**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, 27 OCTOBER 2009**

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

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

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

## WITNESSES

## Privilege statement

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*Amended 21 January 2009*

**The committee met at 1.04 pm.**

**COBBOLD, MR TREVOR**, Convenor, Save our Schools
**MORGAN, PROFESSOR IAN**, Member, Save our Schools

**THE CHAIR**: Welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs inquiry into the educational achievement gap. I welcome Mr Cobbold and Professor Morgan to the hearing today. I draw your attention to the privilege statement that is on the table. I want to make sure that you are aware of that. I invite you to make an opening statement before we go to questions.

**Mr Cobbold**: I have prepared what amounts to a series of propositions, which I hope captures the essence of the material in the several pieces of paper which we have tendered to the committee.

The first proposition is that the ACT has a high-quality, low-equity system. The ACT school system has very high quality outcomes by international and national standards, evidenced in high average outcomes, high proportions of students achieving national and international benchmarks, and high proportions of students achieving at the highest levels. There is also a large achievement gap in the average outcomes between students from high and low socioeconomic status families, or low SES families.

The well-known achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is an extreme version which has specific features relating to Indigenous communities. The achievement gap broadly refers to the influence of socioeconomic background on education outcomes, but it affects other ethnic groups as well. Reducing the achievement gap and improving equity in education outcomes means lifting the outcomes of all lower achieving students.

The second proposition is that the achievement gap in ACT schools is large. The achievement gap in average results for high and low SES 15-year-old students in the ACT represents about 2½ years of schooling. The gap in the ACT is the highest in Australia, apart from the Northern Territory, and there is no evidence that the gap has been reduced since the year 2000. Much higher proportions of low SES students achieve at the lowest proficiency levels and much lower proportions achieve at the highest proficiency levels compared with high SES students. Low SES students in the ACT are doing no better than low SES students across Australia.

The achievement gap is a major injustice and a major challenge facing the ACT. Differential access to education blights a democratic society. It means that some social groups are consistently discriminated against in providing opportunities for rewarding livelihoods and successful participation in adult society. Large disparities in school outcomes for students from different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The ACT government is a signatory to the national goals of schooling, which include a social equity goal to reduce differences in school outcomes arising from students' socioeconomic background.

Employer organisations in the ACT are concerned about skill shortages in the workforce. Reducing the achievement gap in school outcomes would assist in alleviating these shortages. The large disparity in school outcomes indicates a waste of talent, skills and resources. It is in fact a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity. Reducing the achievement gap is the most important challenge facing the ACT school system and requires a comprehensive strategy.

Remedial policies should recognise that significant causes of the continuing gap lie outside schools. The socioeconomic circumstances of families are a major influence. Reducing poverty and inequality in the community have much to contribute to reducing the achievement gap. Indeed, it will be much more difficult to reduce the gap without a substantial reduction in inequality in society. Government economic and social policies should aim to increase labour force participation and employment for families of young people at risk, support the general welfare, health, mental health, housing and nutrition needs of families of young people at risk, and ensure access to appropriate community-based programs. Early childhood policies also have a critical role to play. They should ensure that early childhood programs, including health services, are adequate and accessible to families in disadvantaged circumstances.

A comprehensive action plan is needed for schools to reduce the achievement gap. The extensive research literature on reducing achievement gaps in schooling highlights the importance of improving teaching and learning opportunities for students who have fallen behind, providing a range of student welfare, behavioural and learning support measures, developing home-school partnerships, as well as increased funding allocations for schools based on student learning needs.

The plan should focus primarily on government schools. ABS census data shows that government schools have much higher proportions of students from low SES families. In the ACT, about 24 per cent of government school enrolments are from low SES families compared to 13 per cent of Catholic school enrolments and 10 per cent of independent school enrolments. In contrast, 75 per cent of independent school enrolments and 65 per cent of Catholic school enrolments are from high SES families, compared to 49 per cent in government schools.

Closing the achievement gap will require a large funding effort. Research studies show that the funding required for low-achieving disadvantaged students to achieve adequate levels of achievement is two to three times the average cost of educating a student.

The national partnership agreement between the federal, state and territory governments will inject about $3 billion into 1,500 disadvantaged government and private schools around Australia over the next seven years. This looks very impressive, and it is. It amounts to about $2 million per school over the seven years, or about $300,000 a year. Spread over an average size of, say, 300 students per school, it amounts to about an extra $1,000 per student. Put another way, it would allow the employment of about three extra teachers in each school. This additional funding, impressive though it is, amounts to about eight per cent of current per student funding levels, currently estimated at about $12,000 per student. By comparison, according to the research studies, what is needed is at least 12 times this amount. This gives us a

measure of the enormity of the task facing the ACT and the rest of Australia.

It is imperative that the increased funding needed is well targeted. Finland has about the same per capita expenditure per student as Australia, and so is lower than the ACT, but achieves higher average outcomes and much greater equity in student outcomes. It uses its resources more effectively. Program funding in Australia and the ACT is often too indiscriminate to make a difference in terms of the achievement gap. For example, many states, including the ACT, have embarked on extensive across-the-board reductions in class size. These are popular with parents and teachers, but they are also very costly and they have not resulted in higher average outcomes or reductions in the achievement gap since they have been implemented.

Class size reduction programs and other programs should be directed primarily to the areas of high need. The priority should be to direct increased funding at reducing the gap and revise school funding allocations to increase the needs component. The current funding framework in the ACT is only marginally structured to address equity. It is largely based on an equal funding per student framework, with relatively minor adjustments for identified student need. The total needs component of ACT school funding is only about 10 per cent or less of total recurrent funding. The difference between per capita expenditure on the least disadvantaged students and the most disadvantaged students in government schools in the ACT is about the smallest in Australia and is less than half in several other states.

A new system of funding should be developed to better allocate resources to reducing the achievement gap. An independent public inquiry should be established to devise a system of funding schools that gives greater emphasis to differences in student learning between schools.

**Prof Morgan**: If I could just add a lifelong perspective on this: I currently work in the university sector. I think it is important for the committee to recognise that these inequalities that are set up very early on last for the whole of life. A report released in the last week shows that the access of low SES students and students disadvantaged in other ways to universities has stagnated in the last close to 10 years. Once again, that is indicative of the funding aspect of this. The federal government is offering, in return for targets for low SES students, to raise the per capita funding directed to disadvantage from a magnificent $400 to an only slightly less magnificent $700. This is derisory in terms of the needs. That would mean one additional low level lecturer for every 100 students. You can see that it is just totally inadequate to address the disadvantage issues that we are talking about.

The other thing that happens goes beyond access to higher education. The students who do not get an education early on are disproportionately represented in prisons and they are disproportionately represented in hospital wards. This is a whole of life change resulting from the failure of school systems to address these issues early on. We need some more information on these issues in Canberra. For example, one thing that is obvious when you look at the situation in Sydney is the huge disparity between areas.

A recent Auditor-General's report indicated that roughly one per cent of children on the North Shore had identified early reading needs compared with 20 per cent in the

south-western suburbs of Sydney. That is written very starkly. It is much less obvious in Canberra because of the way in which Canberra has been planned to mix up socioeconomic status communities. Nevertheless, if you dig down to the next level and you do not look at the geographic distribution but at the real factors that are important, you will see the same sorts of patterns emerging. It would be very useful if the ACT carried out an analysis of that kind.

**THE CHAIR**: Thank you, Mr Cobbold and Professor Morgan. In your introductory statement, Mr Cobbold, you mentioned the funding system we have and the need to restructure it. I think that is in the September 2008 paper which you have provided to the committee. You also mentioned in another paper and today the system in Finland and how that is a useful model to look at. Is that the sort of model you think we should be looking at in terms of how they have structured their funding? Do you know whether the model has been applied in any other country and how it has operated?

**Mr Cobbold**: There is a very interesting stream of literature, and it is quite extensive, in the United States where in the court cases—some of them are still going—they attempt to assess the funding required to meet adequacy criteria in US schools. There is quite an extensive literature that uses different kinds of models, basically structured around learning need and the social backgrounds of students, to devise better funding models to meet those needs. I am quite happy to supply you with some of that material. In fact, Ian and I wrote a very substantial submission for the Connors inquiry that occurred in 2002 in the ACT.

In that submission we had detailed ideas about how such a funding system could be structured. It certainly draws on that literature, because I think it is that kind of significant change to the way we allocate funding between schools that is needed. I am not saying we should take away funding from some schools and give it to others, but in terms of putting the extra money into schools it should be directed according to a formula that addresses the differences in socioeconomic circumstances and learning difficulties between schools. You are happy for us to supply you with that?

**THE CHAIR**: That would be useful. Perhaps it can be provided to the secretary.

**Prof Morgan**: Could I add an additional comment on that? I think that, as well as funding, Finland also offers some other lessons. The emphasis in education in Finland is on local schools. Children go to their local schools. The end result of that is there is only a vestigial private sector in Finland. There may be some lessons in that. We would certainly argue that there are.

The second thing is that, given the current vogue for testing everything that happens in schools and if you have missed something you will invent a new test, Finland is one of the countries which have most actively and explicitly rejected any idea of systematic testing throughout school and it has the best educational outcomes in the world. When considering what is going on, particularly when driven by federal government initiatives, that is an important factor to bear in mind.

**MS BURCH**: You spoke of the achievement gap with low SES families and the impact that has on opportunities for further learning and life opportunities. What do you think of compulsory early childhood education, or the increased hours in that, and

also a recent announcement around an earn or learn policy, given that for some of these children school is not the natural match and it could be that they are disadvantaged and behind the eight ball at an educational level so we give them other opportunities to enhance their whole of life opportunity? Do you think that fits in the gap debate as well?

**Mr Cobbold**: I think the fundamental principle is making a difference in these areas. It is a labour intensive operation. Instituting rules of compulsion I think actually make the achievement of these goals more difficult. It sounds sensible and appealing but actually depending on that to make a difference, it seems to me, does not work. We have to provide the teams within schools and the teams that work between schools and other organisations to work with those families who perhaps have not got their kids attending school as regularly possible. That is really the only effective way to carry out major change that is effective.

**MS BURCH**: I would probably say "compulsory" was not the word. The right words were "around the opportunity" for early ed across all families.

**Prof Morgan**: I agree entirely with Trevor that compulsion, except in very rare circumstances, is not the solution to the problem. I think everything in the educational literature tells us that the key is to get engagement with parents. You do not get engagement of parents in a struggling family when you are saying, "We will take away your welfare as well." That is very rarely—

**MS BURCH**: But the provision of the opportunity—

**Prof Morgan**: The provision of the opportunity is really important. An extra year of preschool is something. I think you need to think in terms of disadvantage.

Take the Indigenous community as a good example of one of the most extreme things that we can see. I think everybody would agree with the proposition that the first thing you have to do to start closing the gap is to deal with fundamental issues like housing, decent water supplies, socially disrupted communities et cetera. It can be as non-educational as that to start solving the problem.

If you can add to that—and that is already expensive—some early intervention, in some cases this will be introducing kids to books in the house because their parents do not read. One year of compulsory preschool is something which we have not opposed, but it is only touching the tip of the iceberg of the problem. You really need to be able to get back into families who, often because of lack of parental education, do not have those resources to get their kids moving early on.

**MR HANSON**: In your view, why do we have such a large gap in the ACT? You suggested that it was the second highest gap in Australia after the Northern Territory. What is the reason for that?

**Mr Cobbold**: That is a good question.

**Prof Morgan**: Can I attempt an answer? It seems to me that it is a gap that is simply neglected. There has been a good deal of self-satisfaction in the ACT about our high

retention rates, our results on national testing et cetera. I can remember through P&C council Trevor and I having to campaign very strongly to get the ACT to recognise that the retention rate into year 12 covered up a significant non-completion rate which was, from memory, more like 20 to 30 per cent of children. So I think there has been an assumption that we do not have those problems, and we probably address them less explicitly.

In New South Wales, for example, I know that for the identified ethnic communities which are known to have problems with educational performance a number of the schools will have community liaison officers. That is easy to implement in New South Wales because of the geographical segregation, but the only area in the ACT where that would happen would be in relation to Indigenous communities. I think we have just not addressed the problem—

**MR HANSON**: So we have focused on the top end, not the bottom end.

**Mr Cobbold**: There is another element when people talk about social justice in education. I have seen this go on for, I reckon, 15 years. There is an assumption that I do not quite understand that says that when you are talking about that you are talking about Indigenous students and students from different ethnic backgrounds; somehow the whole issue of socioeconomic differences gets hidden away.

It is almost as though people do not want to talk about class any more. But the fact is that there are classes, and people seem to me, for reasons, as I said, that I have never understood, to be no longer willing to talk about class. That is at the heart of this issue: the huge differences in socioeconomic circumstances of families. If you refuse to talk about that, you are not going to address the problem; you are only trying to address the problem of more identified groups. But it is a good question.

**THE CHAIR**: We are almost out of time so have only time for one very quick question—

**MR DOSZPOT**: One of my usual short questions?

**THE CHAIR**: A very quick question, if possible, Mr Doszpot.

**MR DOSZPOT**: It is a direct question: do you believe that disadvantaged students are currently supported well enough? We have talked around that. Do you believe that there are other things that we should be doing at the moment?

**Mr Cobbold**: I think we have made the case in broad terms about what needs to be done: programs outside schools, inter-relationships between agencies outside schools and schools, but also things within schools. I have answered the second part of your question first. On the first part, I think we have just neglected the issue for at least as long as I have been involved in education in the ACT, which is now over 20 years, so this is not a barb at any particular government, but it is a feature of what has happened in the ACT for at least the last 20 years. We have neglected these people. The money has not been there, and you cannot change practices within schools without the money.

**THE CHAIR**: Thank you, Mr Cobbold. I am sorry that we are under time constraints

today. Thank you very much, Mr Cobbold and Professor Morgan, for appearing here today and giving us your time. A copy of the transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you for you to check for accuracy.

**ADONIOU, MS MISTY**, Member, Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages ACT
**DAWSON, MS FELICITE JANE**, Member, Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages ACT
**MAYERS, MS JENNIFER ELIZABETH**, Member, Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages ACT
**MOORE, DR HELEN**, Member, Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages ACT

**THE CHAIR**: Thank you very much for appearing before the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs inquiry into the educational achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table in front of you. Could you make sure that you are aware of that. Before we go to questions, I invite you to make an opening statement. We have very limited time available today, so if possible could we have some short statements so that there will be plenty of time for the committee to ask questions.

**Dr Moore**: I will give an overview and point to a few bits in our submission. Felicite will talk about preschools. Misty will talk about what is happening at the grassroots in schools and the implications of the national partnerships, and Jennifer will talk about social inclusion and engagement with parents, guardians and families.

We would like you to note that two of our panel here are employed by DET, and they have information that they are actually not permitted to reveal in this capacity, and also that we are not permitted to reveal for our submission. They are very conscious that what is going on here is being recorded and that this will be in the public domain and also in the domain of their workplace. For that reason, I would really commend this inquiry to request DET for information where we have indicated information gaps in our submission.

Who are we talking about? We are talking about, as we outlined on pages 11 and 12 of the submission, a range of different types of learners of English as a second or other language. If you look at pages 11 and 12, I will not read it all, you can see that there is a huge diversity there. What they have in common is that they are learning English, and that is different from the way in which the commonwealth is currently targeting these groups. The commonwealth's targeting is in terms of language background other than English. Our association, and nationally, argues that that is too wide-sweeping. Misty, for example, will tell you that in her household they speak quite a lot of Greek, but her children are fluent English speakers. So we are talking about learners of English, and at the moment that group has disappeared off the map, including in the DET submission to this inquiry.

The only legitimate way in which we argue that you can identify learners of English as a second or other language is by reputable, credible English language assessment. To its credit, the ACT department do actually assess learners on their English language on a scale of one to five. That is set out on page 13 of our submission. That is pretty important, so that you have got a scale of one to five, and level 4 is the level where learners are said to have approximately average native speaker competence. There are two groups that are excluded from this assessment, so there is no data on

these groups at all, in terms of their English language. The first group are children who are born of Australian-born parents but who still have a language other than English as the main language in the home. So they are third generation. They impact on preschools and on entry to school. Felicite is going to elaborate on that point.

The other group which I think are really concerning are fee-paying international students. There is no data kept on those students. I am sure you are aware of the issues that have been raised in the press, but even with the issues in the press they have not talked about what sort of English language provision is being offered to these students in schools. We suspect that in some cases their fees are subsidising English language for non-international students, and in other cases provision for other English language learners might be being used to help to assist them with English. Either way around, it seems impossible to find out what is going on with those students. I think that is a problem.

The other problem with identifying ESL learners is that it relies on self-identification. On page 15 of our submission we talk about some of the problems that attach to self-identification. I understand they are quite serious problems. In terms of the students that are identified, the real issue is that, although students are graded from one to five, and level 4 is average, only those rated at 1.5 get funding, because the funding is determined by a formula that bears absolutely no relationship to how many ESL identified kids there are in the system.

The funding for ESL is determined by a formula that relates to how many kids are actually in public schools. The number of kids in public schools in the ACT and elsewhere has been declining, while the number of ESL identified kids has risen by 33 per cent since 2000. So, according to the article which was used quite substantively in preparing this submission, which was in the *ACT Teacher*, 52 per cent of kids below level 4 are unfunded for ESL support. That has a paradoxical and contradictory effect—that is, the more ESL identified kids there are in the system, the less money there is for them. And the more acute the need—that is to say, if you are thinking about refugee students with minimal or no previous schooling, 16-year-olds who do not know how to hold a pen—and the more of those kids there are in the system, the less money there is for anybody at slightly higher levels. That is a real problem.

In consequence of the shrinking budget, provision for new arrivals has declined. There is very little in the schools; there is nothing for translating and interpreting in the schools. If you add to this the fact that unqualified teachers are being employed in schools in large numbers, we understand, although we have no figures on that, that affects the quality of provision and also the effectiveness of the teachers that are there advocating on behalf of these students.

There are two more points that I will discuss very briefly. One is the effect of the commonwealth national partnerships on what is happening in schools and in policy making. Basically, in our view, it is wiping targeted provision and targeted policy making and concern for ESL kids off the map. It is being supplanted by a concern with literacy scores on the national tests. Those national tests—we have elaborated at great length on this in the submission; I will not go into it—do not pick up on what the issues are for ESL kids. We get told over and over again, "Of course, literacy is targeting ESL." So I ask you: if you went to China and were told that you were

illiterate or had a literacy problem, how would you see that as responding to your needs?

Lots of ESL kids are perfectly literate. They do not know English; they do not know the words. So they are confronted with a book like this and they are asked to do an exercise like this one, which has a picture of a thing that is labelled "pin" and they are asked to supply the rhyming word with "pin" for this image here. But they do not know the words in English. How can they do that? Or if they are older, they are treated as if they are somehow dropouts from schools when actually a lot of them are dead keen to get on with their schooling. What they need is English, not literacy. They should not be targeted as literacy problems.

Another piece of work that I did, not related to this submission, is specifically with refugee youth aged 16 to 24 with minimal or no previous schooling. I have sent my report to Sandra. I am not going to talk about that now. One of the problems with the focus of this inquiry, in talking about the educational achievement gap, is that it does not allow us to target those kids, because many of those kids get put into year 10, they last about three months and then drop out. So there is no achievement gap because the gap is not there to be measured.

**THE CHAIR**: We have got about 15 minutes left, so if there are other statements, could you allow maybe 10 minutes to ask questions.

**Ms Dawson**: One of the things I would like to say, following on from what Helen was saying, is that literacy is about reading and writing. In teaching English, one of the major components is about oral language and about speaking and listening. Mostly this is not so targeted in literacy programs. There is a little bit of that, but that is really what these children, especially the young children that I am dealing with, need. I would like to commend the federal and ACT governments on their recognition of the importance of early childhood education, which is what I am interested in. It is a very effective and efficient way to improve school outcomes. I have information on projects and reports about that, if people are interested.

Access for young children with little or no English to preschool programs is very limited, because they cannot access what is going on in the program. The *ACT Teacher* article that Helen referred to talked about at least 225 students in 2008 who had minimal or limited English language, 75 preschools, including Jervis Bay, and there were two ESL teachers to provide support for those children. The children who are not included in those numbers are the children who are below average, as far as they are not a native speaking 4, but they get no support because there just is not money available for them. Helen referred before to parents who were born in Australia but who actually choose to speak another language at home and the children therefore are at home learning that other language. Also, children who are adopted at age three or four from a country where they do not speak English are not included because they do not fit the criteria.

Previously, the area preschools that were abolished in 1990 had five preschool ESL teachers working across Canberra with fewer students than we have now and they provided lots and lots of support for not only the children individually in the preschools but also the staff working with those children every day. Two ESL

teachers just are not enough to do all that work. The DET census talks about the increasing numbers of children and the ESL teachers in preschool are not funded on the numbers at all; there are two of them.

There is an early entry ESL program that works six hours a week for some children but it is a cost-neutral program so it only goes in where there are places in preschools, so of course in preschools with large numbers there are no places for early entry.

The other thing I want to talk about very quickly is bilingual teacher assistants. There are no bilingual teacher assistants in the ACT in preschools. Other states have recognised the importance of bilingual teacher assistants as a language bridge for children and families to help support their self-esteem and also in maintaining their first language. Early childhood ESL teachers who are qualified are vital to do this work. Children who come into ACT preschools with little or no English are trying to both learn a new language and learn in a new language. Supporting them to learn this language makes sense. It will close the gap for them by ensuring that they miss as little as possible of learning of knowledge and skills that other children are already acquiring at school.

**Ms Adoniou**: As Helen said, it is really important to understand the who. At the moment DET in their submission have only described against language background other than English. That is a hugely broad criterion. That includes my children as well as children from Sudanese refugee camps. In order to better identify who, ACT DET will have to mine deeper into their data and they have the capacity to do that. Then, when we know who, we can better understand why those children are underachieving. The underachievement of the English as a second language learner is different from the underachievement of a native speaker. A native speaker would have cognitive processing difficulties whereas an English as a second language learner is simply learning a second language, as we said.

When we know the who and the why, we can get on to the target of how. The targeted programs are really important. What we have done in Australia, in the UK and in the US for at least two decades is a broad dragnet fishing approach to trying to resolve the education gap: we throw out a program, it applies to everybody and we hope that we catch the underachievers in that dragnet approach. It has not worked. It has not worked in the UK with the national literacy strategy; they have not closed their gap. The US have not closed their gap with no child left behind.

What we really need are targeted programs. I have to say that the ACT are about to embark on a similar dragnet process by throwing out first steps as their catch-all for underachievement. First steps is not a new literacy program in the ACT and it is not a new literacy program in Australia. It has not proved a program that closes gaps. It is a good middle-of-the-road literacy program. It is not a program that will address the language needs of English as a second language learners. English as a second language learners need programs and teachers that explicitly teach the English language. That is not the same as literacy, although both federal and local governments have mistakenly conflated English language and literacy to be the same thing.

If you read the ACT DET submission you will not see English language; it is simply

literacy that is being posited as the solution. It will not be the solution. Teachers need to have explicit content knowledge about how English works, which is much harder said than done. Native English speaker teachers of English implicitly know English; but they do not know it to explain it explicitly to somebody else. They are in a position of having to figure out how you make visible what is completely invisible to them. They know how English works themselves because they use it every day; but can they explain it to anybody else? We would all be in the same position probably if we had to explain why we say the things we do in English.

As well as that explicit content knowledge, they also need pedagogical knowledge, so how would you then teach that knowledge to your students? It cannot simply be the domain of the ESL teacher. The ESL teacher would be an important expert in every school, but every mainstream teacher must take on some of this responsibility of explicit language teaching.

Very briefly I will say that the explicit teaching of the English language is best done through the explicit valuing of a student's mother tongue and their cultural background. Unfortunately, not once in the submission that ACT DET have put forward has this kind of content knowledge or pedagogical knowledge been mentioned. I fear they have thrown all of their hopes into the big, broad dragnet fishing approach by throwing out a literacy strategy, fingers crossed that that will pick up some of the underachievers. But it will not; there have to be targeted programs.

**Ms Mayers**: I would like to talk from the heart. I am in my final year before I retire. I have worked in the area of ESL and with disadvantaged communities for most of my career. What I realise after 32 years of teaching is that these families need to be recognised and have a sense of belonging, and I do not think from what I see now that there is a sense of belonging. For example, if parents do not feel welcome into schools because they cannot speak English or they feel embarrassed for their children if they cannot express themselves to teachers, they do not engage with the community and with the school community. We have a need for the parents to understand what is going on in schools. They can only do that if they have the ability to communicate with the school and through using the translating and interpreting service.

The ACT has received information from the immigration department that new arrivals into Canberra do not get access to the translating and interpreting service when they are in school and therefore do not have that ability to communicate with the school and to understand what is different between a school in their own country and a school in Australia, and in most cases they are very different. There is a need to bridge that gap so that the home and the school are on the same page. Access to a translating and interpreting service that is not so costly for schools, that does not come out of their own budget, is something that needs to be addressed. That would be my first point.

My second point relates to what others have said, "Please don't make the mistake of thinking that ESL and literacy are the same thing; they are not." I would like to put a plug in here for the introductory English centres in Canberra. They have served this community very well and they have served it well over 25 years. What they do is provide a very specialist English program but one very aware of the social, cultural and welfare needs of families and one that can put them in touch with people who can

source those other needs, especially our refugees.

I would say to keep an eye on the IECs because the funding for those centres has been changed with the new COAG funding agreement. You need to make sure that they are running because they are the only specialist English centres that we have and they are places where we have done an excellent job and they are places that offer early intervention for our families who come to Australia and to Canberra. It is a good starting place.

The other thing I would like to say is: please be mindful that in the ACT our Indigenous students are self-identifying as having an Indigenous language or having creole or Aboriginal English that they use in their home. When we look at Indigenous students, that type of student, if we do not address that language need and we just do something to them rather than with them, we are not necessarily addressing the specific need that they have. In the 32 years that I have been teaching I have seen an increasing self-identification in that respect, and there is a difference and I think that needs to be addressed as well.

We might see in a submission or in all of the research that we hear about that the teacher makes the difference, and I would agree with that. But the teacher will only make the difference if they have the knowledge with which to work with students who have English as a second language and they acknowledge the cultural differences that are there and how that influences how one integrates into a community and feels a sense of belonging. That sense of belonging is what I would like to get across today: people need to belong to their schools and not be afraid to ask questions.

My last point is on the school review. To have 220-odd responses from other language background students in a government school community of 36,000 or more where 11 per cent of those students are earmarked or flagged as ESL is not a good response from a community with that high number of ESL families.

**THE CHAIR**: We are almost out of time. If members of the committee and Mr Doszpot have any further questions, are you happy for us to send them to you? Think about that.

**MS BURCH**: You have mentioned the different groups—those with Indigenous or migrant backgrounds. Do you get a sense of how those different groups match up against the rating scale? Is there evidence of that and would that support a targeted program?

**Dr Moore**: We did not have access to that information. That is the sort of thing we would have liked to have seen in the DET submission. As a professional association, we have no access to that. Presumably these officers do.

**Ms Mayers**: I think that is a good question to ask the department—whether their dataset would allow them to disaggregate that data. I know, for example—and it is public knowledge—that we have issues collecting data on our refugees because we do not identify them within the enrolment lot, which is where the data is picked up.

**MS BURCH**: Are they not recognised under ESL students in their enrolment?

**Ms Mayers**: Yes, but you would not know what sort of ESL they would be because you would have to look at their visa numbers to disaggregate that.

**Ms Adoniou**: It is like finding the difference between my children and refugee children. They are both collected under the same data.

**MR HANSON**: It appears that kids are coming in at year 10 or wherever—that was the example that you used—and it is not literacy that is the problem but the ESL issues. Because they cannot speak English, they drop out and are not measured in the gap. There are insufficient targeted programs. Is there any provision for any kind of gap year either in a class or in a separate school where children who are at such a low level of English—on a scale of 1 to 5 they are at 1 or 1.5 or so—learn English as a gap year and then can be injected into the school system? It appears that trying to both learn English and learn in English, as you said, is nigh on impossible and they will either drop out or fall increasingly behind and then compound the problem.

Are there any programs like that at the moment that specifically say, "You are at such a low level. We will assess you and we will spend a year, six months or whatever, teaching you English and then we will inject you into the school system"?

**Dr Moore**: There are two issues there. The first one is the diversity of who we are talking about. I was talking about refugee background kids aged 16 who have had no previous schooling and who literally—and I have seen it—cannot pick up a pencil or a pen. At the other end of the scale you have kids who have got perfectly good educations from their own language and they may be very high achievers. The answer to the question is that both groups will be placed in an intensive English language centre, which Jennifer talked about, and have variable entitlements. The refugee kids have about 18 months' entitlement. Other kids would exit quicker.

The answer to your question is yes, there is that provision. But what happens to the refugee kids is that they exit the centres and maybe they have learnt to pick up a pencil but they need a hell of a lot more and they are not ready for year 10. They are not ready to discuss—and I worked with one kid—how a history text has portrayed the currency lads and lasses—not just the information in the text but how the historian was viewing those currency lads and lasses when this person cannot even write a sentence.

**THE CHAIR**: We are unfortunately out of time. I am sorry, Mr Doszpot. If the committee has questions we will send them through to you. I have some questions. Thank you all once again for appearing before the committee today. Thank you very much for your time and for your stories. A transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you so you can check its accuracy.

**BARR, MR ANDREW**, Minister for Education and Training
**WATTERSTON, DR JIM**, Chief Executive, Department of Education and Training
**STEWART, MS TRACY**, Director, Measurement, Monitoring and Reporting, Department of Education and Training
**WILKS, MS TRISH**, Director, Curriculum Support and Professional Learning, Department of Education and Training
**MELSOM, MS KATHY**, Director, Indigenous Education and Early Years Learning, Department of Education and Training
**COLLIS, DR MARK**, Director, Student Services and International Education, Department of Education and Training
**O'HARA, MS KAYE**, Deputy Chief Executive, Academic, Canberra Institute of Technology
**WENNER, MS JACKIE**, Centre Director, CIT Vocational College, Canberra Institute of Technology

**THE CHAIR**: I thank you, minister, for appearing today before the education committee's inquiry into the achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which will be on the table in front of you. Before we move on to questions I invite you, minister, to make an opening statement.

**Mr Barr**: Thank you, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to appear today. This is a very important inquiry and I certainly welcome the interest the committee has shown in these matters. Perhaps I can give a brief outline of our intention this afternoon in relation to the presentation of both the government paper and some of the broad areas that we would like to discuss. Once I have concluded, Dr Watterston, the Chief Executive of the Department of Education and Training, will make some introductory remarks. We will also hear from Tracy Stewart, who is the director of measurement, monitoring and reporting. She will present an overview of the data that we have available to us. Trish Wilks, the director of curriculum and professional learning, will talk about quality teaching, gifted and talented, literacy and numeracy and national partnerships. Kathy Melsom, director of Indigenous education and early learning, will talk around Indigenous issues and early childhood intervention. Mark Collis, director of student services, will present an overview of student behaviour, alternative programs, achievement centres, the connect10 program and support for students with a disability. We would like, with the committee's agreement, to hear later from some representatives from the Canberra Institute of Technology to outline their programs.

From my perspective, it would be clear from the government's submission to the inquiry that this is a matter that we take seriously. To set some parameters around the territory's performance overall, we are the top or equal top jurisdiction in this country in the range of testing that we have available to us—previously through our ACT-based testing, more recently with the national assessment program, consistently over a period of time through the PISA and TIMSS data—all of which present a very positive picture for educational achievement in the ACT.

It also goes to highlight some areas where the further strengthening of our educational outcomes will be important into the future. We obviously seek to work with a range of stakeholders outside of the education field to bring a whole-of-government response to areas of concern across all of our schools. As Minister for Children and Young

People, for example, the importance of working closely with the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services, particularly in relation to education programs which support services for children in care and for those who are temporarily in our juvenile justice facilities, is another important measure of a whole-of-government approach to addressing educational underachievement and providing opportunities for students across the range of educational institutions in the territory to enable every student to achieve their full potential.

As a general statement, the territory performs very well but there are areas where we obviously need to strengthen our performance. The range of initiatives that have been put in place over the last eight to 10 years go to address a number of those areas of underachievement and in fact have produced some quite admirable results in terms of lifting achievement across the board. I think when we get into the detailed analysis of the data you will see that some of those interventions have had quite dramatic success. When you bring an evidence-based approach to policy making and you are not afraid of looking at data and at areas where traditionally there may have been attempts to cover up poor performance and when you are prepared to have an open and transparent debate about performance in the education system then that only augurs well for the future of the territory's education system. We are about to enter a new era of transparency and accountability in education, which I think will be an important advance for the territory. Having said that, I will now hand to Dr Watterston to provide some opening remarks.

**Dr Watterston**: Like Minister Barr, I appreciate the opportunity to speak today. As you may be aware, I have been in the position for three months, so it has been a good period of time for me to have a good look at the system and also to compare and contrast with where I have come from, which has been Victoria and, prior to that, Western Australia. So I can endorse Minister Barr's comments when he said we are doing very well in the ACT. The national testing results, which we will elaborate on soon, certainly demonstrate that there is an achievement gap. But the focus in the ACT on raising the bar and lifting the tail is making headway.

I guess it is some cold comfort that our gap is a higher gap than in other states. In that sense, we are defining the gap as the distance between the highest achieving students and the lowest achieving students. We can claim that that gap is probably slightly smaller and also slightly higher in terms of achievement level. But, as Minister Barr alluded to, we certainly do not feel any complacency about that. As my colleague will detail, there are some very definitive strategies in place to make sure that we do not accept that that tail is where it should be. I think there is evidence to be presented that that has lifted over the past few years.

I want to point out the strategic direction that we are moving in. We are just about to launch a new strategic plan for the following four years. We have settled on the theme of everyone mattering, and titling the plan "everyone matters and everyone learns". I guess that is the issue for the ACT, and it is a mantra that I would like to maintain. Being the best system in Australia in terms of national testing and results may not be good enough. If you are one of those children suffering from challenges and perhaps not achieving to your full potential then it does not matter what system you are in. A colleague of mine said there are red students in every green class.

With respect to whether we have high socioeconomic status and high performing schools, and whether we still have children within individual classes that perhaps are not performing to give them lifelong opportunities, we see this plan as addressing the needs of individuals and making sure that there is personalised progress and planning for those students and ongoing learners. We are very much focused on lifting the tail, but at the same time maintaining the high standards that have characterised the ACT performance. We figure that, if we cannot do it in this territory with the conditions we have, it is going to be very difficult anywhere else. So we feel that pressure to lead the nation and continually to strive for that level of commitment from teachers that we know will make the difference.

It would be right to point out that it is accepted practice through leadership and writing from leaders within the field that quality teaching is the most influential determinant that will ensure that success comes to students. The ACT has invested heavily in the quality teacher program. The professional learning that has been going on in the last 18 months to two years has been quite profound. Schools report that the level of engagement by staff and the commitment to that program has been exceptional. We feel that the basis has been laid for continued improvement and capacity within the system to develop strategies that will personalise our approach and make sure that individuals are being treated on their own needs, and making sure that we can identify issues that will enable them to succeed.

Literacy and numeracy are obviously high-profile and major priorities for us. Trish Wilks, our director of curriculum and professional development, will talk about that in depth. We are entering into a coaching model. We are enabling expertise to be invested long term into schools, to work side by side with teachers. Instead of the professional learning model that has characterised previous development within schools, we see now that having expertise located in the classroom, working alongside people, is perhaps our preferred methodology going forward.

We also have strong evidence to claim that, certainly within our government school system, in addition to the non-government school system, our top-end achievement levels are as good as anywhere that results are produced, from the nation's point of view. So we consider our ability to push students to their potential as being one of the hallmarks of the system. We are working really hard in the student services area to make sure that we are able to address disability, which is the subject of a further review, and work that will contribute to our ability to address individual needs.

They are my opening comments. I would like now to hand over to Tracy Stewart, who is our director of measurement, monitoring and reporting, to talk a little about the data that we collect and that we have available.

**Ms Stewart**: I would like to talk briefly, following on from the previous comments from Minister Barr and Dr Watterston, about defining the gap and what it might be telling us over the last few years. There certainly is a gap between our highest and lowest achieving students here in the ACT. We have used the recent NAPLAN data results, the national assessment program—literacy and numeracy, to really highlight how we might define that gap and, as I said, what has been happening with that gap over the last few years.

One of the ways we can measure that is to look at the performance of our students in percentiles. We look at perhaps our top five per cent of students and our lowest five per cent of students. We measure them by looking at student results for the fifth percentile, the lowest five per cent, and the 95th percentile, which is our top five per cent of students.

Looking at the results for the last two years, which are the years that NAPLAN has been run, the size of that gap between the lowest and highest students in the ACT was not really noticeably larger or smaller than in other jurisdictions, although it is slightly smaller than across the board, with the exception of the Northern Territory, which of course has quite a different profile from the other jurisdictions. The data over the last few years also shows that the changes in that gap, again, while not noticeable, were consistent with other jurisdictions. In most cases, the gap had reduced, but where it had not, we were showing a similar sort of result to what was happening across the board and what was happening nationally.

In a number of our results, particularly in year 3 and year 5 in reading and numeracy, while the gap has not changed at all, it has actually moved up, meaning both our top performing students were improving their results and the lowest performing students also improved their results. So while we have not noticeably reduced the gap, we have in fact been moving results for students across the board upwards.

In a couple of areas, for example, in year 9 numeracy, we did see an improvement in the results for students at the bottom, at the fifth percentile mark. However, we did not see an improvement at the 95th percentile mark. So that gap had actually narrowed because students at the lower end of the range had improved their results in 2009. In some groups, for example, in year 7 and year 9 reading and year 7 numeracy, there was a slight decline in results across the board. So students at both ends actually did not perform as well in 2009 as in 2008. Again, I make the point that that was consistent across the nation—there had been no difference there in the results for the ACT compared with the other jurisdictions.

We did look a little bit back over time. We did compare our NAPLAN results with that earlier assessment program. This showed there had been some closing of the gap over time. We went back to the early ACTAP results from 2005. We did show that there was a decrease in that gap for reading in years 3, 7 and 9 and for numeracy in year 7. In most respects there were improvements overall in the results of students both at the fifth percentile mark and for the higher achieving students at the 95th percentile. In fact, in reading, in that fifth percentile, at the lower end, there was an achievement in all the year groups from year 3 to year 9. In numeracy, there was an improvement in all groups at that lower end, with the exception of year 3 numeracy. Generally, we were also improving at the top end from 2005.

We can all talk a little bit about the gap between the results for Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students. This is probably best demonstrated by looking at students who do not meet the national minimum standards that are now set in our NAPLAN assessment. We can compare those results for Indigenous students with the non-Indigenous students in the ACT. In general, there is a gap of about 10 percentage points between the proportion of Indigenous students who meet the national minimum standard and the non-Indigenous students meeting the national minimum standard. In

2008, which is the latest data that we have available, the gap was most noticeable for year 5 reading, where 81 per cent of Indigenous students were at or above the national minimum standard, and that compared with 95 per cent of non-Indigenous students. However, interestingly, in that same year, the smallest gap was in year 7 reading. So this was compared with the results I just gave you for year 5 reading.

In year 7 reading, we had 94 per cent of our Indigenous students at or above the minimum, compared with 96 per cent of non-Indigenous students—quite a small gap at that point. However, I must urge a little bit of caution with our Indigenous data because we do have a small number of Indigenous students in the ACT, and these results are all subject to a degree of statistical error which is quite a bit higher for results for Indigenous students. That gives a bit of an overview of the gap and what is happening in the ACT.

**Dr Watterston**: Trish Wilks, our director of curriculum and professional learning, will outline some of the strategies we have got in place in order to address this gap.

**Ms Wilks**: I will talk generally around some of the major programs that we operate. I will start with quality teaching. As Dr Watterston has said, quality teaching is really the fundamental underpinning of improving student outcomes. The quality teaching model, which we have modelled and have a licence for and have slightly adapted from New South Wales, is a way of theorising, putting into a framework, what quality teaching is all about. For the first time it has given all teachers, from preschool through to college teachers, a common language to talk about what the art of teaching is about.

There are three main dimensions to this. There is intellectual quality, which is really the centrepiece. It does not matter what you do or for whatever students, there must be intellectual quality. Student environment is obviously very important in setting the scene, and then it is about significance. Significance is around making it relevant to all students so that they can see the purpose of their learning.

To support this program, this year we have had cluster quality teaching consultants working throughout the ACT in clusters of schools, which are clustered in different ways. We have a college cluster, we have some which are primary and high schools working together. The role of this person is to, again, support teachers. As has been said, we are moving very much towards a coaching model to develop teacher capacity, and see that as the way forward. We also have moved away from the one-offs, knowing that one-off is not really the way that you increase teacher capacity. You can give them a bit of an injection in an afternoon or a day, but to get long-lasting change, you need to have long-lasting programs.

Quality teaching—and I have the booklets here, if you are interested in looking at them—is something that we started working on last year. We are in the second year, and it will be an ongoing exercise. This is probably the greatest change that we have made, the most fundamental investment of money in terms of developing teacher capacity. It underpins all the other professional learning that we do, because for obvious reasons there is no point in having a framework around quality teaching and then having other professional development which does not fit within that framework. So whatever we offer, whether it is within literacy and numeracy, it has a quality

teaching dimension to it.

Going to literacy and numeracy, our strategy is a new strategy which was launched earlier this year. The strategy, again, builds heavily on building teacher capacity. We say it is very important for the leadership dimension, having regard to the importance of school leaders. There is a lot of research around that role. The school leaders, at whatever levels, must be involved in and understand what quality teaching, whether it is in literacy and numeracy, in mathematics or in anything at all, looks like. Teachers need to be trained to have the expertise in the particular area so that they know what a good literacy classroom is like.

Certainly, when I trained as a teacher, because I was a high school maths teacher, I was not trained in literacy, but now there is an acceptance that we are all teachers of literacy and numeracy. Therefore, we have to upskill teachers so that when you are teaching maths in a high school situation, you understand that there is a component of literacy in that. If a student cannot read a problem, how on earth are they going to be able to do the work? They may have the mathematical side of it but it is the literacy that holds them up.

We have also, for the first time, endorsed programs in literacy and numeracy and said that across the system we will be working on First Steps and Count Me In Too in the primary schools, and that all schools will be provided with these resources. All schools will have the opportunity to be trained in these programs and we will be upskilling trainers along with the Catholic education office. We have worked quite closely with them—they have a similar program—to facilitate the training as a "train the trainer" model.

Indigenous literacy and numeracy has been an area of concern. As Tracy said, it is an area that we know that we need to do better in. We have a program of literacy and numeracy officers who work kindergarten to year 4. We changed the program. Initially, it was a program for year 4 Indigenous students which arose out of the NAPLAN results in year 3. We very quickly realised that year 4 is far too late to start doing intensive work with them, so we work with students in kindergarten to year 4 across the ACT, choosing schools that have the greatest number of Indigenous students with the greatest need. That is a program where officers work in schools for a term at a time, and there is an extension if the needs are still there.

We also recognise, as well as doing that, the big jump from primary school to high school and the literacy needs particularly of Indigenous students. So we have an Indigenous transition officer who works to support students moving from year 6 into year 7 with the increased literacy requirements of a high school.

As part of the literacy and numeracy area, ESL is a very important part of our program. We run two major programs, a mainstream ESL support where students who are working in mainstream schools undergo assessment to determine their level of language proficiency and through a moderated process we provide additional staffing, generally with teachers who have extra qualifications in ESL. That is an area where we recognise that we do have a shortage in trained ESL teachers. To compensate that, we offer fairly intensive professional development programs through the department to support those people and we are looking at scholarships next year to provide that

additional training for those teachers.

We have four intensive English centres, three primary and one secondary. The primary intensive English centres are at north Ainslie, Hughes and Urambi, which will then move into the new K-10 school in Tuggeranong. These centres have a ratio of between one to 12 to one to 15 with students who have generally very minimal English but who come from a diversity of backgrounds—everything from children of diplomatic parents to children from the defence forces, particularly at Weston, who are here for a limited period of time, through to our refugee and humanitarian visa students.

The humanitarian visa students are able to stay a longer period of time, but generally it is 30 weeks that we have those students at the school and then they go through a transition program, which again varies from school to school and student to student depending on the needs of the student. They then go to their local school. You may have heard of the Dickson bridging program through the secondary IEC but I am happy to talk further about that if you have not already obtained that information.

At the other end of the spectrum are gifted and talented students when we talk about the educational achievement gap. We have a proportion of students who are not achieving to their full potential because they are not being extended sufficiently. Since just recently we have a consultant whose prime focus is to support schools with their gifted and talented programs. That is again to ensure that the curriculum is differentiated. By having a differentiated curriculum we mean to meet the needs of all students. We do not say that there is only one way to teach; you teach to the middle. You teach to meet the needs of all the students in your class and that includes extending the students who need to be extended. We have programs that operate in many schools, particularly in high schools, and I am sure you have heard of many of those.

As well, we are looking at developing programs on a cluster basis, for instance in the arts to meet the needs of those students who may be highly accomplished in the arts but an individual school does not have either the number of students or the expertise to meet their needs. That is something we are developing at a departmental level.

We also recognise the importance of parents in all these. For the gifted and talented, we are working with the parent support group and they will be receiving a grant to support them in developing material to support parents. In literacy and numeracy too, parents cannot be left out of the equation. We support parents through the u-can read program, which was previously known as the parents as tutors program, at the University of Canberra. That is a very successful program that has been operating for over 20 years.

Having said that, we recognise that some parents would find it difficult to go to a university to be assisted in working with their student; also getting their child to the university over in Belconnen limits access for many children. So this year we have run a pilot program, which we have called positive and proud, which is based at Wanniassa school and is for Indigenous parents. It takes the model of u-can read, which has parent tutorials and then parents and students working together, into the school. We are very keen to evaluate that program and hope that we will be able to

run that out into other areas, through the field officers. This is another new dimension to our literacy and numeracy strategy. Next year we will have 21 literacy and numeracy field officers who will work across the ACT. They will work in the schools that have been determined to have the greatest need in terms of their NAPLAN results plus some other indicators, for instance around perhaps our kindergarten testing program.

There will be 16 primary field officers and five secondary field officers, and their predominant role will be to coach the teachers. They will be extensively trained in everything from the endorsed programs that we are running, through to coaching through to having a very deep understanding of what quality teaching means. So again they are supplementing the quality teaching model. We see that as a new way forward and are very excited about that development. But these field officers will hopefully be able to run parent engagement programs—not in every school but geographically across the ACT—so that parents have greater access to what is a unique ACT program.

I now move to national partnerships. Within the smarter schools national partnerships, it is teacher quality, literacy and numeracy and the low SES schools. For literacy and numeracy and the low SES, the identified schools there are the schools that will be getting the field officers next year. So we have again ensured that these schools are very much in the limelight in terms of having their plans accessible to everybody across Australia as part of our program. We are working with the literacy and numeracy national partnership with both the Catholic Education Office and the independent schools, the only schools identified through the low SES indicators were government primary schools, so we have four government primary schools that will take part in that program.

The low SES program is a seven-year program and we anticipate that the four schools involved will have additional funding for four years and then we will look at the results over four years to decide whether we move to other schools or continue in those schools, whereas the literacy and numeracy national partnership is really a two-year program with facilitation and reward happening on how and where we achieve the targets that are determined to generate rewards. Those targets are around literacy and numeracy in years 3 and 5. We have a working party comprising the Catholic Education Office, the independent schools and me which coordinates that work to again bring economies of scale into a small jurisdiction.

**Dr Watterston**: I would now like to introduce Kathy Melsom, who is Director of Indigenous Education and Early Years Learning, two really important portfolio areas that pertain to this inquiry.

**Ms Melsom**: I would like to start by making some statements about the number of students that we have in the ACT who are identified as Indigenous. At the February census this year we had 1,082 students, which is quite a small percentage, and of course those students are dispersed across the schools in the ACT. The reason I make that point is that we are now seeing—and I believe this is through some of the work we are doing—more of our students identifying as being Indigenous. That is quite encouraging for us and it will be interesting to see where this takes us and how this translates. We need to do some more work around analysing that trend—and I hope

that it is a trend—to determine exactly what is contributing to it.

Of course the outcomes for Indigenous students around Australia vary, as they do in the ACT, and in response to that we look at a range of strategies that we adopt to address that diversity of need within our students. Some of the programs that we have had in place for a quite a long time, our Indigenous education officers program, involve Indigenous employees that are placed in a high school and work to a cluster of schools. We have worked with these people for some time to try and find the most effective way of providing optimum support for schools.

It is not an easy scenario to unpack because we do experience a reasonably high turnover in staff members working in this area. There are lots of reasons for that: the ACT being fairly fertile ground for commonwealth government employees, particularly for Indigenous people, along with our other agencies that are also seeking Indigenous employees, and the fact that we have such a small percentage of Indigenous people in our population.

There are nine of those Indigenous education officers and, as I said, they are placed around the ACT. We generally go for the highest number of Indigenous students enrolled in the high school as a base school. That is not of itself an indicator of need, but it does give us the opportunity to make a much stronger connection with parents and community across a larger number of students, and that is especially important in contributing to the learning outcomes of students. We also have Indigenous education workers. There are two of these and they are placed in a primary school—again, the same notion of a cluster model—and they work across three of our primary schools. Again, the identified schools are those with the greatest student enrolment.

I should mention that Jervis Bay is also one of the schools that come under the auspices of the ACT. There are 47 Indigenous students in Jervis Bay, and that is the highest number in any of the schools that are managed by the ACT. Usually, our high numbers would be in the 20s; we would consider that to be relatively high and they would be spread across the years.

We run a number of programs and some of these are relatively new for us; for example, most recently, the student aspirations program. The student aspirations program employs three officers. Their role is to work with students from as early as year 5 right through to year 12. What we are looking to do in support of those students is to keep them engaged and connected to schooling. We know that amongst our Indigenous students there are any number of capable students who for many reasons do not continue with their education. This initiative is intended to identify those students and to provide them with mentoring and support to keep them engaged and connected to school—to broaden their views about the options that are available to them. That program has just begun. There is an officer that works in each one of our school districts, of which there are three.

In combination with that we have also introduced a scholarship scheme. We are in the process of selecting students now. They are students that are in year 11 and year 12 or entering into year 11 and year 12 for next year. This scholarship program, again, is in recognition of the support that many Indigenous students require to remain within the school system and to also acknowledge and recognise their capabilities and capacity

to complete their year 12 education.

We are targeting these scholarships to those students that are interested in entering into teaching as a career. We would like also to attract more Indigenous people into the teaching profession. That may not be the translation—and obviously young people will change their mind as they move through, and we understand that—but from the outset that is what we are looking for. There are 10 of those scholarships that are offered to year 11 and 12 students. In addition to that we will offer three scholarships for young people that are graduating from year 12 and moving to university to complete a teaching qualification. Again, that will contribute and return to us the benefit of Indigenous people in our workforce.

Over the last two years we have conducted a school leadership program called "accepting the challenge". We know that school leadership is a significant factor in making a difference for all young people, but especially Indigenous young people, within our school system. We have provided professional development for our principals and deputy principals in the school system. We have also conducted some action research. We have supported our schools to engage in an action reflection process, thinking about the ways in which they support Indigenous students, the strategies they are employing and the degree of success of those strategies and how they might adjust those. That has been a very positive experience for a number of our schools and some very clear and positive directions have come from that initiative.

In addition, in recognition of the comments that Trish has made and the knowledge that we have around quality teaching, we have also provided professional development to teachers around meeting the needs of Indigenous students within our classroom. What we are seeing as a result of a number of these initiatives is the engagement of our schools in partnerships with their Indigenous communities. A number of schools, usually through a cluster base because of the small number of enrolled Indigenous students, have entered into partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members. That is about acknowledgement that parents are critically important in the child's learning and education process and that we need to build much stronger relationships. Quality schools are also well connected schools. That has been a priority. In addition, some of our schools of their own volition have decided to develop reconciliation action plans. They are also a very clear indication of the acknowledgement of schools of the needs of Indigenous students and the ways in which we can move forward to provide positive benefits for those students.

The department itself has been working on developing its own reconciliation action plan. We will be looking at finalising that by December this year. That again brings forward some very positive initiatives that will contribute to improving the learning outcomes of students via the fact that it recognises Indigeneity and acknowledges that we need to respond in perhaps other manners than we may have done in past times.

As far as Indigenous students are concerned, we also provide Koori preschool programs, of which there are five sites. They have been conducted in the ACT for a number of years and they are received very positively by the Indigenous community. They provide very much a cultural context for young children as they begin their school education.

I will move into early childhood education and try and cover that fairly quickly. You will know that our preschool system was amalgamated with our school system in 2008. One of the reasons that we went down that path was to remove transitions for very young children. It is now a seamless provision as children move into primary school and then through their primary school education. Preschool to primary school is now seamless.

We offer 12 hours of preschool and that is the highest of any of the jurisdictions around Australia. The next closest is Tasmania. They offer 11 hours of preschool. At the same time, we have entered into a national partnership around universal access and are extending our preschool programs to 15 hours a week. In 2009, the 15 hours were offered in five early childhood schools only, of which O'Connor was one. Then, of course, there are four new early childhood schools that have come on board this year.

In addition to that preschool provision, we also provide three-year-old preschool programs. When reading a previous transcript I noticed that someone mentioned we do not provide three-year-old preschool in the ACT. We do. We have a preschool program that is for children that are from low socioeconomic backgrounds or are Indigenous. There are two sites. One is at Narrabundah and the other is at Charnwood-Dunlop. In addition to that, we expanded a three-year-old preschool at Jervis Bay this year. We also have early intervention programs where children as young as two years of age are being provided learning and development support to ensure that they can achieve successfully in the education system.

Our early childhood schools are a very positive initiative in terms of learning and development centres. All of them are located in what the ACT describes as low socioeconomic areas. Their intent is to work very closely with families and to support those families as the children engage in these early years of schooling, through the provision of parent programs, through the provision of health services and through other community services that will work out of these schools as a base. The advantage of schools, of course, is the fact that they are a non-threatening or non-stigmatised environment for the provision of service. They have proved extremely successful in overseas countries. Whilst our model is slightly different in that we have taken birth to eight, which is a first in Australia or anywhere, it is certainly recognised as a quality provision and one of the best models that we would find anywhere in the world.

In addition to that, there are a range of initiatives that schools provide of their own volition. You will be aware that schools have discretionary funds and they determine programs that would be beneficial to their students. You will know of some of those programs—homework centres that schools decide that they will put in place and various other initiatives, including art programs. There is a whole raft of programs that schools engage in that are targeted to the benefit of their particular student cohorts.

**Dr Watterston**: Thank you, Kathy. Last but not least from the Department of Education and Training's point of view is Dr Mark Collis, who is our director of student services.

**Mr Collis**: Low achievement is frequently associated with disability, behaviour difficulties and poor student engagement, but it is not a simple relationship between those things. As I outline some of the provisions we have, I will draw attention to where we are working in an across agency and whole-of-government sort of format, and indeed across the Department of Education and Training, where key initiatives in both Kathy's and Trish's directorate are integrally involved and enmeshed in how we can provide for young people with low achievement.

I would like to outline a few of the programs and services the Department of Education and Training deploys to address the factors of disability, behaviour difficulties and poor student engagement and how we mitigate against the associated low achievement that sometimes occurs in those groups. It is first important to understand, I guess, that the programs and services that I am going to describe sit in the policy framework of providing safe schools from P-12. Meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities are policies that we will go into in more detail and depth in terms of how to guide schools and teachers in how to mitigate against the educational disadvantage associated with these factors.

I would like to address students with disability, followed by improved behaviour initiatives, and then talk lastly about some interagency collaboration that we have. Currently there are over 1,800 students in our public school system who have a disability recognised by the department and each week a further 322 students access our early intervention programs. A feature of this is that both of these numbers are growing steadily. It is not a tidal wave by any stretch of the imagination, but there is a consistent and persistent incremental increase in numbers and there is a persistent incremental increase in complexity in terms of the students that we see in our classrooms.

In recent years there has been a particular growth of students with disabilities in mainstream classes. That would be the single largest growth in that population. Whilst the overall growth might be of the order of six per cent in the last five years, the growth in the corresponding time of students with disabilities who are receiving education in mainstream classes would have been double, so we would have seen a factor of two.

To address the needs of these students and to again, as I say, mitigate any potential for disadvantage, we have an array of services and placements available for students. These services and placements vary. They include learning support units in mainstream schools. These units are for moderate to severely disabled young people. They usually deploy a range of methods of approach. Sometimes the approach will be to deliver a program within these settings independent of the mainstream class and at other times there will be an opportunity for these students to access the mainstream class as well.

We also have provision for learning support units which are specifically designed for students with autism spectrum disorders. In these settings we are looking at tailoring specific methodologies that are appropriate for students with autism. In addition, we have learning support centres. These are classes for students with mild levels of disability or in the borderline area of learning disability who could benefit from an intensive learning experience in a smaller group and sometimes with some support

going into the classroom.

In addition to those centres, all of which occur within neighbourhood schools, we have five special school settings. Four of these schools are dedicated special schools alone. Black Mountain caters for high school and college age students with severe levels of disability. The Woden school is for high school age students with moderate to severe disability. Cranleigh and Malkara are primary school special schools.

In addition, the Turner school, which is probably unique to the commonwealth, has a special school population which is essentially embedded within a neighbourhood school. There are approximately 100 students who would be considered of the same level of need as students in special schools who are accessing their program through the Turner school. There are some groundbreaking and unique approaches to how that is delivered in terms of pairing a special school kind of class with a regular class and doing co-planning and so forth. It is quite an interesting and effective provision. Those are some of the provisions we make. We also make provisions in terms of how we support the students in the mainstream through our inclusion of a support team. We have visiting teachers who work with classroom teachers around programming and provision for students who are in mainstream classes.

In addition, we have a very strong vision and hearing team which works both directly with students who have vision or hearing impairment and also with schools and teachers in providing for students with those disabilities. A recent addition to the department's provision, going back to 2006-07 and continuing to increase, is the inclusive technology team, which is a team looking at how technology might be deployed to address disability right across the spectrum, from special schools to mainstream settings. This team, it would be true to say, has quite a national reputation now and is quite frequently requested to provide advice and people come to observe their work here. I have had a number of submissions from parents thanking me for the work that my team have been able to do in developing communication technology that has allowed their disabled young people to be able to communicate for the first time and to learn how to read and write for the first time through the use of innovative technologies.

I will now move on to programs designed to support responsible behaviour in our schools and to increase student engagement. I would like firstly to address some universal programs that we have. With respect to school counsellors, we have 45 school counsellors who are psychologists, and many of whom are also teachers, who support teachers and families of students right through the system, from preschool to year 12. We also have student management consultants who work across all sectors of schooling. Their role is to work with teachers and schools in terms of helping them to develop systems, skills and capacities to address student behaviour management issues.

I reiterate here that this team does not operate in isolation. The myriad reasons why a young person might not behave appropriately within a school include the quality of the curriculum and the quality of the teaching that exist for that student and the relevance of the program. More and more, this team is working with Trish's team in joining up that service in schools.

We have in schools as well a pastoral care coordinator program and the associated youth support workers who slightly pre-date the pastoral care coordinator program. This is in high schools, and it is around addressing a particular issue that exists for students in their adolescent years. The purpose of this program is to build resilience in the school community so that they can develop quality relationships with the young people and their families, so that all teachers, all adults in the community, can develop quality relationships with young people, to again prevent and to intervene early around issues that might be causing distress and later go on to cause behaviour problems. They also provide some good advice to the young people. It is a time in development which we know is a critical period for young people to be receiving some quality advice from people who care about them and about their outcomes. We often know that it is very useful if that advice is coming externally from the family and definitely from within schools.

We have at the moment across eight of our high schools the school youth health nurses program. This is an initiative to look at addressing the needs of our students from a health perspective. Whilst the goal of the youth health nurses is to work with schools to develop a health curriculum and also to provide just-in-time advice to families and to—

**MR DOSZPOT**: Dr Collis, can you give us some numbers? You mentioned 45 school counsellors. What are the numbers for student management consultants?

**Dr Collis**: With respect to student management consultants, we have 13 teachers and a total of 17 people on that team.

**MR DOSZPOT**: And pastoral care?

**Dr Collis**: There are 17 people, one for each high school, and 17 youth support workers as well.

There are a number of other programs that exist which are around trying to prevent disengagement within the school system. We also have programs which are attempting to catch as well, at the other end of the spectrum. We have two programs. There is a YES program, which is essentially youth education support. It is a social work program that is designed to work with families when students have been out of school for a lengthy period of time, and start the process of moving those students back into school. We have two workers in our youth education support program. Then we have the family and schools together team, the FAST team, which, again, is a social work program. It is attempting to intervene at the moment when young people are partially disengaging or have just disengaged from school and to help the school and the family work together as to how they might be able to meet the needs of that young person.

With respect to other programs which are relatively recent, in 2009 the Department of Education and Training has implemented the achievement centres and Connect10 centres. The three achievement centres are at Wanniassa high school, Canberra high school and Campbell high school. These centres are designed for students in years 7 and 8 where there are concerns about those students disengaging from school, a poor academic record and, usually, as I said before, associated behaviour difficulties.

The achievement centres have as a strategy to intervene through an intensive teaching program. They focus on catching our young people up so that we may be able to build their confidence to move back into the school system, to take advantage of the neighbourhood school program again. We have provision for years 7 and 8. Provision for years 9 and 10 is largely around the qualitative difference that that age makes. It might not seem much in numerical terms, but I guess every parent knows that the difference between a 13-year-old and a 15-year-old is quite significant. It is particularly significant when young people have been out of school and have developed a whole series of patterns of behaviours and disengagement and patterns of relationships with their schools which are not going to help them to be re-engaged.

The Connect10 program, which is for year 9 and 10 students, is based in a college setting. Again, there are three of these settings—Ginninderra college, Dickson college and Lake Tuggeranong. They are based around having young people come in and engage in a curriculum or in work experience, with the outcome of not only returning to school—although one of the things that might happen for these students is that they return to their host school—but also achieving a year 10 certificate and going on to college. That is another outcome. Bearing in mind that we are in our first year, and having monitored what is happening, that appears to be the most likely outcome—that young people are choosing to want to go on to college, if they can, out of our year 10 cohort. There might be provision for these young people to move into training or work. That would be another possible outcome. Those outcomes are different because of the different age and stage of the young people.

**THE CHAIR**: Dr Collis, if I could interrupt, we have limited time here. While we thank you for the information, could you maybe wrap up by quarter past, and then we can ask questions.

**Dr Collis**: Sure. That was the last of the programs to increase engagement. I wanted to make some observations. For the students we are talking about now, frequently, it is not within the resources of a school or a school community alone to address their needs. There is an increasing requirement that we work across systems. I refer to the work that Trish's literacy experts are doing for us in our Connect10 and achievement centres to bring those literacy and numeracy practices up to standard, and they are now going to be working in our Murrumbidgee education training centre out at Bimberi and focusing on that.

We are also working with the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services on wrap-around programs such as Turnaround, an integrated family support program and also Affirm, all of which are programs to address the quite severe needs of some families in terms of helping them develop capacity to assist a student to engage in schooling as well as general life outcomes.

**THE CHAIR**: Thank you very much for a very thorough introduction and information. We do still have some questions after all of that. We have already talked about ESL today, but through the different hearings we have had, one of the groups that has consistently come up as being in real need is ESL students and, in particular, refugees. One of the issues that has come up in relation to that today—and a number of other groups have raised it—is the funding formula for schools in terms of looking

at the competency level as to who gets assistance through that rating. When we look at overall enrolments in public schools, we see that the number of students in the ESL group has actually gone up and is continuing to rise. Obviously, that is impacted by the type of formula that is applied there. A comment made today was that we can teach literacy but language is really the issue as well, and understanding that.

I have a couple of questions in relation to that. What happens to students, when they go back into the general school population, if they have been through this assistance program, and how are they then able to cope with the general school population? Do we know what is happening to the students who do not receive any assistance? Given that we are seeing this increase in the number of students requiring that sort of assistance, is anything being done to examine the current formula?

**Ms Wilks**: We have certainly increased for next year the number of ESL teachers because you are right: the number of ESL students in terms of the total population is increasing, and we are aware that there is a need to service them. That is why, to a large degree, we have talked about the intensive professional development programs that we have been put in place to help mainstream teachers. It is so we have ESL support, but this ESL support is not sufficient to meet the needs of every student who may need ESL support. So we run simple programs of around 30 hours to support teachers in teaching ESL students while recognising, you are right, that language development is not the same as literacy development.

We also have our new program called InSinc, which is again really based on supporting ESL students. It is around recognising the particular needs for language. But we also see that as a program that will meet the needs of upskilling all our teachers in terms of meeting the language needs of students.

Another area that you have not mentioned is the increasing number of Indigenous students who are identifying for Aboriginal English and hence the requirements for ESL funding.

**THE CHAIR**: The Indigenous group is obviously another particular group and I know that that group still comes under the ESL area as well.

**Ms Wilks**: They do.

**THE CHAIR**: I guess that is one of the issues that I appreciate perhaps needs to happen at a national level. But another issue that comes up is about the data as well and how the data on ESL actually recognises what the needs are within that group. In particular, there are a couple of areas that are excluded from that data set in terms of being migrant Australians who might be not speaking English at home or for whom English is their second language at home.

**Ms Wilks**: It is about breaking down the definition.

**THE CHAIR**: Yes, and I appreciate that that is something that needs to happen at a national level. I know you have mentioned the more intensive assistance that is happening for teachers within the school environment. But also one thing that has been mentioned is the importance of those targeted programs. Do we know what the

outcomes are or what are the experiences of those students who might not be getting the targeted assistance and how they are actually going in the school system? Are they continuing on or is it too soon to actually be able to determine that?

**Ms Wilks**: There is data available that I do not have in my hands where we track the performance of ESL students. We might be able to pull that out, but my understanding is that they are not available for this year at this stage. We do monitor that. We also look at the students who are ESL but who also require literacy support. Sometimes one masks the other. We are aware of that. Then for these students who are really at need, we look at having individual plans to support them. Again, it is around the differentiated curriculum and having teachers understand. This is part of the role of the coaches too—to help teachers understand the particular needs of students and to work to meet their needs. But the work we are having to do is to upskill our teachers and actually getting qualifications around the teaching of English as a second language.

**THE CHAIR**: Basically that formula of bringing more intensive support into the schools will essentially stay the same?

**Ms Wilks**: It is certainly not fair to say that the formula will change, but knowing what the formula is, we are working on different ways to supplement ESL support. Whether the formula may change in the future will be something that would be a departmental decision. It certainly would not be mine.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Can I ask a supplementary question on that? It relates to confusion around the formula not really addressing the real requirements. I guess we would be asking for some clarification on that. The second part relates to one of the submissions we received. There was quite a concern regarding school ESL programs that are unstable and staffed by unqualified and part-time teachers. Has that been brought to your attention?

**Ms Wilks**: Certainly, in respect of being untrained, they have teacher qualifications but not necessarily ESL qualifications. That is why we are addressing that through intensive programs and also hopefully through our scholarship program for next year in ESL to support teachers to get those additional qualifications. Part-time teachers do not necessarily mean poor teachers. That is the way that schools staff some positions. It can mean that people are not as interested in some of those positions. But in other cases people are very interested in the part-time positions. So it is not a plus or a minus associated with whether a teacher is part-time or not.

**MR HANSON**: Minister, in your opening statement you talked about a new era of openness and accountability and that we would not be hiding the figures anymore. I am not sure whether you used the words “covering up”. You may or may not have; I cannot quite recall. What have you done previously? How long have we been—well, covering up might be the wrong words. But if we are now going to be revealing what the truth is, how long has this hiding of the truth been going on and what have you actually been concealing? If we are open and accountable now, why haven’t we been and what have we been hiding?

**Mr Barr**: Up until this point, national testing results, and ACT testing results prior to

national testing, have not been made available publicly. The department has held the data. We have known for some time the relative performance of individual schools and the strengths and weaknesses of particular programs. But that has not been publicly released.

**MR HANSON**: Is this related to league tables and so on or to performance?

**Mr Barr**: Yes. That is the shorthand characterisation of the release of what I will call "rich data" about relative performance within our education system at school base level. So from January next year on the ACARA website there will be a range of new information provided to parents for the first time in this country's history.

Some other states and territories have taken some elements of what will be available nationally and have been releasing that data in different forms within their individual jurisdictions. Tasmania, for example, has been doing that for a number of years. There is considerable evidence that parents value this information and that it leads to greater accountability within the education system for government, for education departments and also for individuals schools. There is considerable merit, provided that the data is appropriate and is given a context, in fact, to aid and provide a rich evidence base for education policy—indeed, for policy almost anywhere.

If you look across the field of government endeavour, Mr Hanson, data, statistics and information are made available. As a shadow health minister, you would be aware of the variety of data that is available around the performance of the health system.

**MR HANSON**: That is fine. I just wanted to know what you were getting at when you mentioned that.

**Mr Barr**: That is what I am referring to. So some of this information that we have now is new data that we have for the first time as a result of national testing. There is other information that we have been collecting for some time locally that has not previously been publicly released. Then there is perhaps an intersection of that material together with some evidence and research based around some of our individual programs that fall outside the strict definition of literacy and numeracy testing.

So we have always traditionally in terms of presentation in the education field, in the budget papers and in the annual report looked at PISA and TIMSS. To a certain extent from the introduction of the ACT testing, I think about eight or nine years ago—it might have been 1999 that came in—we have had that level of data. But we now have a whole new level of data. That becomes publicly available for parents for the first time in January of next year.

**MR DOSZPOT**: I have a question for you, but prior to getting to you I would just like to congratulate Dr Watterston on his appointment.

**Dr Watterston**: Thank you.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Congratulations. This is the first time we have had the opportunity to meet. Obviously we would like to catch up with you at an appropriate time. We

want to give you that three-month period.

**Dr Watterston**: Thank you for the acknowledgement.

**MR DOSZPOT**: We would like to meet up with you at some stage, with the minister's concurrence. Minister, on page 27 of the government's submission, figure 18, the Productivity Commission's statistics show an alarming decrease in the retention rates for Indigenous students in the ACT for years 10 through to 12. What impact will the proposed changes to the school leaving age have on these numbers?

**Mr Barr**: There will be a requirement for all young people to be involved in some form of education, training or work. In terms of this particular data set, one would imagine that it fluctuates based on a very small number of students. I think the general caution was issued initially. One student less could influence the percentage by a considerable amount given that the number of students in the cohort would be less than 100 students potentially. Given that there are 1,000 in the entire system, there is going to be less than 100 in each of the year levels. So a move from 66 per cent to 65 per cent could just simply be one student. I would need to get some advice in relation to the data in 2003-04 and exactly how many students we are talking about.

It might actually be more useful to present that data in raw numbers than it is in percentage terms, given that we are talking about movements of probably less than a dozen students across the board.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Given that, are there different plans to keep Indigenous students at school until they are 17?

**Mr Barr**: Certainly, the participation requirements will be there for all young people, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous. But, of course, the flexibility is there within that model for schooling, for training or for employment. We would, of course, through the range of programs that have been highlighted in the earlier presentations be looking to ensure that students are getting to the minimum of year 10. That will be the requirement for school participation.

Beyond that, there should be a range of educational pathways tailored to meet the needs of individual students. That could be accessing education in a number of different sectors. That could be via the traditional schooling model, it could be via the CIT; it could be via a registered training organisation. The goal is to lift the territory's year 12 retention to 95 per cent from where we are at the moment—around 90 per cent—and to achieve that by 2013.

**MR DOSZPOT**: What we are talking about now, is that a cohort where there is a decrease? What we are asking is whether you will be looking at adding some additional resources to address this issue as well.

**Mr Barr**: Additional resources have recently been added, yes.

**MR HANSON**: Just on Indigenous education again, Gugan presented to this inquiry and to other inquiries as well—estimates and so on—their real concerns around the funding that they receive. I appreciate that that does not all come from your

department or, indeed, from this government. It comes from other areas as well. Part of that concern is the fact that they get funds for specific programs and they are limited in their tenet.

For example, the education program they are running there is limited in the number of students they can take because they only have one teacher. And they do not know as yet whether they are funded next year. So there seems to be a real problem with that organisation in terms of just trying to establish programs for next year and to coordinate the funding. It is a kind of drip-feeding process.

**Mr Barr**: Certainly, for a number of community organisations that receive funding from multiple ACT and commonwealth agencies, there are clearly challenges when you have five simultaneously.

**MR HANSON**: With Gugan, just to highlight the issue, clearly they are at a point where they are looking at falling off the edge of the cliff with some of their programs which, from what I have seen and what others have seen, would seem to be very worthy. I would ask you to look at that, if you have not, and to address that issue.

**Mr Barr**: I understand Kathy has been working with them.

**Ms Melsom**: Yes. The department does fund Gugan. This is the first year that we have funded them directly. You may be aware that they were recipients of the community inclusion fund previously, and it was on that basis that they set up their literacy and numeracy program. Yes, they are limited to eight to 10 students, and the recommendation out of the evaluation that was done was that that provision should be over a three-day period.

That raises a question about those young people being engaged in a school program. Generally, that has not been the case, and that is of concern for us because we need to keep them connected to school if they are to be successful and continue on. We have been meeting with Gugan. Kim Davison is very aware of this and wants to work closely with us to find a way forward by which we might be able to tailor a program that does give students more of a sense of belonging and connectedness that they do not perhaps always find in their school. But it is about setting up an initiative that will keep them connected with their school, while at the same time giving them that boost and sense of self-confidence and self-worth to continue to be engaged within the school system. That is what we are trying to achieve.

**THE CHAIR**: One thing which Gugan mentioned when they appeared before the committee was about being able to engage with the general school population and how they have found that often, when students leave the program, it is because it is in a different environment as well. So it is good to hear that you are working with them on that sort of engagement. I am wondering about the level of outcome for students who then go back into the general school population and what happens to them. Given that we have this new policy of "earn or learn", what will happen to those students who, regardless of what might happen, have those difficulties about engaging with the school system? Also, given that a lot of the assistance ends at a particular point, that might create some difficulties with the new policy coming in. What is being done around that?

**Ms Melsom**: Dr Collis also mentioned some recent initiatives within our school system. They are for all students, and they are intended to keep those young people connected to school. They have just come in, over the top of, if you like, what Gugan has been trying to do, but they are of a similar nature. We know that young people often disconnect from school because they are not feeling a level of success. You would not want to come if you are not being successful. So it is as much about that. We need to find ways within our school system to ensure that these young people have a degree of success, do feel welcome within school and are comfortable there.

**THE CHAIR**: I guess Gugan is successful because it is an Indigenous organisation providing assistance to Indigenous youth. Obviously, there is that sense of belonging, and that is something—

**Ms Melsom**: Absolutely, yes.

**THE CHAIR**: they have noted themselves about why it is such a successful program. I would imagine you would be wanting to build on what they do.

**Ms Melsom**: Absolutely, and that is why we are liaising with them to work closely with that. It is also important to note that there are many Indigenous students that do achieve extremely well through our education system.

**THE CHAIR**: Absolutely.

**Ms Melsom**: So it is not just about being Indigenous, and I certainly would not want to suggest that all Indigenous students need to be located in an environment with other Indigenous students. You may be aware that the Indigenous schools in Victoria were closed because they were not able to achieve success for their students, and similarly that has been a fairly common scenario around Australia. So if you want to extrapolate from that and say what it is that we are trying to do, generally these are students that have many complex issues in their lives and, with school, if they are not attending, they fall further and further behind. So it is not necessarily the school of itself; it is just the place at which they find themselves at a certain stage in their lives, and they need something different to help them turn around and reconnect with the education system.

**MR DOSZPOT**: My question is supplementary to Mr Hanson's. When we met with the Gugan Gulwan people, they were in desperate straits—I guess that is not putting it too dramatically. They were saying that, unless something happened fairly quickly, they could not plan for what was going to happen next year. Can you give any assurance that their program will be continued for next year, because we are virtually in November now and there is not much more of the school year left to go. How much consideration will they be given to ensure that the program will continue?

**Ms Melsom**: Gugan found itself in this same situation with the completion of the community inclusion initiative. Again, they had not approached us about funding. So it is the same situation that they are finding themselves in now, even though they had been given considerable time to identify alternative sources of funding. I do not mean to be critical of them because we know there are not buckets of money out there that

one can access.

Similarly, I would say to you that what I would want to be confident of is that the program actually translates effectively for young people's education. I know it translates wonderfully well in terms of the connectedness for them at Gugan; children love to go there as a place to be. But I am still asking the question: what is the quality learning outcome for those students? From an education perspective, that is our goal—to ensure that these young people have success within the education system. That is why we need to work very closely with Gugan to establish a way by which we can do that.

**MR HANSON**: When do you anticipate a decision being made?

**Ms Melsom**: I do not know because I do not have discrete funds for that purpose either. We have juggled things around a bit so that we could support Gugan for this year. Obviously, we would need to be doing the same thing next year. Our moneys, as you would know, are for particular purposes, and that Gugan Gulwan initiative needs to align with that purpose if we are to support it.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Obviously, you have to make a decision based on performance and other factors, but there has been concern shown about the lack of continuity in some of these programs. We are concerned, from information we have been given, that there is a possibility that there is another program that could go by the wayside because a decision is not made in a timely fashion for them to retain their staff and the other administrative factors that go with it. I guess we are trying to highlight and underline the issues that we have heard. We appreciate the fact that you have to make decisions based on fact and accountability.

**Ms Melsom**: That is right. Really, what I am looking for is a quality education program. I do acknowledge the work of Gugan. I think it is a wonderful initiative and I support them fully. But the funds that come to education are for education purposes, and we need to make sure that that is the direction in which they go, and that those are the outcomes that are achieved.

**MS BURCH**: I have a question about alternative settings. What are we doing for those children who are disengaging? I heard the term "earn or learn" as I came back into the room. Where does Gugan fit into those alternative settings such as Connect10 and achievement centres, and what is the package that we are offering to get the disengaged re-engaged?

**Dr Collis**: Inherent in the problem of disengagement is a multifactorial problem. One frequent factor for the most disengaged is stability of housing and stability of living arrangements for young people. At the moment we have a six-weekly meeting of my staff and those of the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services—in particular, care and protection and the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support—and CIT, to sit down and discuss all of the possible options that are out there. The outcome of this until now has been an actual map which is now used in some of our youth transition programs—a map of all the services which have an educational focus that exist in the community. Obviously, they are not all offered.

**MS BURCH**: That would be Gugan and Galilee?

**Dr Collis**: Gugan, Galilee, Murrumbidge education training centre, the youth education centre here in town, the youth support centres and all of those places where young people are accessing their education in one way or another. A couple of the outcomes, as I said, involve mapping that, to find out what the story is there. I talked before about ensuring that, in those centres, we can quality-assure the literacy, numeracy and curriculum that is going in there. Trish's team and the literacy and numeracy team are helping with that. We may offer, for instance, to Galilee to work with them around some of those support mechanisms. That is one outcome.

The other outcome is that we are looking to ensure that there is a common curriculum across some of these areas. For instance, our students who are in the Murrumbidgee education and training centre, when they come out, sometimes will go to a school and sometimes will not. Because of the living arrangements, they might access education through CIT or the youth support centre. We are endeavouring to ensure that all of our centres, like Connect10, are operating off the access 10 CIT curriculum, so that if a young person moves around, regardless of their stability of living arrangement, when they access a youth service and the youth service engages them with education, they will be engaging with something that they are already familiar with.

We have really taken one baby step in that direction. The learning or earning legislation, as it has been called here, the youth attainment and transitions work, is really going to be a huge opportunity to stitch all of these bits and pieces up into a coherent whole. However, I will say that, from my experience of working with disengaged young people over a long period of time, that coherent whole will look more like a tapestry of lots of bits and pieces than it will a fairly standard blanket. So it is an opportunity for us to stitch that up.

**MS BURCH**: Is it too early to get some trends of completions through the Connect10 program? Is it showing success or is it too early?

**Dr Collis**: Yes, I have some data. Bearing in mind that we are in the first year, we are going to be doing our complete destination study at the end of this year. We are getting somewhere between 85 and 90 per cent attendance rates at Connect10s, for example, and probably about the same at achievement centres. We are pretty happy with that, given that some of these students were not attending at all. At the moment this is a trend. One of our colleges which has reported recently is having a graduation and, of the 18 students, I believe 14 have chosen to move into formal education processes again, either going on to college or going back to school, and four of those students are going to come back into the program again next year. Remember that it is a year 9 and 10 centre. So the early signs are that there is some degree of success, but we are going to be wanting to find out where these young people are six months from here and 12 months from here to be able to be confident that this model is going well. At the moment it is looking optimistic.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Have ACT schools participated in any surveys on bullying?

**Dr Collis**: Not since I have been here but I would have to take that on notice in terms of the longer term. Is this systemically or individually? For example, one of the

programs that we support is the friendly schools friendly families program. Part of that program surveys the school community on bullying. That is what you do to start off with. So those kinds of surveys have happened within school, but I am not aware of any across-system survey of bullying.

**MR DOSZPOT**: There was a DEEWR survey conducted called the Australian covert bullying prevalence study—ACBPS—but no government schools were represented in the data published. It was a fairly recent survey. Do you have no knowledge of that at all?

**Ms Melsom**: I have had the portfolio since 2004 and I have no knowledge of that particular survey and no approach from the commonwealth government to be involved in the survey.

**MR DOSZPOT**: It just appears that every other jurisdiction was involved in the survey, but the ACT was not included.

**Ms Melsom**: I do not know anything about it. We do often get left off their lists, I can tell you. I am not sure why, but sometimes we do.

**MR DOSZPOT**: There were three non-government schools included but there are no government schools. Was there any offer made to—

**Ms Melsom**: That would seem very odd, given that we were doing a considerable amount of work at the time in restorative practice initiatives, so it was very much a focus for our government schools. We were investing considerable resources and have had a great deal of success out of that initiative as well.

**MR DOSZPOT**: That is the reason why I am asking the question because there is a lot of work going into this. I would have thought it would have been valuable information for you to have.

**Ms Melsom**: I am not aware of it, sorry.

**MR HANSON**: Minister, a previous submission today said that we have the highest achievement gap in the country other than the Northern Territory and I asked the question: why? The response was that we are perhaps not putting enough focus on the bottom end as opposed to the top. It strikes me—and I do not know the answer—that we do achieve very well in terms of our outcomes; our achievement is at the top end in terms of the number of people who go on to tertiary study and the high levels of participation in college. Does that skew the results? I am not trying to give you a dorothy dixer; it might sound a bit like one. We do seem to do—

**Mr Barr**: We certainly would not be expecting dorothy dixers from you, Mr Hanson. But if you want to dish them up—

**MR HANSON**: You know I like to be fair; not just opposition for opposition's sake, Mr Barr.

**Mr Barr**: Let me note the time that this occurred.

**MR HANSON**: We do seem to achieve very well in some of those college settings and the number of people going on to tertiary study. Does that then skew it and make it look worse than it is perhaps? As you said earlier, statistics can—

**Mr Barr**: I would not necessarily have said so, but from what Tracy was indicating earlier perhaps more recent data might suggest otherwise from what was presented to you by other presenters earlier today. That would not be the first time that that has occurred. Tracy might like to expand a little on the specific statistical analysis.

**Ms Stewart**: Yes. There are a number of different measures you can choose to show an achievement gap. I have chosen one that I think is a good measure, which shows the gap between the low performing students and high performing students. Another way to measure an achievement gap might be to look at students who do not meet the national minimum standards, and that may have been a measure that was used. In some respects we perform slightly less well than other jurisdictions, but because we have got a large number of students who are exempted from the national testing and those students are counted as students who do not meet the national minimum standards.

I think that was the information that the committee chair was referring to earlier about students from a non-English-speaking background who get included in those measures and about some national initiatives that are underway perhaps to show that data in a different light. So when you talk about our performance being less well than other jurisdictions in that respect it is because we have more students who are getting assistance, who are exempted from the national tests and are below the national minimum standard. So that could be where we do not show up quite as well as other jurisdictions.

**THE CHAIR**: On that, one of the attachments that were included is the ACER report that was prepared for the department in February 2008. I guess this is on the socioeconomic issue. Appreciating all that you have just said, it does actually say that socioeconomic levels increase the gap between the performance of students in the ACT, and Australia in general. So socioeconomic status is still an issue, noting obviously that the ACT is participating in the SES school communities special partnership. So it obviously is recognised as an issue here in the ACT. Is that something that has been noted by being involved in this partnership?

**Mr Barr**: Yes, obviously, but I think the point needs to be made that in the context of national socioeconomic disadvantage the reason there are only four ACT schools is that in the national context the ACT sits quite distinctly above in almost every category.

**THE CHAIR**: But, as ACER, PISA and others have recognised, as the socioeconomic disadvantage increases, that gap does increase.

**Mr Barr**: Sure, but then the point is that the students that sit in a lower socioeconomic strand in the ACT perform better than the equivalent students elsewhere in the country—

**THE CHAIR**: Yes, I appreciate that; that is recognised. But the results also show that that level is very pronounced here in the ACT.

**Mr Barr**: Sure, there is still a gap. That is a clear indication across the world, not just in Australia.

**THE CHAIR**: But it is particularly recognised as being pronounced in the ACT in those results.

**Mr Barr**: But the point is that all students in the ACT at each level of socioeconomic status are performing higher than elsewhere, so it shows that that system must be doing something right. We cannot equalise outcomes. We are not living in a socialist utopia where everyone will get exactly the same outcome.

**MR HANSON**: As much as you'd love to, Andrew.

**Mr Barr**: I heard some commentary earlier about how apparently there is not enough talk about class, so I will be very interested in the committee's views on that.

**THE CHAIR**: I was just going to ask about the partnership, the national plan. We asked the AEU about this and they said it was probably a little bit too soon to show what impacts there have already been. Has there been anything shown yet? Is there a time frame when you will be reviewing what is happening with that program?

**Ms Wilks**: The national partnership has not actually been signed yet. We are in the preliminary stage and we hope that it will be signed on 6 November by the Deputy Prime Minister. It is far too early for us to have any idea of the impact that it will have.

**THE CHAIR**: What is the time frame for that?

**Ms Wilks**: It will go through for four years with those four schools, so there will certainly be a gathering of a lot of data and things. There are six reform areas around everything from school leadership through to community engagement and the recognition of the importance of the community in these low SES schools. But, having said that, and just picking up from what the minister said, the four low SES schools also have a number of students who certainly are not from low SES backgrounds and that is where the ACT is very different from any other state or territory.

**THE CHAIR**: Yes, I appreciate that they are dispersed across the population.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Minister, generally it seems that the number of year 12 students in the ACT that are attaining a tertiary entrance score is on the increase. Is this due to any one initiative?

**Mr Barr**: One initiative? I would not have said that you could single out one initiative. I would point to a significant piece of work that was conducted through 2005-06 around the review of secondary colleges that led to some particular reforms following the government response there.

In the context of university entry, some initiatives have flowed from that college review and also some other new partnerships that have been struck with other educational institutions; the ANU secondary college, for example, has been a fine initiative in providing an accelerated pathway for students to get credit towards their university degree by undertaking study in year 11 and 12 in association with that institution. So, if you like, at the very top end of student achievement that has been a worth while initiative. Similar partnerships are underway or being developed at the University of Canberra.

I would identify the most pressing need looking forward as being in the vocational education and training field, to form a similar partnership with the CIT in relation to our highest performing vocational education and training students. We have very good and workable models with the universities. One of the recommendations of the college review was a need to strengthen vocational education and training provision in our colleges.

There are significant challenges that we face with the provision of high quality VET courses, so greater involvement with the CIT and with other VET providers is critical. So I would argue that that is the area of greatest focus for our education system and an area where we need to have a considerable amount of work undertaken and thought put into developing stronger VET programs. That was very clear from the college review and a series of recommendations have been made. One of the most important ones, I think, is that of strengthening that partnership with the CIT. I am a little conscious of time and we have not heard from the folk at CIT. I am in the committee's hands in relation to this, but this might be an appropriate time to bring them forward to discuss this.

**THE CHAIR**: We have six minutes.

**Mr Barr**: Given that we did start a little late, Madam Chair, I seek the committee's indulgence to go for five more minutes.

**THE CHAIR**: If you are happy to stay, that is fine.

**Mr Barr**: Certainly, for five more minutes.

**THE CHAIR**: We do have another group coming, but five minutes would be fine.

**Mr Barr**: Apologies to the Youth Advisory Council. I hope you do not mind waiting five extra minutes. Thank you.

**O'HARA, MS KAYE**, Deputy Chief Executive—Academic, Canberra Institute of Technology
**WENNER, MS JACKIE**, Centre Director, CIT Vocational College, Canberra Institute of Technology

**THE CHAIR**: I welcome Ms O'Hara and Ms Wenner from the CIT.

**Mr Barr**: There will be a quick presentation on the CIT Vocational College from Jackie Wenner but Kaye will start first with an overview of the institute and its collaboration with schools.

**Ms O'Hara**: I had a range of things to say but I will be much briefer. I think the partnership with the schools is probably the most important but, starting off, CIT is an important option for a whole range of people from the broad age spectrum who have some educational challenge. I guess our core business centres around providing a whole range of support structures, teaching methodology environments that really build confidence, build capability and provide pathways, through programs that include vocational education but also preparatory general education. It is quite important that we are able to provide a line of sight from an introductory program right through to a degree with all the pathways that we have got. Linked to that then is the line of sight that we have through a range of strong collaborative arrangements with schools and colleges.

Our intent there is very much to enhance the provision of vocational education and training because we see it as a really engaging form of applied learning that meets the needs of a whole range of students for whom highly academic pathways do not fit; their aspirations do not fit; their capabilities do not fit; their ways of learning do not fit. So vocational education has a whole wealth of rich experiences to offer to a great number of students. In what we do at CIT and how we act with schools we are trying to enhance that.

We partner with schools around school-based apprenticeships. In 2008 CIT provided 109 school-based apprenticeships for school students. We probably have about 1,500 students at CIT, experiencing CIT, who are 17 or under, and that is quite a surprising statistic when you look at it. Those are people who are still at school and people who are not at school and they include people who are doing traineeships or apprenticeships. So it is a lot of young people who are working with us.

With our partnership at schools, some of those programs occur at CIT and occur for high school students and college students, sometimes funded through the department, sometimes by individuals, sometimes by CIT. There is a whole range of arrangements and collaborations. There have been some really innovative ones that the minister has supported and launched with industry.

There has been a certificate I in construction that has been done with about—I am not good with numbers—16 young people, either disengaged from school or at risk thereof, who have worked with the Australian Federal Police out at their Majura site, working on construction studies, literacy and numeracy, job-seeking skills and personal development, but on the site, the whole teaching program, full time, 10 weeks. At least six of those have gone on to apprenticeships in construction, others

have gone back to college and others are completing their year 12 at CIT. So there is a whole range of pathways and outcomes. That was just one example. I will not give the others because it will be quite pertinent to get Jackie, who is the Director of CIT Vocational College, to talk about its place in the sun.

**Ms Wenner**: The CIT Vocational College is coming up to the end of its second year. It offers a suite of programs and services for people in the ACT community to begin or continue their learning journey. Many of those programs can be seen as bridging programs or transition programs for people who have certain gaps, but not all of them. The programs that we offer include learning options which provide literacy, numeracy, basic computing skills and work preparation across a range of levels. It is a very flexible program which we adapt and package into different courses, such as learning options for women and returning to work. We have computing for seniors and preparation for study at CIT. They will sit under learning options. They are little packages that meet particular needs for students.

You have already heard a little about access 10. It is a program that was developed by CIT and is now used across a number of agencies. It is an alternative year 10 program. It is very flexible and self-paced. The big secret of its success is that students can keep building on it. Those people who are facing a lot of challenges might be dropping in and out of their education and moving around between some of these different agencies. They can keep building and working towards an access 10 certificate rather than having to start again every time they start in a new place. That is a very valuable program that we offer.

We have a year 12 program which caters mainly for older and mature students—students who are beyond the age that they would have done year 12 in college. They are still quite young; they are just beyond that age. They are able to do an abridged program. We have just enhanced the program in terms of its vocational content and are promoting a vocational year 12 which provides greater opportunities for students to combine vocational study in a certificate II or a certificate III in one of CIT's other centres with their year 12. We have developed some core year 12 units in English, maths and business that suit those students who have got those more vocational pathways. So the content of their core year 12 work will also support that learning pathway. We are planning to implement that next year.

We also have students doing a tertiary year 12. They come to CIT for a range of reasons, both for access 10 and year 12. We have students who have been bullied at school. We have students who have been ill, who have perhaps missed a lot of school, and find it hard to reconnect. We have students who have been home schooled and have found it difficult to fit into the school environment. We have students who have come from interstate midyear and are finding it hard to fit into the school system. They find that our programs are an option for them. They move on to different outcomes as well. Some will return to the school system. We have got students in our access 10 program who are planning to go back to a college next year. Others might go on to our own year 12 program or on to further study at CIT. It varies a lot.

We have a lot of ESL programs in the CIT Vocational College. The adult migrant English program, which is a nationally funded program for new arrivals, provides a whole suite of services for those newly arrived migrants. There is home-tutored

distance learning. It has a settlement function as well as a language training function. The language, literacy and numeracy program is another nationally funded program which we deliver which caters for people who are registered as jobseekers with Centrelink and have been identified as needing assistance with language, literacy or numeracy in order to access employment.

We have some ACT government funded ESL classes and an international English program as well. The range of services that we provide for ESL is quite broad. Recently we formed a group of our younger students, new arrivals. We are running a special program for them with activities that will engage them a little bit more. We also work quite closely with the Secondary Introductory English Centre at Dickson College. We are working with Dickson College on developing a unit for the year 11 and 12 program that they are conducting for refugee and humanitarian students, looking at a component that those students might be able to do at CIT as part of that program.

This year we have established what we have called our student advice team, which is a team of people qualified in youth work, careers advice and social work—that range of qualifications—and it provides some customised support to our students across all our programs on the more non-academic range of issues. With the extra resources we have got from that team we are building the work experience opportunities that are available. We are providing some more case-managed support, particularly for the young students who have a lot of issues—someone who can help guide them and link them to the various services that are available. The pathway planning team is working quite closely with the teachers to help make all those connections.

**THE CHAIR**: I am sorry, but we are going to have to finish. It does not leave us time for questions, but if members have any questions we can put them through you, minister.

**Mr Barr**: Sure. I beg the indulgence of the committee just to give you a sense of how many people are involved. There are 215 enrolments in access 10, 548 in the year 12 program, 2,175 in all of the ESL programs, 356 in the learning options and across all of the programs at the Vocational College there are 5,713. It is the biggest single education institution dealing with these issues in the territory and it is two years old. I think it is a tremendous initiative and it is one that we are very proud of.

**Ms Wenner**: If I could say one more thing too. The word "tapestry" was mentioned earlier. What I had hoped to do was to talk a little bit about the individual students and the kinds of pathways that they have because that, even more than the numbers, reflects what we are trying to achieve. It is that customised finding of solutions for small groups of people that is, I think, the great strength of the CIT Vocational College.

**THE CHAIR**: It would be good if we could get that in writing.

**Ms Wenner**: I did bring some packages that show the range of programs that we offer that I can leave with you. Those are some of our brochures.

**THE CHAIR**: I am sorry for the limited time, but a written tapestry would be nice.

Thank you, minister, for appearing today. Obviously a copy of the transcript will be sent out to everybody.

**Mr Barr**: I thank the committee.

**Meeting adjourned from 4.08 to 4.22 pm.**

**TRAN, MS SHARON**, Member, ACT Youth Advisory Council
**PIERCE, MS MIMI**, Member, ACT Youth Advisory Council
**HARRIS, MR BEN**, Member, ACT Youth Advisory Council

**THE CHAIR**: I would like to welcome you to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs' inquiry into the educational achievement gap. I draw your attention to the privilege statement that is on the table in front of you. Please make sure you have seen that and are aware of its contents. Before we go to questions, I invite you to make an opening statement if you would like to.

**Miss Pierce**: Just in case you do not know, the ACT Youth Advisory Council consists of about 15 young people aged between 12 and 25. We provide advice to the Minister for Children and Young People and to the broader ACT government. We also consult with young people in the ACT.

In response to your invitation for a submission, we have had a look at the terms of reference for the inquiry. It outlined five main specific reference areas. We found two of these to be within our scope of research and consultation. These included the educational engagement and outcomes for students of all interests and abilities, with particular reference to any implications of cultural background, including Indigenous and ESL students. The other one was the kinds of programs and initiatives designed to address educational achievement gaps, including resources allocated and relevant experiences in other jurisdictions.

In our response we aim to represent the views of young people in the ACT on these two areas. We drew information from our wide external network, which includes schools, youth organisations and members of the general public, as well as from within our internal council. The council itself includes a balance of age, gender, life experience and representation of young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. That is who we are representing.

**Mr Harris**: We went about gathering information in two ways. We did an online survey to gather young people's thoughts. The other way we did it was to gather information from previous consultations that the youth council has done over a few years. Sharon, do you want to talk about the survey?

**Miss Tran**: Sure. As Ben has just said, our submission has been divided into two sections, the first one being our consultation with young people via an online survey and the second one being based on previous consultation. I will just briefly explain a little about the survey that we conducted. Has the committee had the chance to look through our submission?

**THE CHAIR**: Yes.

**Miss Tran**: If you refer to page 4, section 1 of the submission, you will see the consultation survey results and some recommendations that the Youth Advisory Council has come up with based on the results of these surveys. The online survey we created was hosted by Surveymonkey.com—an online survey host. It was made available to young people in the ACT from 14 September until 14 October, a one-month period. Unfortunately, we had a few difficulties getting the link out to our

Youth InterACT consultation register and to other networks as well. It was during a school holiday period so we did not receive many responses. During that one-month period we unfortunately received only 23 responses. As a final effort to gauge as many responses as possible, we extended the survey period until 25 October. In that period of time we have obtained an additional 29 responses, giving us a total of 52.

The council is not going to pride itself on professional statistical analyses of survey results, but we do have some basic statistics included in section 1.2 in the survey results. Apart from just taking figures from the survey, we have also included some dot points of areas that we found to be recurring things inside the survey, which you will find on pages 4 and 5 of the submission.

Finally, in section 1.3 on page 6 of the submission you will find four recommendations that YAC has developed based on these results and based on our analysis of these results. We have also taken some direct quotes from the results of the survey to give the committee a more specific view on the results that we received. I will now pass on to Mr Harris to talk about what we have included in the submission from our previous consultations with young people.

**Mr Harris**: We have information from past consultations that the youth council has done. We begin with the school leaving age consultation that we did last year. We went out to schools and groups of young people from specific areas, including Galilee and the CIT access 10 group, which we heard from earlier. We found that there was a gap between the mainstream and other social and economic groups.

**Miss Tran**: Ben, did you want to list the consultation groups that we had?

**Mr Harris**: Yes. We had access 10 from CIT and Galilee. We had the YEP program. There were a few others, but those were the main ones.

**Miss Tran**: Those consultation processes involved members of the Youth Advisory Council actually going out, as Ben mentioned, to Galilee and Gugan Gulwan and engaging personally and directly with those students. You will see in section 2 of the submission that we have listed some outcomes from those. As well as the school leaving age, we also found these outcomes relevant to the educational achievement gap in the ACT, which is why we put them in the submission.

In addition to the consultation groups that Ben mentioned, we also held a community forum at Narrabundah College on increasing the school leaving age. A few young members of the community attended. We also held a survey on the school leaving age. You will find the results in the submission. Since the committee has already had a look at the submission we did not think we would go through and explain any results or anything in detail, but does the committee have any questions?

**THE CHAIR**: Yes, we might go to questions. Thank you for that. My first question is in relation to the recommendations in 1.3 out of the survey. The one that I thought was particularly interesting was the one about current support services for disadvantaged students and having consultation on what improvements could be made. In looking at these disadvantaged groups, is that something which has come out of the other consultations, even though it was on the leaving age? Those groups which you

talked to were often the disadvantaged groups, which you would probably consider. Would they be the sorts of the groups you would be consulting with? One other group we have heard a lot about during this process are refugees. Young carers are another group identified by the Youth Coalition. Do you think they are the sorts of groups that should be involved in the consultation process?

**Miss Tran**: I think most definitely, although this recommendation was based on the results of the survey and not on the outcomes we got from the previous consultations. Those would be some of the groups that we believe would definitely benefit from further consultation on this issue.

**THE CHAIR**: Do you think young carers are another group? It was interesting that the Youth Coalition mentioned them as being a particularly disadvantaged group, often because they do not want to identify themselves. I guess it is interesting that they did not come up as a group that the education department mentioned. It was the Youth Coalition that mentioned them because they have that interaction with them. Do you think they should be a group that is included?

**Mr Harris**: Yes, the youth council have had some minor consultation with them. It is something that is not that new; they do not feel that they are being supported, and they would like to be. It is something that we feel needs to be taken into consideration.

**MS BURCH**: Another recommendation goes to educational institutions and relates to a broader range of courses being on offer. Looking at the community groups that you spoke with, they seem to be alternative education settings. So is it a mix of both? Is it around increasing alternative settings to school or is it the subject choices?

**Miss Tran**: That particular recommendation was in regard to catering education for a larger range of interests and needs of students in the ACT rather than those that are disadvantaged. That particular recommendation would be more towards catering for a broader range of interests for students and a broader range of needs as well, and not necessarily just in the area of disadvantaged students but for other students as well.

**THE CHAIR**: It might be for groups that have English as a second language? Would they be one of the groups where the services could be broader?

**Miss Tran**: Definitely, with those specific disadvantaged student groups, such as those with English as a second language, but the recommendation there was more about the survey results. From the survey results, the Youth Advisory Council noticed that a lot of the respondents stated that there were not enough specialist courses to cater for their specific interests. Some examples that the respondents gave included media courses, specific IT intensive courses and things like that. Another respondent stated that the courses offered by ACT educational institutions seemed to cater more for academic subjects and not subjects for artistic students. I suppose that recommendation goes more towards providing a larger range of subjects to suit the interests and needs of students.

**THE CHAIR**: I guess it recognises it is not just academic but that there are artistic interests that people pursue.

**Miss Tran**: Yes, definitely.

**MS BURCH**: Was there a sense through the surveys or from community groups, in your group discussions, around whether there is a gender difference—whether it is more fellas or girls wanting more diversity or alternative settings? Is there a sense from the council as to whether that is something to think about, or just in your general discussions when you are out and about and talking with both?

**Miss Pierce**: In the survey we did not actually ask what their gender was, so we could not really assess that in the survey, but in the consultation—

**Mr Harris**: I do not remember that being brought up. I do not think that was a theme that people were really concerned about.

**MR HANSON**: We have heard from other submissions that a lot of the initiatives and the different programs that can be introduced are dependent on the school principal and the school culture. When you did your survey and you were speaking to students, did you find that was the case—that some schools seem to have a particular culture and a way of doing business that is better than others? If that is the case, what particular programs are working in some areas and could be rolled out further in other schools?

**Miss Tran**: I will pass that to Ben. Ben, through those previous consultations, did you actually notice—

**Mr Harris**: Not really. I think they all felt the same, and they all had the same sort of feeling—that they reacted to what was happening around them. That is from what I remember.

**MR HANSON**: In terms of those that responded quite favourably, because I guess you get a variety of results, from those who are very marginalised to those who think it is okay—

**Mr Harris**: Yes.

**MR HANSON**: for the people who think they are going okay, I assume it is because of specific programs or cultures in their school environment. I am just trying to pick up on the difference there. So if a bunch of respondents said, "It's going well," is there a particular trend there? Is there something happening in a particular school that we could roll out somewhere else?

**Mr Harris**: One of the things we relied on was our forum. We did the consultations and then we did the community forum. In the community forum, a lot of young people felt kind of comfortable in their position. But in the consultation, we looked at specific groups and they kind of felt the opposite.

**THE CHAIR**: With respect to the community forums on the school leaving age, it is obviously relevant to the achievement gap. We have heard from the department of education today, and recently the government has talked about the "earn and learn" policy in regard to increasing the school leaving age and ensuring that students either

go on to education or to a trade or some other qualification. How do you think that sort of change to education policy will impact on those students who might not be doing well at school, are not engaging or even are uncertain about where they want to go? Do you think that will have a big impact? Do you think it will benefit students or will it possibly have some negative consequences?

**Miss Tran**: Do you mean in terms of increasing the school leaving age?

**THE CHAIR**: In terms of increasing the school leaving age, it is a policy which the government is proposing to put forward about "earn or learn", about actually keeping students in school—they go on to education or they go on to an alternative, whether it is a trade or some other qualification. What impact do you think that sort of education policy will have?

**Mr Harris**: I would like to think that it might have a positive impact. It might give even more opportunities for young people to stay at school for longer.

**THE CHAIR**: In terms of the achievement gap, do you think it will have a positive impact on that or do you think it will possibly enhance or exacerbate those inequalities which might already be there?

**Miss Tran**: The Youth Advisory Council has not done any proper consultation with young people regarding whether or not they think the new policy will positively benefit young people. But from my perspective, and just from the consultation we have done, I do believe it will have some positive outcomes.

**MS BURCH**: I wanted to ask about "earn and learn", because it is around the government then putting in support structures or opportunities so that, if you do not stay at school until you are at least 17, you have an earning opportunity, whether it be an apprenticeship or an alternative type of framework. Again, because some of your recommendations are around that hard dollar support, emotional support and other bits and pieces, is there a sense that the young folk think that is a pretty good idea?

**Miss Tran**: Yes. In section 1.3 on page 6, there is a quote in the middle of the page from one of our respondents that we thought was particularly relevant. The respondent mentioned they did not think young people were sometimes responsible enough to make these future life decisions, so that earning-learning policy most definitely would have a positive impact.

**MR HANSON**: You were asked about whether you saw any difference between the genders and you said you had not really surveyed that. Did you pick up any particular group that is struggling, whether it be people with English as a second language, migrant groups or Indigenous? Did you find a trend anywhere else amongst particular groups?

**Miss Tran**: With the 52 respondents that we had, we probably did not have enough to actually pick up such a trend. You will see that we have noted some points regarding what some respondents have said. You might find in there the sorts of things they have identified. For instance, we have mentioned English as a second language, students with a disability and students with a lower socioeconomic status, from what

the respondents have said.

**MS BURCH**: Do you pick up a sense, just through your general council work, of whether there are groups that are finding it tougher than others to achieve, in that there are barriers to their achieving?

**Mr Harris**: Yes, we do.

**Miss Pierce**: Often, some of the things that are put in place to help them achieve only further isolate them and might have a negative effect.

**MR HANSON**: Can you give an example of that?

**Miss Pierce**: Just with the English as a second language at a school. Often, because they are forced to stay with people who are speaking English as a second language, they are not immersing themselves with people in the wider school community and learning about our culture and things like that.

**MR HANSON**: So they become increasingly isolated?

**Miss Pierce**: Yes.

**THE CHAIR**: I know this is a difficult question. A lot of people have said we need targeted programs because people might have English difficulties. It is important for them to get that targeted attention but I take your point that it does somewhat isolate them from the general school population. How do you think that situation can be dealt with?

**Miss Tran**: I would perhaps recommend that it is important to have these programs that target specific disadvantaged students, such as those with English as a second language or disabled students, but as well as these programs, it is also important for them to mix with the rest of the school. Perhaps have those classes where there is a specific focus on these students, where they are being helped and their individual needs are being catered for, but then also have classes for those students where they are interacting with other members of the school.

**MS BURCH**: What is the age group for the council and the groups that you spoke with? What is your target audience?

**Miss Pierce**: About 12 to 25 is our age range.

**MS BURCH**: So in school and out of school?

**Miss Pierce**: Just out of school, yes.

**MR HANSON**: What do you guys do? Are you at school or university?

**Miss Pierce**: I am in year 12 at girls grammar.

**Miss Tran**: I am in year 12 at Narrabundah College.

**Mr Harris**: I am 22—

**THE CHAIR**: Thank you very much for giving us your time today in coming to speak to the committee. A transcript of today's hearing will be sent out to you so that you can check it for accuracy. And thank you for doing the survey—it was much appreciated—for the submission.

**DORRIAN, MRS MARY**, Head of Religious Education and Curriculum Services, Catholic Education Office
**NAJDECKI, MS MOIRA**, Director, Catholic Education Office
**IRVINE, MR JEREMY**, Executive Director, Association of Independent Schools of the ACT

**THE CHAIR**: I welcome Ms Najdecki, Mrs Dorrian and Mr Irvine to the education committee's inquiry into the achievement gap today. I draw your attention to the privilege statement on the desk in front of you. Please make sure that you are aware of that. Before we go on to questions, I invite you to make an opening statement if you would like to.

**Ms Najdecki**: I might kick off. We did not put in a submission but I would just like to put in context where I come from and where the Catholic schools in the ACT are. I am the director of Catholic education here in Canberra. In the ACT we have a total enrolment of just over 13,000 students. We have 27 schools, of which 23 are primary schools and we have just over 8,000 students in those primary schools. We have four system Catholic schools and nearly 5,000 students in those four system Catholic schools.

In our Catholic system schools we accept students from all faiths or from no faith. We just ask that they subscribe to the ethos of the Catholic school. So 28 per cent of our students would be from other than Catholic backgrounds. We enrol obviously Indigenous students, students who have English as a second language and students with disabilities—a variety of disabilities. The average SES of Catholic schools in all Catholic schools, including probably the congregational schools over which I do not have jurisdiction—

**Mr Irvine**: Nor do I.

**Ms Najdecki**: The SES is about 116. Our schools range from an SES of about 111 to about 128. That very much reflects the homogeneity of the ACT and is probably pretty close to the average SES for government schools as well. In fact, we would say that in that average, in the range, our schools are very closely matched in terms of public schools as well; they are very closely matched in terms of SES.

The average class size in our primary schools is 24.3. I cannot tell you in secondary schools; they are much more complicated than the primary schools. In terms of teacher salaries et cetera, they are aligned with the ACT department. So our salaries are the same; conditions might vary a little bit in terms of hours of face-to-face teaching and some of those sorts of things.

I read with interest the ACT government submission and we concur with much of what is in there, particularly that teachers make the difference and that our job in schools is really to meet the needs of all students in the school. Mary is going to talk a little bit about the educational side of those terms of reference but I just make the point that our schools are registered; we undergo registration externally and internally every five years.

We meet the ACT requirements in terms of education and I would also make the

comment that we work closely, particularly on the big issues, with the independent schools and with the department. I would give examples such as developing every chance to learn, the ACT curriculum framework. There was intensive work done very collaboratively by all of us, and on the national partnerships as well, which consumed us over the past few months. We have worked very closely on literacy and numeracy and teacher quality. None of our schools are in the low SES national partnership here in the ACT.

Some of the big issues for us might be things such as access to preschools. We are only just developing preschools in terms of ACT Catholic schools. We have one at the moment, we will have a second one next year and we will have three more after that. It is going to be an issue for us in terms of parents having access to preschools, particularly the universal access, once that comes in, for all four-year-olds.

Another issue that I guess will come up in other inquiries is access to services and access to other agencies for students with disabilities. Another issue for us in terms of the ACT department might be their class sizes: 20 is plenty; the fact that in high schools they are going to have average class sizes of 19. That will also be an issue in some ways for us, to be able to meet community expectations of class sizes. We would argue that teacher quality is what is really important and that our Catholic schools are doing very well. As you will have seen in the report here, they are certainly providing very well for students despite the fact that we would have higher class sizes than in other areas.

That is a little bit of the context. Mary might talk a bit about educational achievements et cetera.

**Mrs Dorrian**: With educational achievement at the moment, the national agenda is dominating all of our time in various ways. We regard that as a very positive sign because education often is a hard agenda for people to be talking about it in the media and the general community, apart from some negative things from time to time. So the national plans are very positive in terms of trying to get everyone to work together for the common good of all of our students in Australia.

In terms of us as a Catholic sector, working across the government sector and with other independent schools, we regard as the highest priority how we improve the results of all students. The main data that is used now is the NAPLAN data, which you have probably heard about from other submissions. That data is very important data for the system and for schools. It provides a first step to be able to say, "We're seeing in this data some trends and we need to drill down further into that data to have a look at what is happening in the school so that we are getting a complete picture." At the moment we are all a bit concerned about people taking some of that data and using it for purposes that it was not intended for. NAPLAN was designed as a first step in terms of identifying areas that are working well in schools and areas to strengthen that.

NAPLAN is certainly on our agenda and across all the agendas. In line with that, the biggest educational improvement strategy is the national partnerships. At the moment we have been very involved with the teacher quality national partnership and the literacy and numeracy national partnership. As Moira said, we do not have any

schools that qualify for low SES.

The other two partnerships that are just starting to emerge are the early childhood and the youth attainment and transitions partnership. All these partnerships have different ways of funding and the accountability is with those funding measures. We have worked very closely with our government counterparts and our independent school members. The areas on which we have the most agreement in terms of literacy and numeracy strategies, that we are looking at with the literacy and numeracy partnerships, are only for primary schools; they are not at this stage for secondary schools.

The secondary schools are receiving funding through the digital education revolution but there is no professional learning associated with that that comes back to the system. For the primary schools, we are looking at the strategies of first steps reading, which is a well-recognised program that came from Western Australia, and in our implementation strategy we have been able to implement it in all schools, in Catholic schools and government schools—we have trained facilitators—and in some of the independent schools. In terms of numeracy, the strategy that we are looking at is count me in too, which is another very well-researched strategy.

We were quite fortunate with our national partnerships and our implementation plans that we were able to get something for all of our schools. As you know, our archdiocese covers New South Wales as well as the ACT and in New South Wales it is a very different model of funding. This is an advantage for us, being in a small jurisdiction and working well with our government and independent partners, because we have been able to make the partnerships work for all of our schools as well as have some strategies for our schools that we consider of the highest need. That is just a brief summary. The national agenda is the big one at the moment.

**Mr Irvine**: Thank you for having us here today. The Association of Independent Schools represents 12,500 students in the ACT, 4,200 of whom go to independent primary schools, and by that we mean kindergarten to year 6, not preschool. There is a slight differentiation, depending on the sector, in how you count numbers, but 5,900 students go to independent high schools, that is years 7 to 10, and nearly 2,500 go to an independent school where there are years 11 and 12.

We also represent some Catholic schools and it depends on which day of the week they fall under our banner. St Edmund's, Daramalan and Marist colleges are what we call congregational or independent Catholic, although I note to my colleagues to my right that sometimes they work with the Catholic Education Office very well as well. We have four Anglican schools, an Islamic school, a Seventh Day Adventist school, four Christian parent-controlled schools, a Steiner school, a Montessori school, Blue Gum in Hackett, which I am sure you have heard about before and which is a secular school, and Galilee, which I note has visited and spoken to you in the past.

Our SES average—noting that Galilee is a special school for a funding purpose, not a special school in the way that the ACT government would count a special school; I am just trying to be up-front about that—is 117. That includes the two grammars in the mid-100s, 125 and 126 for the boys and girls grammar, down to about 111, so a similar demographic split to the Catholic Education Office schools.

Without going over what Moira and Mary have said, I would like to echo what they have said, particularly about the national partnerships. We are working extremely closely with colleagues in the Catholic Education Office and DET on particularly the teacher quality national partnership and on literacy and numeracy. It is fair to say that it helps being in a small jurisdiction where you can bring people together. It also helps that the sectors not only get on well at a senior level but the teachers are used to working with each other doing professional development or they might teach at a Catholic school one year and at a government school the next.

Mary has underlined very well the importance of those national partnerships. They are really the nitty-gritty of the structural changes that will be made over the coming years to things like teacher quality and to the very heavy focus on literacy and numeracy, which I think we all agree is important. I am not sure what the minister or Dr Watterston were talking to you about before but there is a lot of work about to begin on the youth attainment and transitions national partnership.

**MR HANSON**: Doesn't it have "revolution" at the end?

**Mr Irvine**: No, Mr Hanson, it doesn't. As a former military officer, that—

**MR HANSON**: I thought it was mandatory that they had to have a revolution at the end.

**Mr Irvine**: In terms of those, it is also important to note that the way that the three sectors have been working over the last couple of years has been collaborative. We have seen every chance to learn be developed by the ACT curriculum task force. Even school sport is run by a body that is inclusive of all three sectors. That does not happen in many of the other state and territories. We are very lucky to be in a city state, if you will, that allows the three sectors—particularly when the non-government sectors between us have up to 44 per cent of the students, which is the highest in any state or territory in the country—to work closely. Those national partnerships that Mary and Moira have spoken to you previously about will bring those three sectors strategically closer together at a policy level but also sharing information across them and within them. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

**THE CHAIR**: Thank you. One of the things we have talked about with the department of education—and people have given evidence—is SES levels. The submission from the government says that it is a significant issue, and that is in a report which they commissioned. Looking at PISA results, while we have attainment across the different levels in the ACT, as the SES level goes up, the SES gap increases—as does the achievement gap. Is that something you see within your schools—that socioeconomic status is an issue? How is that something you have addressed across the schools?

**Ms Najdecki**: I am always a bit reluctant about that one. On a macro scale, I probably would agree. In terms of just the ACT, it is sometimes used as a bit of a defence that our students cannot achieve because of the families or the areas they come from et cetera. When we look across our schools we find that some of our schools with the lowest SES in fact have excellent results. Sometimes we see vice versa as well.

**THE CHAIR**: Do you think that it is about maybe recognising that that is an issue and about the way you then address it?

**Ms Najdecki**: It could be recognising that it is an issue. It could also be recognising that every child can learn and it is about the way in which an individual school approaches teaching and learning within their school. As I said, maybe you can look at it across Australia. I am not so sure when you have a very narrow band that SES is a great difference.

**THE CHAIR**: I appreciate the ACT is different from other jurisdictions in that we do not have pockets of disadvantage because it is more or less spread throughout the general population.

**Ms Najdecki**: That is correct, yes.

**THE CHAIR**: That is obviously a factor. We may not have a situation where particular schools are going to have issues because of that. It is therefore sometimes a little harder to identify and deal with on that basis.

**Mrs Dorrian**: I think that is the benefit with the NAPLAN data. We encourage schools to have very strong school assessment data so that when you start—using, say, the term "driven down"—to notice that there differences, there can be differences for a range of reasons. To put a broad category of low SES as the reason why a student may not be performing as well could be quite limiting in a small sector, whereas we would recognise that there are a range of differences. You could have students who are really quite gifted and maybe they are underachieving. You could have students who have various learning difficulties, or there could be wellbeing issues. There are a whole range of reasons.

It is hard to quantify, but I think through the work that is happening now in schools, schools are becoming better in using data to inform practice. That is probably one of the biggest changes that we are seeing. How do we skill our principals, school leaders and teachers in being able to use the whole range of data to inform what is happening in the classroom and to have evidence around what works and what is not working so well?

**MR HANSON**: We have had previous evidence presented to us about the gender gap. It seems that the pendulum has shifted and boys are getting, in some regards, worse outcomes than girls—not exclusively, but it seems to be a trend. Some of the independent schools, and I am not sure where it fits with the Catholic schools—whether they are congregational or systemic—have single-gender schools. Is there any evidence or anecdotal evidence that having boys in boys schools helps reduce that gender gap?

**Mrs Dorrian**: You are the only ones with boys in boys schools.

**MR HANSON**: It might be a little bit anecdotal, but obviously it is done for a reason, I imagine.

**Mr Irvine**: The answer is yes and no. If you look at the results for year 12, for example, you will see Girls Grammar is doing very well, then you will see that Marist did very well last year and Radford topped the ACT. So you have three examples of a co-ed school in Radford, a girls school in Girls Grammar and Marist College, which is an all boys school. The answer to your question in that regard would be no. I think it is up to individual schools and individual teachers to work with their school communities to determine what works best. I am not sure how it works in Catholic systemic schools.

I do not run the independent schools, but I am sure there are ways in which they would look at their cohorts of students and say, "We might take the boys out and focus them on this." Girls sometimes work better in different situations. It would be up to the schools to determine that. I think all schools, be they Catholic, government or independent, would be very much focused on the student achieving their best potential. I am sure they would be sitting down with them saying, "We think you could get to point C. You're at point A at the moment. What are we going to do to get you through point B for you to maximise your potential?" That has not answered your question, I suspect.

**MR HANSON**: To be honest, I would have been surprised if there was a clear answer to it. It is an interesting trend that we have in terms of outcomes and how many boys are going on to university compared with girls. I know in medicine it is now 60 per cent female rather than male. I think females exceed males in every category other than engineering, so it is an interesting trend. You guys do it a bit differently in the independent schools.

**Mr Irvine**: Because there are 17 different ways of doing it. There are four single-sex schools—Eddies, Marist, Boys Grammar and Girls Grammar. They would look at things very differently from, say, the way Radford would. Daramalan, for a number of years, was a boys only school. It has been co-ed for about 20 years, I think, when it merged. I am sure there are advocates for girls only education out there and I am sure there are advocates for boys only education out there, but at the moment I think the mix is just about right in the ACT.

**Ms Najdecki**: We have got two girls only schools—Merici College in Braddon and St Claire's. We do not have any single-sex boys schools. It would probably be fair to say—I would have to say it off the cuff, just about—that the girls in those schools probably do better—they are doing well; let us put it that way—in terms of their literacy side, but that is sometimes the case with girls anyway. Sometimes, in terms of the number of girls you see going to university et cetera, it is not always to do with educational attainment. Sometimes it is about confidence and what they see they need to do or what they want to do.

I know what you are referring to. In the 1980s I was working in a single-sex girls school and it was certainly the case that the boys were achieving in maths and science and we needed to bring the girls up. That seems to have been righted and it is much more equal. Now the girls have an enormous amount of confidence and an expectation that they can do anything that they want to do and I think that is part of the reason they go into things.

**MR HANSON**: I think that is right, but it just seems that in some sense girls have overtaken boys. We have had these discussions before when trying to find out how we can make education more attractive to boys and more accessible in some regard and whether, in relation to the single-sex male schools in particular, there were any comparisons done that showed that boys as a cohort do better if they are all boys rather than mixed. I do not know what the answer is. I was just wondering.

**Mrs Dorrian**: I think you have to be careful. Years ago when I was doing my master's study I was really interested in the boys and girls issue. With some of the information you have to be careful about looking at simplistic solutions. It sounds like, "Let's just put all the boys here and the girls there." I can remember someone saying, and I thought it was a very true statement, "There is often more difference within the sex than between the sexes." I think we need to be very careful about making broad-term generalisations about what works. We really need to look at the students as much as possible. We need to look at the individual students and see how we can make the learning more personal for those students.

**Mr Irvine**: Marist College, for example, has a program in year 9, which you may have heard of, called "stepping stones". That has been Rick Sidorko's—the headmaster at Marist—focus. Obviously it is a Marist Brothers school and it comes from a deep philosophical perspective of the young man going out into the world and being a holistic person, not just an academic-focused student. They have recognised—and we can provide the data on notice to the committee, if you wish—that in year 9 boys begin, potentially, to disengage through whatever reason. Being a teenager is not much fun to a certain extent. They have worked out a way of looking at the curriculum quite differently, following, obviously, the framework that is put down. They are thinking, "Let's get the boys out of the school and engaged in real life experiences when they are 15 and 16."

Instead of saying, "We're going to learn maths today," they say, "How are you going to learn how to budget when you go to uni or how are you going to learn how to iron a shirt?" It is simple stuff—not that I think ironing a shirt is simple—like life skills that you reengage the student in, but there is a learning framework underneath that. Knowing Rick as I do—he has taught overseas—he would have been coming from the perspective of how do we engage the boy individually, but how do we get a collective sense of the boys actually wanting to be at school? They are doing a lot of community service. That is part of the program. They are working with boys who are older and boys who are younger. That is just one of our schools. It is essentially a pastoral care program which has been worked—

**MR HANSON**: That is not gender-specific.

**Mr Irvine**: No, it is not. Rick would argue, I suspect, that it is a good example of recognising that boys in that instance—

**MR HANSON**: That might be unique to boys because girls might not need that at that age or they are more—

**Mr Irvine**: I think the two year 12 students we saw before were—

**Ms Najdecki**: We sometimes have girl-specific things as well. An observation I would make after 30 years of teaching is that boys come into their own later. So often you have the disengaged year 9 or year 10 students. Having worked in lots of co-educational schools as well, I have seen that they make it up in years 11 and 12. So it is about where they are at certain stages.

**MR DOSZPOT**: In most of the submissions we receive, people have issues that they want to raise. Whilst we are inquiring into the educational achievement gap, you mention that there are three issues you may have, and they are access to preschools, access to services for children with a disability, and possibly the average class sizes. We have received a lot of submissions that relate to specific problems in ESL. Is that an issue from your point of view as well?

**Ms Najdecki**: No, that has not come through as a major issue in terms of our schools. We have a number of students from ESL backgrounds, but we would not have seen that as a major issue. We would have a range of cultures, a range of different backgrounds in the schools, but I could not say that it is a major issue.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Would you like to talk about any of the issues that you have identified?

**Ms Najdecki**: The DET submission talked about preschools and the fact that bringing them all in under the government schools has meant it is easier to make transitions. They talk about it from that point of view, and there being less disturbance and a whole family type advantage in doing that. In terms of access to preschools, we are concerned for the future. As I said, we have got one preschool; we will have another one next year. We would like our parents to have the same choice to be able to ensure that there is easy transition and that there are pathways.

We will have no funding after next year for preschools at all. Obviously, we work in our schools with funding from both the territory government and the commonwealth government. After next year, there will be no funding at all for our preschools. That is why it is a concern that parents would have the same access, particularly at beginning of school. Because the "every chance to learn" framework is P-10, it is actually taking into account that school begins, here in the ACT, at preschool. It really is the beginning of school. That would be my issue—if parents were not able to have that choice as time goes on.

**MR DOSZPOT**: We have received some representations, Mr Irvine, as you may know, from some of the independent schools in the preschool category. My understanding is that independent preschools are not getting any funding at the moment.

**Mr Irvine**: I will preface my answer by saying that we actually represent schools from kindergarten to year 12. Because of the fact that we have two staff in our office, and traditionally—and I defer to people who understand preschool registration much better than I do—it is quite a time-intensive issue, the reason those schools would have written to you was because we do not actually support them through such services.

**MR DOSZPOT**: I understand.

**Mr Irvine**: I think Moira and Mary alluded before to the early childhood education national partnership. As you noted, there were some announcements recently, and we have written to the minister because 10 or maybe up to a dozen of our schools have early childhood centres. If there is a way that we can work with the government to see what the funding situation is, that would be great. It is not an area in which we have a direct policy interest at the moment because the schools pay us a subscription for our services and we provide services from K-12 amongst a staff of two. I wrote to the minister only recently, and that is because of the fact that I had some representations, as I know that you have, from two of our schools.

I think it is an area of ongoing interest. If we could step back and look at the policy issue for a moment, it has been interesting to see what the territory government has done in terms of moving preschools into education. As Moira has noted, "every chance to learn" is P-10. That has some real implications for a whole range of issues for independent schools, because most of our schools are P to whatever. But it has changed the way that we are now beginning to do business, because of the fact that the federal government is now thinking of preschool—kindergarten in other states; so 2 minus 1—as education. I think that is going to be an ongoing conversation across the three sectors as we go forward. In answer to your question, Mr Doszpot, I wrote to the minister only recently, and it will be interesting to see what that advice is.

**MR DOSZPOT**: This is a topic that we were going to explore with the minister. Unfortunately, we ran out of time. Obviously, it is something that we will take up.

**THE CHAIR**: In relation to that point about having that model where schooling begins at the preschool age, we did hear from a researcher at the University of Canberra about the fact that they have done some initial research where they looked at further educational achievement and also the point where there is going to be an impact on a student's life. It showed that, if you do not start at that age, it does have an impact, and it goes through to year 5. Is that something you are aware of? Does that build into the concerns?

**Ms Najdecki**: Yes, it would. I would agree. We are fortunate in the ACT. As you would know from the figures in the submission, probably just over 90 per cent of children in the ACT access preschool. So there are certainly plenty of places in terms of that. I guess good education systems are built on the fact that there is also choice and diversity in those systems.

**Mrs Dorrian**: It certainly makes it more difficult in terms of the Catholic ethos if we are recognising that it is very important, as soon as children come into a preschool environment, that they are in an educational environment. So if some of the structures that are in place make it more prohibitive for some parents to access either Catholic education or other forms of independent education then I think over time that is quite a serious equity issue.

**MR HANSON**: The importance of individual teachers has been highlighted by just about everyone, including yourselves. The government has introduced a number of programs around quality teaching. Are you doing something similar? How do you

make sure that your teachers are up to speed on the latest advances in teaching ESL, literacy and so on?

**Ms Najdecki**: We have worked over the last couple of years in terms of developing a leadership framework for our principals, for our school leaders, and then it will go right down. It will be launched to our principals this week. It recognises both professional development that has to be offered and given by the office itself and professional development that must be accessed and shaped to the individual school leader, whoever they might be.

We recognise it is very important in schools that all of the teachers have access to professional development. We would expect that within our school budgets they have got a line there for professional development and that the teachers are being inserviced and are keeping up to date and in currency in terms of what is happening, and needs to happen, across Australian education in particular. We would wholly agree that what you have to put into your teachers is of vital importance. Mary talked about the work we have been doing with the smart data, with equipping them to be able to analyse and make sense of that data. That has been very good in schools and in terms of teacher development as well. When they understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, every teacher has the best interests of kids at heart. I do not know many teachers who do not absolutely have the best interests of kids at heart.

**Mrs Dorrian**: We are at a stage in education now where we know a lot more about what works. Recently I went to the Australian Council for Educational Leaders conference, which is an annual conference. At that conference the majority of speakers were talking about research about how the teacher makes a difference and what makes a difference in the classroom. We are getting better and better informed about that and again as small sectors we have that ability to go out and look at what is happening in the global field of education as well as the national. It is our job to keep as up to date as possible and to be able to provide opportunities so that our teachers are as up to date as possible.

**Mr Irvine**: Seventeen different answers to 17 different schools. I keep referring back to what Mary and Moira said. It is part of registration: every Catholic and independent teacher is required to do professional development. It is a requirement of the school registration.

**Ms Nadjecki**: And to list it; they have to list the last three years of professional development.

**Mr Irvine**: Yes. So, for example, when you go into a school and they are doing the five-year registration, one of the things you will look for—and it is not a negative thing—is the staff list, to see their qualifications and what they have done. Many independent school principals would point to their staff as one of the reasons why parents decide to spend money on their child's education despite having a wonderful government system that is positively free. A number of our principals would say that the teachers are extremely important to them, because if the parents were not happy they would not be putting their money into the child's education.

**MR HANSON**: It is a business, I guess, after all, isn't it? In that sense, it is a business,

I suppose.

**Mr Irvine**: It is a business proposition in the fact that the investments that the school would be putting into their staff professional development, as Moira has said, for the Catholic sector would be expected to be delivered in the classroom. If parents did not like it, we would not have had a 12 per cent increase in enrolments in the last six years in independent schools.

I also reiterate what Moira said: teachers across all three sectors passionately believe in what they are doing. One of the good things about the territory again is that there are shared opportunities for professional development, be it through every chance to learn, sustainable schools—there is a great deal of sharing of PD. One of the things we will need to look at in the future is how that could perhaps be done better. When we come and talk to you about the outcomes of the Shaddock review, I suspect that will be a conversation that will begin to flow through that, without presupposing what might be in that review. But I would be surprised if any parent said, "Teacher quality doesn't really matter to my kid." We hope they will never say that, because teacher quality is critical.

**Mrs Dorrian**: The era we are coming out of in terms of education was where teachers in lots of ways were disempowered by having a lack of knowledge, felt under enormous pressure and often were quite confused. Now, with the national curriculum coming in, there is more of a standards reference and we are all looking for what is really best practice and how we can best embed that best practice across schools. It is a good time to be in education because we are coming to an era where there will be a stronger education for our students. That is what we all want.

**MR DOSZPOT**: Leading on from your reference to the Shaddock review, Ms Nadjecki, and coming back to the issues, you mentioned access to services for children with special needs. Would you like to elaborate on some of the issues?

**Ms Nadjecki**: That is probably something that comes out in the Shaddock review. Certainly, just from even the beginnings of the drafts that I have read—it is probably not just for us; it is probably right across the education sector—students with special needs are the most vulnerable in our society and there should not be any question of their being able to access whatever they need. It can be very difficult for parents if they have to traipse from one place to the next and are almost put in a deficit mode of trying to be defensive about why they need something. I really hope that is opened up as part of the next conversation that we have because that is really important right across the ACT.

**Mr Irvine**: I could not agree more. In 2005-06 there were 77 identified students with disabilities in the independent sector, Mr Doszpot, and last financial year there were 151. To its credit, the ACT Labor government has increased that funding up to $1.5 million for non-government schools, but it is still capped. Our view, very strongly, as an independent sector with 17 independent schools, is that the funding should follow the student irrespective of whether that student is wearing a Boys Grammar uniform or a Gordon primary uniform; it does not matter. I will say that for a long time: the funding should follow the student. If a student has band 12 high-level needs it should not matter what school they go to; they should get the same funding,

be it a Catholic school, an independent school or a government school, and that is something that we will continue to advocate for, as we did last year and the year before.

**MR HANSON**: And you agree with that?

**Ms Nadjecki**: I do. We could well say, "This school might be able to offer better services for that child. Why wouldn't you send your child to that school?" But in my experience it is about a family, and a family with a child with a disability should have the right to know that their child can go to school with their siblings but still be able to access services that will enhance their education.

**THE CHAIR**: We probably have time for one more very quick question.

**MR HANSON**: We had a presentation about gifted and talented students and the fact that they often have an achievement gap because of their difficulty in fitting in and being looked after, because of their special needs. I guess a lot of parents who identify that their child might have a gift or is talented would then endeavour to send them to an independent school or a Catholic school because they might sense that there is a more individual style of education or care. Do you have specific programs targeted at gifted and talented students across the sectors?

**Mrs Dorrian**: There is a variety of approaches to meeting the needs of the gifted and talented. Some schools have from time to time specialist programs in music, art or things like a tournament of minds. Sometimes schools do special afternoons once a week, once a term. There is a whole range of activities but not anything that is specific in nature. A few years ago there was an Australian government funded project looking at gifted and talented education, and a number of our teachers were trained more about the overall philosophy about and strategies to support students who are gifted.

It can often be just as hard for those students as for a student who has quite a severe disability, in terms of being able to challenge those students. Things like multiple intelligences and a range of different strategies are being looked at. Certainly something that we are all looking at across all those sectors is how we challenge those students who are sometimes sitting comfortably so that they can achieve at a much higher level while still maintaining all their feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

**Ms Nadjecki**: I know this is a bit of a motherhood statement but I think every single child is gifted or talented in some way. One of the great things in education is to be able to recognise that child who is musically very talented or in sport or whatever else. The other observation I make is that children hate to be made to feel different and so whatever you are going to do has to be inclusive. So it is about giving opportunities and any child can opt into them. I was at a school today where I looked at the choir and there was one lone little boy singing in the choir with 30 girls. But he was having a wonderful time—

**MR HANSON**: I bet he was!

**Ms Nadjecki**: We really have to recognise those multiple intelligences. Heavens

above, when we look at it, academic achievement is not by any means everything.

**MR HANSON**: Indeed.

**THE CHAIR**: We are, unfortunately, out of time. Thank you all for appearing before the committee and for giving up your time to come and speak to us. A transcript of today's hearing will be sent to you for you to check for accuracy.

**The committee adjourned at 5.31 pm.**