the socioeconomic factors and other issues around that. I am not sure if you are able to tell us a bit more about the indicators and how you would see that working.

Prof McConaghy: In our work in rural New South Wales we basically correlated a range of school-based data—things like declining or increasing enrolment, numbers of teacher entitlement, change, teacher transfer rates in and out. We correlated those with a range of ABS data for the particular location. We then correlated those with the student achievement results and came up with some factors that strongly correlated and others that did not, but we need to do a multivariate regression analysis to look at the relative effect of those factors. We have got an idea from that work on the factors that strongly correlated. What we need to do now is to take the ACT student achievement dataset with a whole range of ABS data and a whole range of schooling data and do a multivariate regression analysis on them. We plan to do that with the department of education.

THE CHAIR: In the ACT is it sometimes more difficult to identify particular areas, given, I guess, the size of our population? Disadvantage might actually be spread in the community rather through particular areas, as you might find in New South Wales if it is a regional area.

Prof McConaghy: We cannot use postcodes but we can drill down to a much smaller level, an individual street address, and come up with meaningful analyses.

MS BURCH: Just as a follow-up, I have a couple of questions around pockets of disadvantage. I was curious about how you identify that because in, say, Tuggeranong or the Brindabella area, different schools in different areas would be disadvantaged but at a postcode level or general community level they do not necessarily stand out. So you are saying you can drill down to that?

Prof McConaghy: We can. In fact, NATSEM—I just cannot find the page, but it is the map that I have showed you—have done some very detailed analyses of the socioeconomic disadvantage factors in the ACT. We can bring those datasets together with the student achievement data at the level of the individual student, the class, the school.

MS BURCH: So you can identify pockets of disadvantage and then, depending on what you are looking at, you can see whether there is a gender bias in achievement or an Indigenous or ethnic background bias in achievement.

Prof McConaghy: We can. What we found in New South Wales was that different factors correlated with boys' lower scores than girls' lower scores. We need to cut the data in a number of different ways. For example, boys' lower scores correlated with a whole range of out-of-school factors, particularly things like declining population in the community, higher rates of mental health problems reported and so on, whereas the girls' lower scores correlated with high teacher turnover. The girls' lower scores did not correlate as much with social factors, such as a declining town; the boys' did. The boys' lower scores did not correlate with things like higher teacher turnover and yet the girls' scores did.

In country New South Wales, girls' higher scores correlated with higher levels of income support in the community. At first we thought that was an error, but if you go to the sites and talk to people about what is going on—why would you get higher girls' results in areas of higher income support?—you find that what was happening was the grandparent effect. It was people on age pensions supporting clever girls in the community. We need to do that type of situated analysis of what is happening in the ACT.

MS BURCH: On the broad brush, the boys seem to be doing not as well as the girls, so I would be interested in that.

Prof McConaghy: It is consistent with what is happening elsewhere, which does not make it acceptable.

MR HANSON: The slide—and I am not sure what page number it is—shows—

Prof McConaghy: Page 12, yes.

MR HANSON: I was quite surprised to see the small effect, relatively, that home, parents and peers cause and the large element that comes out of teachers. Is that consistent across people who are doing badly? If someone is succeeding, will it look the same as for someone who is not succeeding at school?

Prof McConaghy: I will comment first on this diagram. I have worked with John Hattie. A lot of the work that we are doing in my centre is critiquing this model as being an inadequate explanation of what is actually happening. If you look at the home wedge and the student wedge, those both equate to social factors. The student characteristics include things like SES, gender and so on. We need to look at those two together in the type of model that I am presenting.

MR HANSON: To try to separate them.

Prof McConaghy: Home, I think, is an inadequate way to explain things like the effect of global economic restructuring on communities. We can think in terms of the social determinants of health, but we struggle around the concept of the social determinants of education. If it is not the teacher then what is it? It must be poor parental—low aspiration, parents not reading with their kids. We tend to look at an individualistic family-based explanation, whereas I think we need to be looking at larger social readjustment issues.

MR HANSON: The message I get out of that is that teachers, schools and principals can only do so much to improve that quality. A large part of changing educational outcomes comes from environments outside the education system rather than inside it.

Prof McConaghy: I think the teacher is important, but the teacher cannot sort this alone. The teacher is directly responsible for some effects. The broader social structures, the relationship between education policy and social policy, has got to come together to help support communities.

MR HANSON: Even if the teacher is given a full 30 per cent they can only achieve—

Prof McConaghy: But I think the teachers can also do better. One of my concerns is that with the new national approach to teacher professional standards, if we get the content of what teachers need to know wrong then we are in trouble. I think the current draft graduate teacher standards are not sufficient to make an impact on these sorts of trends. They are not informed by the types of research that we need to fix this problem. That is another challenge. We are concerned that the models that we currently have around quality teaching are not sufficiently informed by research such as this in terms of what really can make a difference. We have got some work to do before we buy wholeheartedly into a set body of knowledge on what constitutes quality teaching. As our societies are changing rapidly, we need models of teaching and teacher education that can be informed by social analysis and informed by analyses of the practices that can have positive interventions in these social trends. We are not quite there yet.

MR HANSON: Given the pay scales of teachers and the problem of attracting people

to different professions, is it realistic to say it is now a five-year degree to qualify as a teacher? Is that achievable?

Prof McConaghy: We would imagine that some people will opt for four years and get quickly into the workplace. Others will opt for five years. They will see teaching as an important career path for them and they will want a master's degree instead of a bachelor's degree or graduate diploma. We see there will be two different types of teacher markets, but we need to move into the five-year qualification in the ACT.

MR HANSON: For everyone?

Prof McConaghy: No, I think we need to offer it as a pathway.

MR HANSON: As an option, a pathway, to the master's.

Prof McConaghy: Yes, which we are doing as of 2010.

MR HANSON: So people in leadership positions in schools, you would expect, would have a five-year degree course?

Prof McConaghy: Yes, or they would upgrade their qualifications as they go. We are seeing an increasing number of ACT teachers doing postgraduate qualifications, and there is support for that.

MS BURCH: Do your comments apply to the national push for a quality teaching framework, or is this reflected back to—

Prof McConaghy: No, my comments apply to the new quality teaching framework. I think its focus is strongly on the wrong end of the challenges. For example, the focus is on things like classroom management. Classroom management is a symptom of other sorts of social challenges taking place in the community and in the classroom. We need to deal with that end rather than the behaviour problems that result when we do not get the front end right in terms of the delivery of schooling and the delivery of community resources.

At my university our teacher education programs are focused on things like social analysis and understanding the community and how to enhance the relationship between the school and the community, in addition to classroom management. That is the trend. The national trend is looking at behaviour problems and addressing behaviour problems. I think we need to move back and look at enhancing the relationships between schools and communities and then the broader economic and policy frameworks at the level of the region or the state to support those.

MR HANSON: That is at a policy level more than at a front-line teacher level, isn't it?

MS BURCH: I was going to say that at the end of the day they have got to be in the classroom teaching.

MR HANSON: I do not see how an individual teacher can affect the systemic

behavioural patterns that are developing. They have got to deal with the here and now and manage the implications of what is before them.

Prof McConaghy: But how they think about what is causing that problem is important. A good school leader can certainly make a huge difference. You can see that a different analysis of what is going on will lead to a different type of outcome. Good school principals, good teachers, now have some understanding of the broader social dynamics of the place they are working in.

MR HANSON: You are saying that in order to manage effectively you have to understand the context in terms of what is causing the behavioural issues—otherwise you are treating the symptom rather than the cause.

Prof McConaghy: Absolutely. Where am I? Who are these families? What is the result of that factory having closed down last year? Am I aware of the higher rates of youth suicide in this particular area where I am teaching? Am I aware of the higher rates of male mental health problems and what do I do about that on Monday morning in my class? I think that type of understanding is quite important and it has not been a focus of a lot of teacher education for the last decade. The focus has been much more on the behaviour of the individual child.

MR DOSZPOT: Professor McConaghy, can you take us through some of the pockets of disadvantage that are on page 31?

Prof McConaghy: Yes. I am fairly new to the ACT, I have to admit. Page 30 gives us the legend in terms of the colours—yellow being the lowest poverty, red the highest poverty. Page 31 is the city with the size enhanced. What this indicates is that there are pockets of real poverty in the ACT.

MR DOSZPOT: You do not have any identification of those suburbs?

Prof McConaghy: I can get them for you. I am sure they are identified in the full NATSEM paper—Campbell, I believe Ainslie. We could get them identified.

MR HANSON: That is Lyons.

MR DOSZPOT: It would be useful to get that.

Prof McConaghy: Yes, we will table that for you.

MR DOSZPOT: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned the results in kindergarten related to what happens to a student once they get to year 5. Is there any research from that point? Is it recoverable? Can they improve from that point? Does early education really impact on what happens in terms of going through to high school or not?

Prof McConaghy: We have only just received the data and done the first cut so that we would have something that we could say today, so we will be looking at the full dataset and will be able to report on that. At the moment we just did the first cut on

whether or not the results in kindergarten were a predictor of results in year 5 and they are, and we can see the effects of the socioeconomic status at kindy.

THE CHAIR: So it shows basically that impact early on?

Prof McConaghy: It does.

THE CHAIR: Does the research show any particular cultural groups or backgrounds? Last week we had evidence about Indigenous people and refugees being growing groups in the community.

Prof McConaghy: It is difficult because I could not find it freely available in the ACT departmental annual report, and one of my recommendations was that we have that type of analysis presented annually with KPIs linked to the performance of different groups. One of the surprising things is that female language background other than English in Australia is outperforming all students, so we would suspect that we might see that sort of trend here as well.

THE CHAIR: Would that be all international students? There might be some difference in terms of the background of non-English speakers.

Prof McConaghy: That is right. This has come out of the longitudinal study of Australian youth by Considine and Zappala who calculated that female non-English-speaking background students had about a 30 per cent advantage at year 12. That is some interesting work.

THE CHAIR: But there might need to be some breakdown of those figures as well.

Prof McConaghy: Absolutely. We do not know what is causing that.

MR HANSON: They have an advantage so they are doing better?

Prof McConaghy: They are outperforming the average—

THE CHAIR: When we spoke about it last week I think it was said that it might be those international students that could be—

Prof McConaghy: Yes, that is right—people highly motivated, paying very high fees.

MS BURCH: You mentioned achievements. I am just looking at something in the government's submission that shows ACT above Australia across all years, 3, 5, 7 and 9, for writing, numeracy and reading—

Prof McConaghy: Is that NAPLAN?

MS BURCH: It is. And your comment on NAPLAN is that some recent NAPLAN data came out where I think we gave a little bit and gained a little bit.

Prof McConaghy: It is still high achieving, but I think what you can see from the NAPLAN data just released is that the other states are improving more rapidly.

MR HANSON: So relative to the other states we started from a higher base but that gap is closing?

Prof McConaghy: That is right, so nationally I think the department recognise that they are not outperforming as they did. Internationally, the ACT is not outperforming the other jurisdictions; other jurisdictions are catching up, and we need to work out why.

THE CHAIR: I think some of the data did show too that where there are those equity issues the equity gap is greater in a way in the ACT.

Prof McConaghy: The ACT gaps are still surprisingly large—well, not surprisingly; when you drill down to things like the analyses of poverty and intergenerational unemployment and so on, you begin to see that the demographic is perhaps changing from what it was in 2000. We need to look at some of the ABS trends over time to see if that is part of the explanation. If it is, we have to do something differently in teacher ed in the ACT and differently in terms of school leadership, so that people know how to address these new challenges for the ACT.

MS BURCH: On performance, do you have any comments around gifted and talented students, following on from that we are high achieving but low equity that seems to capture the disadvantaged and the excluded? What do we do with the gifted and talented?

Prof McConaghy: You can see that the top percentiles are not performing as highly, so there is reduced performance there relative to other jurisdictions. Does that mean that we need to do more at the top end? Possibly. I have just come back from a study tour of Finland to look at what they are doing and why they are performing so well. They are very squarely focused on the lowest percentiles. Their resources, their focus, are not on the top. So a debate that I guess we need to have is about where the public resources go. But I do know that there are emotional and social challenges for gifted and talented children that we need also to be looking at.

MR DOSZPOT: I guess it is difficult to look at the primary determinants; you have segregated them into the areas that you could. Is there any one particular factor that influences things more? You have the chart there, but is there any overall view of assessment that you can give of that?

Prof McConaghy: I would like to be able to say that, but I would be guessing. We really need to do the hard work. We really need to do the analysis.

MR DOSZPOT: What numbers has the longitudinal study been based on?

Prof McConaghy: Which study?

MR DOSZPOT: Your whole study is based on X number of students.

Prof McConaghy: We have the whole of the ACT's schooling dataset and we have only just begun working on it this year. The department is quite committed to working

with us to drill down and have a look at exactly what is happening.

THE CHAIR: And that is across the whole school population, government and non government—

Prof McConaghy: Yes.

MR DOSZPOT: And that includes government and non-government—

Prof McConaghy: Yes.

MS BURCH: You touched on an agreement or an arrangement with the department. Can you tell us what you are working on at the moment and what are some of the outcomes of that?

Prof McConaghy: We are working with the department in the national partnerships in four low SES schools, so we will do some very detailed data analysis in those schools and we will look at the impact of various practices on reducing the effects of socioeconomic status. That is in the pipeline. So we will be doing some studies of those four low SES schools. We will continue with the work around the entire ACT dataset and will be doing a range of analyses with ABS data.

MS BURCH: I was just interested in what some of the practical things were that you are doing with the department, so thank you.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time, but thank you very much for coming and presenting to us. It was extremely interesting. A copy of the transcript of today's evidence will be sent to you for you to check for accuracy.

ROBERTSON, MS EMMA, Director, Youth Coalition of the ACT
GLASSCOCK, MR JAMIE, Policy and Development Officer, Youth Coalition of the ACT

THE CHAIR: I welcome Ms Robertson and Mr Glasscock from the Youth Coalition of the ACT and thank you for coming here today to give evidence to the education committee's inquiry into the achievement gap in the ACT. Could you please make sure that you have read the privilege statement which is in front of you and understand it. Before we ask questions, I invite you to make an opening statement, if you wish to.

Ms Robertson: Certainly. I thought I would start by giving you a quick overview of the Youth Coalition and then I will invite Jamie to make an opening statement on our submission.

I assume that you are probably aware of this, but the Youth Coalition is the peak body for youth affairs in the ACT, so we are responsible for representing the rights, interests and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25, but we have that dual responsibility of representing both young people and the services and individuals that work with them. So a large part of the work that we do is involved in community youth sector development but also in broader advocacy and policy work relating to young people.

Mr Glasscock: We often hear the logic that schools are the largest youth centres that we have, and we believe that for 90 per cent of young people this may be true. However, for the seven to 10 per cent who are most marginalised or most disengaged from the school sector that is not true. So we believe that this inquiry translates to issues around how to ensure accessibility to schools for those seven to 10 per cent of young people who are disengaged to attain at school.

There are three key themes in our submission, the first one being a whole-of-school approach or a whole-of-community approach to re-engaging those young people to improve the status of low socioeconomic schools. That would involve changing the focus to school-wide issues and community-wide issues. There is a range of models that have worked across Australia in different jurisdictions, including programs which focus on belonging and reducing cultural barriers and other such programs that concentrate on an issue on a school-wide focus—things like MindMatters. This is a relevant way of working for groups at risk, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and also young people with refugee backgrounds.

The second theme in our submission was really about the need for a focus on a holistic approach and that includes the acknowledgement and resourcing of student services in wellbeing terms. It includes strong links and improving the capacity of the community sector. There are a number of great links between schools and the community sector in the ACT. It also involves acknowledging the really important ground issues around things like housing, health and poverty, and it includes acknowledging that there needs to be an integrated family support approach where there is early intervention and prevention for young people engaged in education, as well as their families. This is relevant for such groups as young carers and a number of other groups.

The third theme in our submission is around timely strategic and accessible alternative education. There are a number of areas that link into this, including numeracy and literacy catch-up; Aboriginal education workers and other support workers in the school setting; reducing waiting lists and increasing the capacity of alternative education settings; the expansion of individual learning plans, goal setting and identifying aspirations of young people; and early intervention and prevention in alternative education—not just being about behaviour management.

They are the three key themes and we would also highlight that there are key groups, being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people with refugee backgrounds, young carers and young people facing a number of barriers to re-engaging in education; there are a number of young people in that section. We would also like to highlight that it is really important to work with principals around whole of school and community development approaches and also with student services and wellbeing teams.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. The first question I have is about the point that you have just discussed, about identifying those particular groups that are not engaging with the education system—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, refugees, people with disability—and the disengagement as well. It would be good to get your views on how you have identified those groups in particular. I thought it was interesting that you listed young carers as well, because they are not a group which are talked about a lot in terms of the way they engage with the system. And a lot of the time it is because they are difficult to engage with. How have you identified those groups as being key groups? Is it through research you have done or from looking at other research that exists?

Mr Glasscock: We have found overwhelmingly, in our consultations with service providers in the schools, that young carers were usually the first mentioned. Particularly with respect to the frame for this inquiry around socioeconomic status, often young carers are coming from households in which there might be housing stress, there might be financial stress, there might be a number of things going on—mental health, alcohol and other drugs—and a number of different challenges. So young carers were highlighted in our research, definitely.

MR HANSON: Could I clarify "young carers". Who are these kids caring for? Is it mostly young mothers or caring for their dependent parents or—

Ms Robertson: Predominantly, the young people are caring for a parent or other family member. Often that is a parent or family member with mental illness, perhaps with an alcohol or other drug issue, perhaps with a disability. There is a range, I guess, within that. Certainly, there are a couple of pieces of local research that have been done around that. Most recently, the Institute of Child Protection Studies released a report specifically about young people playing a caring role where alcohol and other drugs was a factor with a family member. A couple of years ago, the Youth Coalition did some research generally about young carers. It is one of the areas where we do have some local research about the situation for those young people.

THE CHAIR: When you are talking to service providers—and this goes to my

previous background—young carers are quite difficult to engage with because they might not think they are a carer or because of the stigma attached to it, and they do not want to identify themselves. Were the service providers referring to those sorts of issues about engaging with them or were there general issues like the socioeconomic issues that were a problem?

Mr Glasscock: Your point is very good. They definitely mentioned it was difficult in early intervention and prevention because often young people did not want to be identified. Often, they might not be identified and then, when things get difficult, first there might be a drop away in attendance. It is very difficult to engage with a young person who is not attending school.

Ms Robertson: Certainly, consistently that is the thing we hear—that young carers have significant barriers to school because their attendance can vary and they need that support around flexibility. It is not that they do not want to be at school; it is just the priority of caring.

MR HANSON: Of your seven to 10 per cent of people who are not achieving, what percentage are young carers?

Ms Robertson: We would probably have to take that one on notice.

MR HANSON: I know it might be a bit hard, but you said that this group gets raised every time. Is that because there are so many of them or simply because they are the most affected?

Ms Robertson: I would say they are a significant group in the group of people that youth services end up supporting, particularly when they have disengaged from school.

MS BURCH: Following on from that, around alternative settings and access around that flexibility in the system, you mention in your submission access 10 and a few other programs. Is there another model in there or is it a matter of doing deeper work with the models that we have got?

Mr Glasscock: One major issue is that almost all of the alternative education settings we spoke to had a waiting list. That means if a young person does run into some trouble and needs timely assistance they might have to wait for six months or 12 months to get that help. And that is a long way to fall behind when it can be identified early. The second issue is strategic alternative education. Many schools implement individual learning plans with young people who need direction. Our suggestion would be that alternative education settings could be strategic. These alternative education settings could be part of that learning program, so that, for young people who need alternative access or are having difficulties and need extra flexibility, that could be included in their plan.

MS BURCH: Instead of being at one or the other, you would do this one but, as the need arises, you will come through here, but with a goal of coming back perhaps into mainstream?

Mr Glasscock: That is very true. Quite often, an alternative education setting is seen as a link away from school, but it is very difficult to come back.

MS BURCH: Do you have any sense of the young folk that have come through your service that have moved into alternative settings as to whether they come back? Do they complete? Where do they go?

Ms Robertson: I think it really varies. It is fair to say that in many of the alternative education settings the eligibility criteria mean that you need to be disengaged from school for at least three months. Sometimes it is longer than that as well. So the barriers for those young people, when they have had such a significant time away from mainstream school, to returning there as being the goal are quite significant.

One of the things that we talk about is that alternative education is not a setting without discipline or routine. In fact, it quite often does provide those things. In fact, young people attending an alternative school, because they are there on a voluntary basis most often, are quite disciplined. If they are coming along, they achieve very well because they really want to be there. Certainly, many young people who have disengaged from mainstream school realise, a little time after their disengagement, that they really wish they had not disengaged because they understand that the barriers to re-engaging with education are quite significant and their options are very limited.

MR HANSON: There is obviously a lot that is going well and some things that are not so good in the ACT. You talk about some elements where things are going well, and it might just be a matter of expanding certain programs across schools. Can you identify any areas that you see, if there were a limited number of things that could be done urgently, as the most important priorities in terms of closing that gap?

Mr Glasscock: I would highlight the great emphasis that has been placed on student services in wellbeing terms. I think that has been a remarkable improvement. However, I think the focus of that could change, to reduce that gap. Often, it is an individual focus, whereas some of the groups that we have talked about need a community approach or a group approach. Earlier on, I talked about a whole of school or a whole-of-community approach. Some of those approaches are about belonging, about taking groups that are at risk, providing those wellbeing and holistic approaches at school, but in a group-belonging environment. There are examples in different jurisdictions, like with the Clontarf program, which is about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people having a program where they belong. Improvements in attainment in that program have been remarkable.

If we look at the ACTCOSS submission, we see that they take a slightly different approach—something which is adapted for this jurisdiction. They talk about being a learning community, where schools are opened up to families and opened up to the wider community on weekends, or libraries are opened up so that there is a family learning environment. I think that would be a priority step to reducing the gap with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and also with young people with a refugee background.

Ms Robertson: To add to that, there is no doubt that early intervention and identification is really key and really important. If the support can be provided before

people have gone further down the track and with the more intensive intervention, you are going to have better outcomes. In saying that, there is also the risk that we forget about the people who do slip through those processes. In terms of urgent need, looking at the alternative education settings, what is available, the waiting lists, the fact that some services have been relying on grant programs to supplement funding, to provide teachers—things like that are probably things that as a community we need to look at very urgently. The Gugan school is an example of that. My understanding is that they are in the process of securing recurrent funding. That is something that we have been calling for through the budget submission process.

MR HANSON: They have appeared before the inquiry and they have made that point.

Ms Robertson: I highlight their school because that is a program that has been evaluated and it is a successful program. It is really valued in the community and has good outcomes. We certainly support that funding is attached to programs that do work to an evidence base and that evaluation is a key input and thing in that. Certainly, reducing the wait lists in terms of support programs and alternative education programs would be a priority. What can happen while people are on that wait list can make their return to school or re-engagement with school—

MR HANSON: The longer you wait, the harder it is.

Ms Robertson: Absolutely.

MR DOSZPOT: Coming back to two specific areas, with young carers, I was really surprised to see the high percentage range from four to 10 per cent. That is a fair percentage of our young people. I refer also to the 10 per cent of young people with a disability. Just grouping these two together, you are talking about a large percentile. Do you have any further figures as to what are the specific areas where most attention is required at the moment? For instance, with young carers, they are in danger of becoming disengaged from education because of all the things we have talked about and all the issues that they have to contend with. Do you have any recommendations that touch on what are the most urgent areas, say, with young carers at the moment? What needs to be looked at there?

Mr Glasscock: I highlight flexibility around curriculum as a very important point.

MR DOSZPOT: The delivery of services to them?

Mr Glasscock: That is right. In terms of delivery of services, there are some very good programs out there. Gungahlin youth centre and Gold Creek school have a really good linkage. Youth workers support young carers in that area, so that model has worked quite well. The emphasis which has come through in our consultations has been around flexibility for young carers. They need to be able to adapt their attendance, and be able to adapt the things they are studying as well.

Ms Robertson: Particularly with young carers, why they are often a hard group to identify—and I am thinking particularly of teachers and the people in the school that might be coming in contact with them—is that they are often quite fearful that their parents will get in trouble if their situation is known. So that can be a really significant

barrier. I certainly think we can do better in the extended support that we provide for young people. Quite often, the reason that young people might be struggling at school might be circumstances that affect their entire family. Jamie talked about whole-of-school communities and schools as extended communities. I certainly think that where we can involve families and family support, we can make a significant difference, because the onus is not just then on that young person, and they are not blamed solely for their circumstances.

MR HANSON: Have you noticed a different trend between the size of schools? It might be a generalisation, but smaller schools might be able to generate more of that community sense than if you have got a mega school. Trying to make that a community might be quite difficult because of the scale. Have you noticed any trends there or are the large schools able to adapt?

Ms Robertson: To be fair, I would not say we have noticed a trend. But I do not necessarily have access to all of the data in all these schools. Something that we were discussing earlier today was that we talked about schools, and particularly where the principal and the leadership in the school are very active and very engaged with wanting to involve the community in the school. That often makes a difference.

The examples that keep being brought up to us are schools like Kaleen high school. That is often mentioned as an example of a school that is doing quite proactive work around their student services team and support given to students. I acknowledge that they are a smaller school. I do not know whether it is their size that enables them to do that. Probably the relationship is both size and also how committed the principal is, what the resources are in the school, how well connected they are to the external support service system—a whole range of things.

MR HANSON: For some schools, if a lot of your kids are from out of area, it is more difficult than if you actually have a school where people live locally.

Ms Robertson: Yes.

MR HANSON: Maybe that is the trend, anyway.

Ms Robertson: Yes.

MR DOSZPOT: Supplementary to that, along with the size aspect, is there much variation between the requirements in, say, primary and secondary, and also the transition from primary to secondary for some of these kids in need?

Ms Robertson: Our research probably focuses on young people rather than children. So we probably know more about secondary school age people. But I will acknowledge that some youth services have started programs now where they get involved with the primary school and the high school to help facilitate that transition. Gugan certainly do that within their community. They have barbecues and things like that to help facilitate that transition from primary to high school, and support it.

Mr Glasscock: One of the emphases is on numeracy and literacy catch-up. A number of the consultations have highlighted that young people without numeracy and literacy

skills in primary school obviously find it very hard to maintain attendance, and attainment—

MR DOSZPOT: That is what I was getting at. Is this mainly discovered when they reach the high school level?

Ms Robertson: Probably it is more identified once they get to high school. As people get further behind, the struggle is more obvious.

MS BURCH: Is there a gender base or a disadvantaged background base with respect to the folk who come through your service or from what you see? Are there more young fellers disengaged than young women?

Mr Glasscock: There has been nothing highlighted around agenda in our consultation. However, the groups that have been listed are definitely the groups which have been highlighted in our consultations, which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, young people with a refugee background, young carers, young people with a disability and also young people experiencing barriers to re-engage in education. That could be through homelessness, experience in the justice system and so on.

Ms Robertson: Definitely, all of those things are exacerbated by socioeconomic status. These are the groups that, combined with poverty, experience the most risk and disadvantage.

THE CHAIR: I have a question around your recommendations. Recommendation 1 is around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and particularly, as I said, about having that cultural awareness among staff. One of the things which came up through Gugan Gulwan's efforts is about that issue where students that they have been seeing might go back into the general school population. They then might have difficulties, depending on what sort of level of engagement there is with the Indigenous population in that school. Obviously, through your recommendation, that is something that you found. Is that something you have heard also with respect to Indigenous students, about how they might engage with the general population if they have had specific assistance, or how they engage in general?

Ms Robertson: Certainly, anecdotally, once people have disengaged from school for a period of time, and particularly if that has been a long enough period of time that they have been in a support service or in an alternative education setting, I think the adjustment to going back into mainstream school is often quite difficult, and the stigma attached to where they have come from can often be something that is highlighted by other students in the school.

Mr Glasscock: I did touch earlier on the whole-of-community approach and the concept of belonging, the success of the Clontarf program and that idea of belonging—people wanting to come to school and feeling at home at school. I think that really relates to that as well.

THE CHAIR: As you said, depending on the engagement or the level of commitment from teachers and principals in particular, that influences what then happens in the

school as well.

Mr Glasscock: Yes, and the knowledge of teachers. At most schools there are some very well informed teachers. It is a question of whether all teachers have the cultural awareness and the numeracy and literacy catch-up skills to engage those students who are struggling.

THE CHAIR: Gugan mentioned that cultural awareness would be something they would like to perhaps see happening more generally than in pockets.

Ms Robertson: We certainly highlighted that cultural awareness has to be a commitment that comes through all levels of a school and part of a strategy for the whole of school rather than something where a number of teachers who have done a course might be very switched on. I think it is something that needs to cut across all levels within the school.

Mr Glasscock: And there are programs out there that do that. Programs like MindMatters, which a number of schools in the ACT use, take that approach. It is a top-down approach where teachers lead the process.

MS BURCH: With respect to whole of school, quality of teaching and leadership, I am looking at the government's submission. Under the COAG arrangements, there are national partnerships around low socioeconomic status school communities which look at reforms—and there is a plan that is about to be sent up the line—incentives to attract high-performing teachers, flexible operational arrangements, partnerships with parents and other schools and communities, personalised learning and school accountability. Is that the sort of cluster of work and reform that goes to your recommendation 5 and a few others? Is that the cluster of work that will respond to some of your recommendations?

Mr Glasscock: I think there are some really good points in there. I would refer to the maintenance of staff. Some of those plans may lead to teachers being maintained in schools, which sounds good. I think the idea of trying to maintain the wellbeing staff or the student services staff is very important. I am not sure whether it fulfils the whole of school or whole-of-community approach.

MS BURCH: Given that it talks about partnerships with schools and parents, that is the theme that you are wanting to explore?

Ms Robertson: Teachers are absolutely crucial, because if teachers connect well with their students, their students will be more likely to stay engaged with school. But we recognise that teachers are under more and more pressure and obligations and more and more expectation from the community about what role they will play, particularly in life education for young people. We would say that those kinds of incentives for teachers, support for their training and professional development, their engagement and involvement in school planning, in the whole-of-school community, are really crucial. But we also recognise that teachers cannot be anything and everything to every student. That is why it is crucial that schools have great links with the broader community, both in their local area and with specialist services. I do not think it is reasonable for us to expect that teachers are specialists in every single area that young

people are going to need support in. So they are going to need the support to be able to engage that specialist expertise from time to time.

MR DOSZPOT: Out of the varying strategies that schools employ, are you aware of some that are working better than others in the way that some schools are approaching these problems?

Ms Robertson: I certainly think that, from a community development perspective, one of the strengths can be that schools look at their local community of young people and design a response for the needs of that local group of young people. But I think that the risk we have is that some schools are very well linked in with support services and support programs and are perhaps resourced by their broader school community as well. There are other schools that do not necessarily have those kinds of connections or opportunities. Within student services teams, the level of knowledge in a particular team varies from school to school. While, from a community development principle, we support that people design a response for that group of students, I would also say that there is a risk if there is not a broader picture in those kinds of responses that there is some real disadvantage depending on who you have got on the ground and what the school's broader resources are.

MR DOSZPOT: That is what I am trying to look at—the availability of resources and the ability to engage. Are they dependent on each other or can schools still engage without having all of the resources that some other school has?

Ms Robertson: When I use the term "resources" I think that means more than just money. I think that it does involve finance as well, but resources might be a parent body who are really well engaged and really active within the school. That is something that varies a lot, depending on the demographic of the students in the school—the capacity of the broader school community, the parents, other people involved with those students' lives. I think that really varies.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you very much for coming along and presenting to us today. It was, as usual, very good.

Ms Robertson: Thank you very much for having us along.

THE CHAIR: A copy of the transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you, so you can check that.

Meeting adjourned from 2.11 to 2.33 pm.

ROBB, MS ANN, Committee Member, ACT Gifted and Talented Support Group
VERBURG, MS KIRSTEN, Member, ACT Gifted and Talented Support Group

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Robb and Ms Verburg, for coming to give evidence today to the education committee's inquiry into the achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table in front of you. Can you make sure you are aware of that and what it says. Before we start, I invite you to make an opening statement.

Ms Robb: I thank you for the opportunity to be able to present a paper before this inquiry. The ACT Gifted and Talented Support Group provides support for gifted children and their families by organising activities, guest speakers, family days and general information and guides to other resources. Who are the gifted? Often within the ACT students who are gifted are misnamed as bright or very bright students and there are quite a lot of misnamings and myths surrounding this. Children of high potential, often referred to as gifted, are children who have the potential to perform at significantly higher levels than those of the same age—well above the average.

These are children who have an untrained natural ability or advanced development in one or more areas, which may include the intellectual, the creative, the physical and the social/emotional. Further, these children are found in all parts of our society, regardless of socioeconomic background and culture. Research tells us that around 20 per cent of the population—that is, four to eight students in a class of 30—may be gifted. What do we mean by "gifted"? These are children who have learning characteristics which are significantly different from those of the majority of their classrooms. Like developmentally disabled children, parents and teachers need to respond to these needs.

Turning to issues relating to the achievement gap in the ACT and the decline in the high end results, the 2008 achievement gap studies show that the bottom end of the scale has not changed and that there is not an overall decline in the educational outcomes. It is the top end of the scale which is moving backwards. Some of the reasons within this complex, multifaceted issue can be attributed to the lack of educational options for ACT gifted students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many families with children of high potential simply leave town for established programs interstate. For those who educate their gifted children in the ACT, much of their education has been negotiated through individual teachers rather than as a result of a whole-of-school set of strategies and programs. This is problematic at best.

Turning to gifted underachievement, underachieving may, in relation to giftedness, be defined as someone who has exceptional performance on a measure of intelligence but who nevertheless does not perform as well as expected for students at the same age on school-related tasks. It is, however, a learned behaviour which can be prevented or unlearned with appropriate strategies in place.

In guidelines to aid identifying gifted children, there are six personality types outlined by Betts and Neihart. It is disturbing that 90 per cent of identified students in school programs are type 1s, all those who are successful in early years. Identification for those untrained may be difficult if children are protectively hiding because they want

to be accepted or fit in or a range of other reasons. Underachieving may be masked by difficulties using a second language, cultural differences or a disability. Many of these children may be a combination of all of those. These children are often the invisible underachievers.

Often those who are identified are the successful, motivated ones who are achieving and having successes. These are the children who have demonstrated levels of high performance. These type 1s, however, often become bored, get by doing as little as possible and, in many cases, fail to learn needed skills for autonomy, and later they underachieve, or may underachieve. High potential too often does not result in demonstrated high performance in our schools.

As both research and anecdotal evidence demonstrate, many gifted students remain unidentified and are frustrated in their learning needs. Where identification has occurred, there is more and more anecdotal evidence in the ACT that teachers are seeing gifted students where potential is not being developed. This will have a marked effect on achievement results.

In terms of resourcing, it is equally disturbing that a large proportion of students identified come from high socioeconomic families, suggesting that lack of access to equal resources also plays a substantial role in the identification of high potential. This is the only group of students whose families have to pay to gain entry into ACT government school programs. The ACT Gifted and Talented Support Group also commend the Labor Party on its 2009-10 budget to allocate resources through DET towards providing free identification for early entry into preschool and kindergarten for these students.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding in the community around “gifted”. There is a common belief that gifted students do not need special help as they will succeed anyway. This is contradicted by many studies of underachievement. Many students of high potential are not challenged and are not provided with a learning environment which meets their needs and, therefore, do not learn how to learn, often becoming unmotivated, frustrated and disillusioned.

Research has also demonstrated that programs for gifted students should be designed using higher order thinking skills, not repetition or more of the same. These children are not being made to learn faster but are instead progressing closer to their naturally preferred rate of learning. School culture may also play a part in promoting underachievement by predominantly using performance-based assessment with emphasis on the outcome.

Many gifted children have heightened emotional sensitivities and this, amongst issues of perfectionism, boredom and others, can lead to reduced risk taking, the willingness to try and the chance to fail. Children who learn to see themselves as failures begin to place self-imposed limits on what is possible. More focus within this area is required on behaviour, feelings and needs of gifted students rather than their intellectual abilities, talents or the interests of these gifted children. In the final page I have listed strategies for closing the achievement gap. I am happy to work my way through those, to read it through or to have questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. The first question is probably in relation to the last point you made about behavioural needs as well and more focus being required on behaviour, feelings and needs rather than intellectual abilities and issues. In an article which we received yesterday—I think it was by Dr Kerry Hodge—there were points raised about characteristics that can prevent giftedness being detected, including problematic behaviour, often disruptive behaviour, learning difficulties and also the concealing of an ability to excel because of peer appearances. On the issue around problematic behaviour increasing, it can often be a sign of being gifted but not engaging with the school system. Is that something you have found through your connections and your work with the committee?

Ms Robb: It is an extremely common occurrence, for a lot of the reasons you have mentioned. A lot of it is due to frustration, boredom. Some of it, particularly in later years, is due to the fact that they have not had their own educational needs met in a variety of ways and they may be struggling to work within the system that they are being educated within. The system does not allow them to use their strengths, to work to their strengths and to learn through their strengths.

The other issue is that many gifted children are also quite highly emotionally sensitive. You could say that all children have some degree of it, but they are even more so. They are extremely sensitive. Also, they are often very aware of consequences and are thinking ahead. All of that leads to them wanting to hide their abilities to fit in—if it is not a supportive class—to try and fit in with peers who are age peers, not ability or mental age peers. Quite often these people will have their friendship groups from years above them, where they have more in common. So there are a range of frustrations that build and they often end up acting out and disturbing the rest of the class. When they are grouped together they can bounce off each other, enhance each other and provide a supporting network that is more of a safe environment.

MS BURCH: Regarding strategies, you talk around individual learning programs and a curriculum to match learning needs. Do you see that playing out within the traditional school setting or is that within a gifted and talented class or school environment?

Ms Robb: It can work in both. Where there is a separate schooling environment and you have got them together and you have fully trained people and the resources, of course you will get solid outcomes—when you have got an environment that is actually addressing their needs, which cover a very wide range. There is no one solution that fits all. But when you have staff with these resources at their fingertips and are fully trained then it works very well.

Within the school system and the normal class, it is more a matter of structuring it into one to meet the different types of learning needs, whether they are visual spatial or auditory sequential or whether they learn by doing or whatever. So the curriculum allows them to get the information in the way they need it to be able to take it in. They also need tasks which will be encompassing high-level thinking and will be more open-ended and more challenging—so that they are not just doing more of the same of what everyone else is doing; they are allowed to work at a different level. Some school structures allow children to move vertically through the program, through the year group, so that they can be where the best fit is for each individual subject area.

They may be extremely good at maths and not so good at English and they can move and adjust to what is appropriate for them. Things like that will also have a benefit for the whole school because it not only enables the gifted children to start to develop their potential but also allows the other children to also reach their potential.

MR HANSON: Anecdotally, the impact seems to be on gifted students—that we have dumbed them down, that the school system is quite rigid: "You are in that class and you will learn this way." As a result of all of those practices you have outlined, we tend to have a dumbing down effect. Can you think of examples in the ACT—private, independent, or schools in the public system—where we are more flexible rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach? Are some schools doing it the right way? I cannot quite remember the term, but you referred to "vertical", where they can do maths in two classes up, perhaps. Is that happening or is that just a model that appeals?

Ms Robb: There are some schools that are doing more towards this. They will have cluster groupings. They may have more extension provided. What it usually comes down to at the moment is the availability of those with the training. Those schools that have teachers or other support staff who are fully across the needs of gifted students and who do more within the school to identify them—identification is the very first thing you need to do because you cannot assist them if you do not know who they are—and who help provide a very different curriculum within the classroom are more successful.

MR HANSON: So what you suggest is that it is a little bit ad hoc depending on individual teachers?

Ms Robb: This happens a bit more in primary school at the moment. There is some happening within high schools. What are very advantageous are some of the music programs and other programs. They have a lot of benefits and they also gather up some of the children who are not necessarily straight academically inclined, because giftedness covers a range. There is a high school here in the ACT that caters for elite sports and has elite classes to extend students.

MR HANSON: That is just sporting, is it? You mentioned elite academic; is it at the same school?

Ms Robb: Yes. They have academic classes as well and advanced music classes. It is a state school. It is Lyneham high school and it does quite a bit towards this. But there is a shortage of trained teachers. Until there is a compulsory aspect to having some gifted training within teacher courses and then ongoing professional development for established teachers, we are not going to develop that pool of knowledge that the ACT really needs.

MR HANSON: So your sense is that it is a little bit dependent on the individual principal or teachers within a school deciding that they want to generate some programs and then doing it.

Ms Robb: Yes.

MR HANSON: We heard earlier from another group that that happens at the other

end of the scale as well, from people who are disadvantaged. It depended on the principals.

Ms Robb: There are a lot of similarities between the two groups and their needs are as distinct from the average group as each other.

MR HANSON: Given that, do you think that segregation is a good idea in terms of if they do have specific needs do you think it is a good idea to have segregated classes or even a segregated school? Do we need to have a school on the north side and a school on the south side that caters for gifted and talented and be more formal about it?

Ms Robb: I think we need both options. Yes, there are a lot of students who would benefit greatly from having that option to be with peers and like minds and with specialists. There are some children, however, who do not fit that model and who would fit better within their own schools and have a fully established program within each of the schools. That would enable these children to reach their potential in a much more effective way.

There is also a win-win there too because most of the strategies when they are fully in place and fully engaged that will assist a gifted child will have a trickle-on effect and assist most of the other students in the schools. They are not taking away from those students; they are enhancing the whole education program, changing the way we think about education and the way we approach education, and putting in place other strategies for the ways children can learn.

MS BURCH: Have you any idea of what sort of numbers we are talking about?

Ms Robb: Here in the ACT?

MS BURCH: Yes.

MR HANSON: It is 20 per cent.

Ms Robb: It is quite a large number. You can expect to find several within each class. It is a significant part of the population and it ranges from students who are six months ahead to those who can be years ahead of their age cohorts. A lot of gifted children have already taught themselves to read and write and count before they have started school. They do not need the same levels of repetition to learn, and quite often they will need to get information in a very different way from the normal teacher standing in front of the class and drawing, talking or whatever. There is a range of other things.

MR DOSZPOT: You mentioned the identification program that has been funded for early entry into preschool and kindergarten for gifted and talented students. What other initiatives can you recommend that could add some extra impetus to this whole program?

Ms Robb: First of all, I would probably say to follow the recommendations in the Senate paper for 2001. A lot of those are very clear and very well outlined, and also in

the DET policy. Initiatives: I think it is essential that students be identified. We are missing the majority of gifted children at the moment. Some of them are never picked up and some of them lead very different lives because of that. It is also about the differentiation of curriculum. Individual learning plans are essential because the students' needs are so widely varying and their combinations of gifts and perhaps talents that they may have developed, learning disabilities and all the other factors that affect the child such as their economic status, whether English is their second language, whether they have a completely different cultural background such as our Indigenous children—all of those need to be wrapped up into an individual package so that staff know what they need and can give that to them most effectively.

Following on from that is support for the staff so that they have the information, the training and the backup so that there is no-one floundering; so that it is not a burden but becomes a joy. These children are truly joyful given the chance to really bloom.

MR HANSON: I am trying to think how you remove the stigma. There seems to be stigma at both ends of the spectrum. At one end there is the stigma of disadvantage, but gifted kids are made to feel—I do not know what the right words is—uncool, nerdy or whatever. We seem to worship people who are good at sport or people who are good at other things, but people who are academically gifted in Australian culture are looked down upon in some ways. How do we make it be seen in our school systems as a positive, something we should all aspire to, rather than in a way trying to dumb kids down? Is that part of the problem?

Ms Robb: The myths that surround it and the community attitudes are a very large part of how children are accepted within a school and also a large part of what enables the staff to create programs and put in place other structures within a school. Part of it is simply that it is thought that they are bright and that they can cope, and why should they have more when other kids need help. It is more a matter of education that these children are not going to be able to do it on their own; that they do have very particular needs and that they will go under and not reach anywhere near their potential if they are not assisted in their learning.

One of the other parts that really enhances this is the ability to accelerate children. There is a range of different types of acceleration within a school and it is sometimes when people see children being accelerated and put into separate programs that they think they are getting something extra; they do not realise that they are simply getting what they need and what their child has is not suitable or appropriate for the other child, so it is simply that each child is getting what they need. It is about dispelling that myth that the gifted child is getting extra or that people think they are better. They are not better; they are just different.

MS BURCH: We had a witness earlier mention a country overseas with limited resources around where you target the achievement gap. This country is targeting the lower end, the socially disadvantaged, the academically underachieving because of disadvantage and exclusion. Do you have any comments about that?

Ms Robb: The figures that I have seen to date show that that does not seem to be moving much; it is not going down and it does not seem to be creeping up a lot either. There is some improvement but it is relatively around the same area, whereas the top

end of the scale is coming down, and I think a lot of that is due to the fact that students who should be able to demonstrate very different outcomes at that level are simply not able to. They are the missing part of the puzzle. They are the part that is flying under the radar and is not being gathered up and supported through to where we can actually see the outcomes. This of course follows them through the whole of their lives.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you very much for coming today and presenting to the committee and also for the information you have provided; it is very useful and we will probably consider putting it up as a submission. A copy of the transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you for you to check for accuracy.

BATTENALLY, MR MICHAEL, Co-President, ACT Principals Association
BRUCE, MR MURRAY, Co-President, ACT Principals Association

THE CHAIR: Thank you for coming along today to the education committee's inquiry into the achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table. Would you like to make an opening statement before we go to questions?

Mr Bruce: With your permission, I would like to give you a two-page summary of our position. Would that help?

THE CHAIR: Yes, that would be great.

Mr Bruce: Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk to you. We are grateful for that. We have put in dot form on those two pages the essence of what we would like to say to you. It starts off by talking about the fact that we, the ACT Principals Association, believe that we do have several programs in place that have the goal and will assist us greatly in addressing the achievement gap. They are listed there. The big, fairly new initiative, of course, is the literacy and numeracy strategy 2009-2013, which is underway and which we are implementing at the moment. I have listed the other things there, such as the Indigenous education strategies, ESL programs, special education and the various social support programs, including youth workers in high schools, and school and community workers et cetera.

We believe, as an association, that these things will be successful, provided we address the nine design elements that are listed there, which come out of the research of Crevola and Hill and underlie a lot of the stuff that is happening around the world in very successful jurisdictions such as Ontario in Canada. Those nine factors are listed there. Our association has advocated for quite some time what we refer to as the three waves of teaching. Each wave needs to be effectively implemented to achieve what we all want to do in terms of closing the education gap. They pick up on those understandings.

The three waves of teaching are, first of all, high-quality classroom teaching, about which I am sure you have heard a lot. A lot of what we are currently doing in the literacy and numeracy strategy is actually addressing that area of how we are going to get the very best designed quality teaching that suits the needs of every child in every classroom. The second wave is a very crucial one, and that is the early intervention approach. We have to get in early; it will be cost effective and more productive if we can address the needs of kids in the range of preschool to year 2 and subsequently at later transition points. The third wave is that some of the kids, despite our best efforts at early intervention, will still need additional support throughout schooling, from years 3 to 12, and particularly at the transition points, for us to be successful.

We have listed five things there. We certainly have a lot more but we are trying to prioritise the things that we think are crucial that need to be done that are additional to what is in place at the moment. It means continuing to build the capacity of teachers to deal with the matter. On early intervention, we need to be better at that. One of the fundamental big mistakes that we believe we as a system have made recently in

re-assembling our resources to address wave 1, through the literacy and numeracy strategy, is that we have dropped some of the things we were doing at the second wave level, particularly the reading recovery program and some of the very effective and proven early intervention strategies. We would like to see us find a way to pick up on them if we possibly can. So we are saying that better implementation is needed at the second and third waves, especially in terms of delivering the face-to-face specialised direct instruction that is needed for some of the kids who are really struggling and are at the bottom of the achievement scale.

We need to continue the fantastic initiative that was taken in the most recent budget of 10 more ESL teachers, because the level at which we are able to intervene for ESL kids has been falling down to lower and lower levels. We have got to address that. We have terrific strategies with people like the Indigenous literacy and numeracy officers. We have a challenge in Canberra because our disadvantaged kids are spread across nearly all the schools; they are not kind of "ghetto-ised", which is good in one way but it is difficult when you are trying to resource them all effectively. So we need to look at whether we have enough of them to be doing that effectively. We need to get serious about targeted scholarships or other incentives for teachers who really work hard at keeping up to date with current research and upgrading their capabilities.

Those are the comments that I would like to make in my opening statement. I am sure that my colleague would like to add some comments.

Mr Battenally: Murray and I, fortunately, had this conversation last night. We did our little bit of homework. I would like to add a couple of points to the document. There are a couple of areas that bring about a continuum of gaps being maintained or recurring. Examples would be the transition intervention opportunity you have with kids who are maybe going from preschool into mainstream school or going from primary school into high school or from the high school environment into the college years. At those junctures, the opportunity to target some resources around those kids, where there is evidence and information around their performance—the gaps are apparent—enables us to produce better outcomes for those kids.

Having said that, I would like to follow that up with the opportunity in the future—and currently it is there, anyway—for students up to the age of 17, for whom we are going to have a higher level of retention of students. I think we are at around 90 per cent now, but it will be in the order possibly of 95 per cent in the ACT. The literacy and numeracy resource provisions stop at around year 10. So as kids go into year 11 and 12, that stream of additional support is not available in the college years as additional support. It needs to be found within the course options that are available. That does put pressure on those years because of the breadth of curriculum in the provision of the college years. To then take away some of that provision to retarget those resources obviously is a school-based position and decision.

A point that we discussed at length last night was the partnership between the school and the student—that relationship. We know that a good relationship between teachers and students brings about some very powerful and fantastic outcomes. But the engagement of parents is a significant part of that success. As an ACT government opportunity, we need to continue to do some work around that. If we ask the question as to whether all young people in the ACT have got reading books in their home,

where they are regularly read to, those sorts of things in regard to which most people, and certainly the average Canberran, would say, "Of course," I do not believe that is the case. So there are some significant gaps in what we perceive to be the standard of community growth for young people, and certainly that relationship between schools and the community and parents can be strengthened. I am suggesting that we should not be complacent about that.

The other thing about the diversity that Murray noted before about the spread of Indigenous kids through our community and the gap—and certainly the data for that is apparent—is that other cultural groups are spread throughout our schools, and it is that diversity within both the government and non-government schools that is apparent in the ACT in particular. We need also to be assured that the ESL programs and the provisions for ESL in particular in schools are very strong and well supported. At this point in time it is probably something that we could have a good look at, because the demand on ESL programs continues to grow. I do not think that the pie gets any bigger but the demand increases.

In working with the community and parents, the experience that some schools have had in after-school homework tutorial programs, anecdotally, has been very positive, and it has not always been targeted at the brightest and the best. I suggest, in this opportunity to have a conversation, a discourse, that those sorts of programs could be targeted, where there is community engagement and extended utilisation of the physical facilities of schools to engage communities, not as an after-school care provision, but as an opportunity for kids to get some other support for learning where that opportunity may not be provided or easily accessible at home. It could be about technology. Not every family has a WiFi connected environment at home. Many do, but not everyone. An average expectation in the community is that most kids have very significant access to technology to support their learning. But it is not all kids; hence we have a gap.

One big one which was fairly topical last week is about complex students and behaviour. In some settings there are times when there are situations where kids do disrupt the learning of other students. We know that. I guess that needs to be noted as one of the dot points about ensuring the "school nirvana" that we are seeking. That aspect needs to be well catered for and well supported on a needs basis. It varies as the demographic shifts or kids work their way through our school system. The support for those kids who have the capacity to disrupt the learning of other kids, and perhaps disrupt the safety of a school setting for the moment that they are not coping as well as they could, needs to be well provided for. That, no doubt, has an effect on the outcomes of other kids in a school.

THE CHAIR: In relation to the point you just made, we heard from the Gifted and Talented Support Group that often one of the characteristics of giftedness is that of disruptive behaviour. They said it is actually more common than you would expect. I wanted to point that out as well. It might be because they are not actually being engaged in school for that reason.

Mr Battenally: I absolutely agree with you. The opportunity to dedicate resources to analyse the learning differences of some of these kids will bring that out; there is no doubt.

THE CHAIR: We have heard from a couple of groups in particular in relation to Indigenous students and also ESL students, which you have mentioned today, and refugees are one of those groups. Often, it will come down to the commitment or the level of engagement from principals down in terms of what might happen in that school around cultural awareness or how particular programs are implemented. I wanted to get your view on that, and also what sort of assistance is provided or what work you do around that particular issue in terms of setting in place that culture in a school.

Mr Bruce: I agree wholeheartedly with that statement. It is part of our nine design factors—the leadership and coordination. One of the fundamental points about everything we are doing in this regard is to have a coherent and a cumulative approach where these things come together in a context that is cohesive about addressing that issue and all the others as well. It requires knowledge, expertise and awareness on the part of the school leadership. It is well understood and documented that if the principal understands it and pushes for it, it is much more likely to happen than if that is not the case. So it is about the availability of programs and professional learning for school leadership teams to increase their awareness of those sorts of issues. There is stuff available here. Companion House, for example, has run excellent programs on awareness of specific issues about refugee groups that are currently here in Canberra. That is necessary and will need to continue. That would be one of the roles and it is why you need enough ESL teachers, and well qualified, properly qualified, ESL teachers. That would be part of their role—to raise the awareness and understanding in this whole school community of those sorts of issues that affect the children from other language groups.

THE CHAIR: Is that something you promote with your members?

Mr Bruce: With our association, yes. In fact, at our last general meeting we referred to matters relating to ESL students and the fact that there is an ESL review that has just been undertaken to review our policy within the education department.

Mr Battenally: Now I will be formal and better practised. I guess you were asking the question: how do we ensure that this is happening in our schools? To support what Murray was saying, the explicit way that we work within our schools is our schools plan, our strategic plan. From a teaching and learning point of view with cultural diversity, albeit from a community inclusion point of view for supporting, say, refugee or migrant families, they are aspects that as principals and the leadership of your school community we need to make explicit. Obviously we cannot do everything all of the time but I would suggest that the attempt of the schools plan is to support that inclusion and that continuing reflection and review. It may be that in year 1 of the strategic plan you do not have any migrant families but then in year 3 you may, so you need to ebb and flow or adjust the needs of the school, and we do on an annual basis. It may be looking at curriculum needs; it may be that in a senior school, a senior college, you might have a significant number of students from families from overseas, whether refugee, migrant or otherwise, that put pressure on the ESL programs or even community liaison and support, because students from whatever community who come to a new environment at varying ages need a level of support to ensure that they cope with life as well as being able to produce good learning outcomes.

MS BURCH: COAG has a number of initiatives covering literacy and numeracy but also low socioeconomic schools, and I understand there are four schools that will benefit from those. There is talk around quality teaching, youth transition and childhood reform. How do you see that having a change on a day-to-day basis in our schools to try and close some of these gaps? Quality teaching can go across curriculum and support and all of that. Do you get a sense of what you expect to see from these reforms in two years time?

Mr Bruce: I am very excited about those national partnerships, both that one that you were referring to and the literacy and numeracy one, because they give us some more people on the ground, some more resources to do the kinds of things that we are talking about here. So the main effect I expect to see is an upgraded professional learning community in the schools where those resources are being applied, where teachers are enabled to analyse the learning needs of the kids more closely and design better pedagogy to address them using that quality teaching model as a lens and a range of other things that would be part of it. So it is giving us resources, the kind of thing we are talking about here, if we are really going to implement those three waves properly in order to close the gap.

MS BURCH: We have heard from UC and the youth coalition about the community partnership. From a schools point of view—you are in the institution of the school—how do you propose to draw in the community? You made mention of not just after-school care but a learning environment. How do you see that working?

Mr Battenally: You go first, Murray, because we might be on different tacks.

Mr Bruce: I will tell you about a program that I had the opportunity to operate once on the basis of a one-off grant—unfortunately it was not ongoing—called the FAST program, families and schools together. We invited six or eight families in the school to come to six evening sessions. It was run as a community partnership with the YMCA and other bodies—it was not just school personnel involved in it—and it was really about parenting, how to take control of things in your own house, address the difficulties you are having with your child and support their education. The children were taken off and did children's activities with people and the parents were given a meal. They were all together for the six nights over three or four months and then there was an ongoing two-year follow-up and by that time they had developed a degree of social capital among themselves.

These parents are often extremely isolated and feel that they are looked down upon, that they are failing with their kids and that nobody else has these problems. When they find that there is a whole group of people sharing the same difficulties, that in itself raises their potential to deal with matters extremely well and it encourages them to feel that they belong with the school community. It cost $20,000 to run the program; that is why we only did it once when we had the one-off grant. But if we as a community put money into those kinds of things we could save hundreds of thousands on the Alexander Maconochie Centre and things like that down the track because we would be solving these problems at the early intervention level. I would love to see things on that scale. We have the one-off social worker type people, who do great things with individual families, and this way you can build the social capital

so that there is a possibility of sustaining it with what goes on in the community as a whole.

Mr Battenally: Murray, you will be pleased to know that the FAST program is still running in some schools, in the Belconnen district, I think. Melba, Copland and Kaleen have access to a FAST officer, which is the family and school together officer, who is about early intervention on referrals from schools for families and students that could benefit from some pastoral care, where that relationship informs the parents about how they might be able to build capacity and do the parenting a little bit better—not to criticise them in a negative way but in a very proactive way—but also assists the families in engaging the kids in learning, in renewing that capacity to learn.

Then there is the word "isolation". There are families, be it two-parent or single-parent families, that feel they are not coping. It could be disadvantage, illness or a raft of different situations. That little bit of connection with the school, we hope—and we are pretty confident; it is only anecdotal—will make a significant lifelong impact for those kids. It is a fluid thing because you might have X number of kids but across our whole community I am pretty confident that there are opportunities for these sorts of agency operations. And this is new.

You have mentioned a number of things, but the youth workers in schools and the pastoral care coordinators in schools are programs in their early years in the history of education in the ACT. So we are building around this multiplicity of support mechanisms in schools that might sound complex but is pretty straightforward at the coalface. You have a suite of people; we have school nurses operating in some schools now. But it is early days.

We are building this critical mass of providing agency resource within the school community. A lot of the contact with these people is with parents about the issues that maybe teachers and principals cannot talk to parents about because it cuts across that line of what is about the learning of the child into how are you running your family. That is not a conversation that as a principal we tend to move into because we do not believe it is our brief. But we would like to think it is our brief to provide opportunities and support for the communities that then come back and support the kids learning in a much more powerful way.

MR HANSON: We have heard from everyone who has presented today the importance of individual principals; that was shown to us by the professor from the University of Canberra. She showed us where the breakdown is in terms of the impact. Principals obviously play a key role and we have heard how some schools are doing this and some schools are doing that. It strikes me that empowering principals is a very important part because they are at the coalface and they know whether they have a school with a large Indigenous population or whatever. As you say, it changes year to year depending on who comes to the school.

I am just interested in what flexibility, autonomy and access to resources the principals have. Is it a case of going through the department, bidding for resources, for a grant that comes in five years time, or is it a dynamic system where principals have the flexibility to introduce programs into their schools to create the school communities? I am particularly interested in how much autonomy you have as a

principal, what access you have to resources and how flexible you can be in terms of moving resources around. Is there a principals reserve type thing of funding or do you have to apply for a grant through 68 layers of bureaucracy? It is a pretty long-winded question.

Mr Bruce: In the primary sector, compared to most public school jurisdictions in the country, in the ACT we probably have more flexibility than most. However, we would by no means see that we have enough flexibility. There is always the dilemma between equity, fair go and people being able to take individual initiatives. We have certainly been keen not to have the squeaky wheel gets the grease kind of approach. We have tended to have systems for distributing resources, for addressing additional learning needs, on a system basis, fairly transparent; we want to know how it is worked out. It is predetermined how much you will get depending on the nature of your student body; that is where the flexibility comes in. So, for example, if in my school I have had more kids from a lower SES background I would have in the past attracted more resources for learning assistance than would a school that had a smaller proportion—

MR HANSON: Just on that point that you get more resources: do you then apply that as you feel fit?

Mr Bruce: Yes. I would say there is good freedom about how you might then apply it. It has to be applied to staffing pretty much. When we apply for grants, occasionally they are from within but mostly they are from beyond the education department. In the Lanyon cluster, for example, of our grants, we have had several from the national government rather than strictly from the ACT.

MR HANSON: And individual principals will say, "Right, I will apply for a grant."

Mr Bruce: Yes. In our case, groups of principals do that as well. There is a degree of flexibility—

MR HANSON: Does the Principals Association support that and enable that? Do you as a group help principals or not through that process by just being aware of what grants are out there and—

Mr Bruce: In the sense of sharing our experiences and the knowledge and really helping each other, yes.

Mr Battenally: I am happy to make a few comments about SBM, school-based management. Probably nine-tenths of your resource in a school is around staffing and that is on a points allocation, not on a dollars allocation necessarily. So you are fixed about the quantum of staff. But you do have some control over the way you align that in your school, which should be about meeting the demand of the student population about the courses, curriculum and so on that they need to be engaged with.

From a school infrastructure and education budget point of view—these are rough numbers—the other 10 per cent comes in in dollars. It depends on what school you are in. If you are in a new school that does not have a need for a high level of maintenance and infrastructure support, you have a different budget from that of an

ageing school with high demand on infrastructure and maintenance. It is a really significant difference. Having said that, if you are a school with a beautiful new security fence around it, there is a fair chance that you have far less vandalism and those sorts of things than a school that might have a problem with intrusion on the weekends and that sort of thing because there is less security.

That does not seem to correlate with anything to do with learning and what happens in the classroom. But I can tell you that it does because it is about having those resources available within your school that you are not spending on. We could be talking about tens of thousands of dollars a year.

MR HANSON: Is that accounted for in any sense?

Mr Battenally: In general, schools will pay for that out of their budget. Of course it is accounted for because you know what you have spent.

MR HANSON: No, sorry. I mean in terms of the resources of a school, that 10 per cent. If you can demonstrate that you are in a very old school that is prone to vandalism compared to your old school—

Mr Battenally: There is some subtle adjustment but it is not significant. I will not labour on that; obviously I have some interest in that one. But I think all principals in schools where there is a high leverage on the maintenance budget which is taking away from the education budget. We call the education budget that provision of opportunity enrichment, good resources, good tools for teachers to use for supporting the learning of the kids in the classroom. In regard to grants, because a number of schools, be it from P through to 12 in the regions, have been working together on their relationships—the transition of kids has been probably the catalyst for that, to have those conversations about the year 6 kids coming into the high school, the year 10 kids going into the college—it has built new relationships that may not have been around a decade ago. In that, there is the capacity then to apply for grants. A number of grants do arise as a result of that and the reality is that you are more successful the more partners you have got in your grants. Just recently there was a limited bucket of language grants that came across the nation but I think only one area in the ACT got one and—

Mr Bruce: I think it may have been down south.

Mr Battenally: I think it may have been. But I think it was for about four schools and for those schools we had one or two schools that were not successful. So that grants and relationship thing is very good and very important. We are at the moment in a very interesting situation with the building the education revolution. It is great to see those resources coming into our schools but it is not always, as we know, targeted exactly at what that school would have if it had total advocacy over what to do with those resources. I am not here to question that; I am just here to say that that takes a lot of time out of the leadership of the school to support that and ensure that it is done well because it is not an opportunity that comes around often.

I am sure that the impact of that in primary schools, because they have significant resources—Murray might like to comment on that—is significant. From a secondary

point of view, national school pride; that is a great thing and I would say that all schools are using it to enhance their environments and the opportunities of their kids. But at the same time that is not always about; in normal times you do not have that extra resource or those opportunities to do significant enhancements so it may be that that adjustment or review of the school resourcing needs to be something where there may be a mechanism available for adjustment depending on the condition of schools.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. Mr Doszpot, if it is a very quick question and a very quick answer we can probably do it.

MR DOSZPOT: Okay. I would very much look forward to talking to both of you about the FAST program and empowering principals. Perhaps I will keep that for another time. To stick to the topic, we heard before from the ACT Gifted and Talented Support Group that they were quite happy with the identification programs that have been funded for the early entry into preschool and kindergarten of gifted and talented students. Could I ask both of you: from that early stage on do you see any initiatives that you think would be relevant to both of your areas that could be looked at?

MR HANSON: I would hate to hear a long question!

MR DOSZPOT: It is a simple question!

Mr Battenally: I will let Murray handle the preschool stuff, if you do not mind.

Mr Bruce: The short answer is I think it is to do with building the expertise of the teaching force. If we have got them coming in early, that is great—but then there is the understanding of gifted and talented, the expertise and the pedagogy that is appropriate. We need to do ongoing work to make sure that our teachers are well versed—and principals, of course—to set up the system and support it. That would be an area of professional learning that we should proceed with. We have been put into a better place by the recently published gifted and talented policy a year or so ago. I would see that as the next pressing course of action.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you very much to Mr Bruce and Mr Battenally for coming here today. As per usual, a transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you to verify its accuracy.

Mr Bruce: Thank you very much.

SINGER, MS ELIZABETH, President, ACT Council of P&C Associations
O'NEILL, MR MARK, Vice President, ACT Council of P&C Associations
ANDERSON, MS TINA, Secretary, ACT Council of P&C Associations

THE CHAIR: Thank you all for coming here today to speak to the education committee's inquiry into the achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement; please make sure you are aware of that. Before we go to questions, I invite you to make an opening statement.

Ms Singer: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this inquiry. Council represents parents to improve the academic, social and emotional outcomes of students regardless of the student's ability, race, gender, religion or socioeconomic status. It encourages and promotes the advantages of parent partnerships with schools. It believes that government schools are designed to affirm a culture about achieving the personal best in every student.

Increased funding is needed to achieve improved outcomes and to improve the academic results of our socially disadvantaged students into the future. Parents believe all government schools are using their limited budgets to do the very best they can for all their students but believe they are operating in a highly restricted fiscal situation. Between 2002 and 2007, the US government allocated more than $116 billion towards educational programs that targeted the achievement gap of a similar group of disadvantaged students. The ACT education system and family related agencies need a similar financial stimulus to create the same change.

International studies assessing student performance between 2000 and 2006 indicate that there is a need for additional support for students both at the lower and higher achievement strands. It is concerning for parents to see so little improvement for students at the lower achievement end matched by an even greater decrease in the achievement of our highest performing gifted students.

There is a substantial amount of research available to support new and additional programs for families of socioeconomic disadvantage. Much of the research used by council in its submission is from the US. However, it was very similar in its content to research from other countries—for example, studies completed by European countries on the Roma children. Council believes that the failure to put in place funding and programs to improve student outcomes for these groups of students to allow every student to achieve their personal best will bring long-term negative impacts to the future of the ACT and the Australian community.

THE CHAIR: My first question relates to the submission you made to the inquiry. You mentioned funding arrangements. I think you mentioned on pages 12 and 13 that programs need to be funded and administered on a needs basis and that is not always the case. Can you comment on the funding models and how you see they should be improved? I think you said that the ESL program was a particular example where it is always on a needs basis.

Ms Singer: In relation to our ESL students, years ago there was a target goal and ESL students were rated on a scale of nought to five. There was a goal that there would be

particular ESL programs for students up to a level of, I think, 2.5. Unfortunately, the amount of funding for ESL students stayed the same. The number of ESL students that came into the ACT system, particularly from refugee programs, increased and the funding did not. There was a match from a Labor government in a budget to try and improve the funding. It actually put six to eight additional teachers in school. That started in July this year when the funding came in. But, because we have so many additional students, the number that they are down to for getting into that program is about 1.75 for the average student. So there is a difference. It has happened because there are a lot of refugee students coming into the ACT. That is a good thing for our diversity, but we just have not kept up with the needs basis for the change.

MS BURCH: You made mention of achievement across all students. There are probably two parts to this question. The first part is: what does your association see as the areas with the biggest gap in achievement? In your submission there are a number of points where you talk about school-family partnerships, school-community partnerships. If you identify a group of the biggest gap, how would that strategy achieve or work towards that?

Ms Singer: At the beginning of our submission we suggested that you put all the things together and create one disadvantaged category, which is something a lot of the research does.

MS BURCH: It is on page 4—poverty, single or no parent(s).

Ms Singer: Yes. It includes: mother does not have a high school education; no parent fluent in English. It is all those sorts of things. That particular group we would see as one group that you cannot separate. That is a group that struggles from the time they actually have the child, so before the child starts school. They never catch up. By the time they get to school the students are already not at the same level; the disadvantage is already there. If you have a look at kindergarten and, say, our PIPS studies which are done in term 1 in kindergarten, you will be able to identify, hopefully, from those studies the disadvantage.

One of the programs that are currently being used near Charnwood in the ACT to have a go at assisting parents within that group before school is the HIPPY program. I could tell you a bit more about the HIPPY program, if you like. It is a two-year home-based program. Most of these parents do not have ready access to transport or whatever and it puts tutors on a one-on-one link between a parent and a tutor in their home for so many hours a week for 40 weeks a year over two years. They go through parenting skills—it is a bit like the CC cares—and also skills that they need to develop the children in the same way as another family would. It is about making sure there is literature and reading coming into the home and making sure there are books. It is about encouraging social interaction with other families and making sure that other support agencies are engaged if there is alcohol abuse or breakdowns within the family relationships.

That is one such program that is impacting. It will be very similar to the longitudinal one in Washington that we have got graphs of in the back of our study. It has not been operating long enough, but we hope that the long-term goals would be the same, in that we would have more students finishing school, more students going to university

and more students not entering the juvenile justice system. It is designed around a similar model to that. Hopefully we can extrapolate that.

In terms of looking at these children in the early years, particularly in primary schools, you do not pull out a form when you go to school and say, "I'm a family that sits in that group," so it is a bit hit and miss to try and target the programs. It often takes the school a while to get to know these families. Often they are not the families that you see. There are stories of some children leaving home at 10 past seven to get to school for five to nine in the morning and it has taken almost all year for the teachers at that school to work out what is happening with the younger children, in terms of the routes they are taking, so that they can put in the external services that they need. The way the system currently works is that families need to put their hands up for help. That means that some are missing out. Community workers operate in some of our primary schools but not all of our primary schools. They have a vital role in terms of engaging this parent partnership and having it work better with the school. We do not have those across all of our primary schools. Then you have additional learning programs, once you identify the needs of the students.

Mr O'Neill: Can I add a comment on that. One of the problems that all schools face, and we as an organisation, is the engagement of those people, and refugees in particular, who come from areas where governments and officialdom are pretty frightening organisations. So it is very hard to engage some of those people. Then we have cultural differences and cultural problems with getting the children educated. In some cultures, males are encouraged and expected to do really well; females are not encouraged at all. They are left to achieve the bare minimum without any effort or encouragement of any sort. They are not expected to do anything like that. They are expected to perform another role in another place which does not require them to be educated. In identifying these problems from the school end, it takes a lot of time to get to the bottom of them. That is always going to be a problem that we face. But where we have programs like the HIPPY program, where people can at least start to get into the homes earlier, there is a chance that you are going to identify those things and maybe make a difference.

MR HANSON: Your submission to the inquiry talks about the importance of the school-family partnership and the role that parents have. You note that the parents who are in some ways least engaged are the ones—and you referred to this before—who actually need to be. Have you, more broadly, seen a decrease in parental involvement in school societies? Are parents less engaged than perhaps they used to be because both parents are working, or for whatever reason it might be?

Ms Singer: On the contrary, I do not think parents are less engaged in students' education in school. I think most schools and parents manage that partnership. It has to be different in that, whereas you might have had a face-to-face meeting with the teacher 20 years ago, particularly the non-working mother, at the moment a lot of the communication between our parents and their teachers, if there is an issue, is by email. That is working well. There are fewer parents available to volunteer for things like the canteen. There are more parents that tend to turn up and help with breakfast now. Breakfast clubs are becoming a big thing within our schools, and a much-needed thing within our society. A lot of our children are out the door before they have breakfast because of whatever is going on in the house. So having the ability for schools and

parents to get together and provide breakfast is a really important thing. There has been a shift in the way that parents are dealing with that partnership, rather than a withdrawal of parents away from the school.

MR DOSZPOT: In your submission—which is up to its usual excellent standard, by the way; congratulations—you say that parents of students at non-government schools have had more success than parents of students at government schools in implementing effective individual learning plans. What does council think is the main reason for this?

Ms Singer: There seems to be a lot of pressure on our teachers in terms of their workload. The EBA that was introduced a couple of years ago actually increased face-to-face teaching by teachers in ACT government schools by an hour a week. Rather than maybe encouraging teachers to create additional individual learning plans for three students in their class, that was seen as the way it would work. Our teachers have a lot of things to do, and they do it very well, but there is that time pressure and they just cannot respond.

I also think that within government schools we probably see more students that would benefit from an individual learning program. We seem to have a greater range. We seem to have very gifted students but we also seem to have a lot of students that have missed school because they were not well or have missed significant amounts of schooling because they have had a parent not well for a significant period of time. We need the ability to support them and help them to catch up. We just seem to have more of a share of those.

MR DOSZPOT: Why do you think there is more of a share of those? Is there something that can be done to learn from how they are handling it in the other sector?

Mr O'Neill: One of the things in the public sector is that we take every student and we take a broad range of students, from the gifted all the way through to refugees, people with poor English, poor socioeconomic structures and things like that. Most of the private schools can have selection criteria. Maybe I would not say most of them, because the systemic Catholic schools certainly do not. But a lot of them are able to pick and choose who they accept, and there is the matter of who can afford to go there in the first place. Therefore it comes back to the socioeconomic structure and things like that.

You get a lot of people who send their children to the public system because academically they will not get into one of the private schools. You get people who send them to a school because it is close. You get people who send their kids to school as a de facto child minding service. We get the whole gamut of what is going on in the community, and we have to meet the needs of that whole community and every child in that school. That is very difficult. It is very difficult for a principal and the teachers; it is very difficult for other students in classes at times, because of the attention that a teacher may have to give to a certain section of the class, and it disadvantages that other person. But, as a public system, we cannot say no to anyone coming to our schools. The only criterion we have is in prescribed enrolment areas, and that is some sort of control, but other than that we take everyone that is here. And that is a huge task. It is a chore that is easily overlooked and forgotten on many

occasions. I hope that assists you.

MR DOSZPOT: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We heard from the Youth Coalition today that one of the groups identified as being a key needs group was young carers. Because they are difficult to engage at school, there can be difficulties around that. Is this a group that you have had connections with or is this a group that you have identified as being one of those key groups as well? The Youth Coalition also said that refugees were another one of these key groups, and Indigenous. I thought it was interesting that they mentioned young carers because not many other submissions have raised that as being an issue.

Ms Singer: The Youth Coalition has the advantage that it actually deals with the students. For us, that is the time when the parents do not become involved in school or are unable to get there and are unable to participate.

THE CHAIR: So it is not a particular group that you have connections with?

Ms Singer: It is not a group that we have a lot of contact with, no.

THE CHAIR: I thought it was interesting that you noted—it is on page 3 of your submission as well—the definition of a US department of education. I think it was the state of California that defined the gap as the disparity in achievements between particular groups. Obviously there is a difference in distribution of groups in the state of California; it might be more pronounced than it is here. Do you think that sort of definition is a useful one to use in any situation, including the ACT?

Ms Singer: If you got the University of Canberra to have a look at the data, I think you would find some very interesting differences coming out, but I do not think it is something that we currently research.

MS BURCH: You mentioned earlier, when you were talking about the definition of disadvantage, that they are behind the eight-ball, really, from the beginning, from the very early years. On page 16 you mention the importance of early learning. The government have put in 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, to early ed and have got special ed programs. It is part of COAG, plus local initiatives. Do you think that will help to address some of that need and help to pick things up so that, if we get in early, we lift the bar up and that follows through? Is that logic that the association would see?

Ms Singer: We would consider that, for all groups that are identified where this was a problem, you really need the preschool to be from three years old, rather than four years old, as is currently being negotiated with the federal government. For a long time we have had early intervention for students with a disability, and we have seen how well that works. For a long time we have had three-year-olds who are ESL students start preschool. They get an additional year, and we have seen the benefits of that. What we have not done is to take the other groups, particularly the low socioeconomic groups. We do have Indigenous playgroups in the ACT, but not preschool for three-year-olds of families that are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

MS BURCH: Do you see universal support for early ed as a positive thing in helping to lift that bottom global bar?

Ms Singer: Yes, very much so.

Ms Anderson: I think there is a gap in primary schools. After that early intervention in the preschool to year 3 level, once they go into primary school I believe there is a bit of a gap.

MS BURCH: There is another bit of work to do?

Ms Anderson: I think so, yes. In a primary school setting, you have one counsellor there part time, so not all students have access to that. I do see a lot of good services at that preschool to year 3 level, in the early childhood centres that are new, but at that next level of the primary school there is something missing.

Mr O'Neill: There is a disturbing growth in the need for mental health professionals for our students. Some schools have access to a counsellor but a counsellor is not equipped to deal with some of these issues. With respect to some other issues, I know of a couple of young children who were born heroin addicts. They are in foster care. The ones that I am thinking of are bright and energetic people, but they still have some sort of behavioural problems. Sometimes it is a matter of not being able to recognise behavioural boundaries and things like that. I think the complexities of the human being and the problems that are there make it very hard to be precise in telling a committee like yours, "This is the problem, this is how you fix it." All we can do is come and identify relevant issues that we know about and that we come into contact with through our schools, through our council and the people that represent it.

It is very hard, at the end of the day, to hold a school or a principal accountable for all the variety of issues that are there. It is very hard for us to be able to find ways to assist them in all things. We do our best. We come here today to do our best. Tina is the only one here at the moment who has a child in primary school. Elizabeth's children are in high school or college. I am here with grandchildren in schools. So we have a range of experience, and our most relevant experiences differ. I would not have known about the need in that gap that Tina identified to you. So it is very hard for a body like ours to be across every single element, because it is so varied out there. It is a huge chore. We put our greatest resources, our children and grandchildren, the future of our country, into these schools. We are here trying to get the best we can for them, and to do the best we can. It is very important that you should be aware of the difficulties that are facing our schools and the variety of people that they have to look after.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson?

MR HANSON: Given the time constraints, I would just like to say thank you very much for your submission and your evidence today. It has been very comprehensive.

THE CHAIR: Mr Doszpot?

MR DOSZPOT: I have a brief question. It is to do with the other aspect of parent

involvement that Mr Hanson has already raised. Two of you have mentioned the issues with children from refugee families. What is the parental involvement like in those cases where children of refugees are coming to school? Do you find that their parents are engaged with trying to help their kids in their school clusters?

Ms Singer: A lot of that depends on the refugee family's interaction with the first ESL school. Those students often do not come into a mainstream primary school or high school; they go to a specialist ESL centre. The government provides transport for those students so that they can get there. A lot of that depends on how well they become engaged at that stage. Our ESL teachers in those units try very hard. There is a little bit of trying to keep refugees from particular nationalities together. They tend to cluster in areas in Canberra so that they tend to have the students all go to the same ESL centre. Then, when the students move into primary school or high school, we tend to find that we have cluster groups at particular schools. Where they have the support of each other, they are not so much on their own and their interaction, because they have a group with the other groups of parents, is much better than just having an individual, isolated family situation.

MR HANSON: On the negative side, people talk about ghettoes, but having clusters of people that support each other is actually very positive. Do you know, when refugee families are being put into housing and so on, if that is taken into account—that they might say, "There's a Sudanese family here so we'll try and put you in an area," or is that not taken into account? You don't know? I was just wondering, anecdotally. You might have five Sudanese families coming in. If one is in Gungahlin, one is in Tuggeranong and one is in Weston Creek, it would not seem to help that effect.

THE CHAIR: That is probably a question for Housing ACT.

MR HANSON: I know, but it is not just about housing; it is more of a holistic look at it.

Ms Singer: We cannot answer, sorry.

MR HANSON: Fair enough. I will follow that up separately.

THE CHAIR: We are out of time. Thank you very much, Ms Anderson, Ms Singer and Mr O'Neill, for coming along today. A copy of the transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you so that you can check it for accuracy. Thank you very much for your submission and for appearing today.

The committee adjourned at 4.09 pm.