

No common CENTS

Schools now have to compete against each other for federal Indigenous education funding, **Steve Packer** reports.

Widespread concern about the federal government's changes to funding Indigenous education has turned into dismay and confusion as the introduction of the new system has caused a crippling funding gap.

"Two school terms have gone by and I haven't seen a cent yet," says Neil Free, the principal of Uralla Central School in NSW and chair of the AEU's National Principals' Committee. "Even where concept plans have been submitted and accepted, there is still no funding. There have been verbal indications from DEST [Department of Education, Science and Training] employees, but nothing in writing. I would suggest there is also confusion at DEST."

Free says the issue was discussed in depth at the last AEU principals' committee meeting and he can "speak with a national perspective".

The changes were contained in the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Bill 2005, which was introduced in the House of Representatives last November to cover funding for the 2005–08

quadrennium. On 6 December the Senate referred the Bill to its employment, workplace relations and education committee, chaired by Northern Territory senator Trish Crossin. The legislation was passed the day after the referral.

The committee detailed extensive problems with the Bill in an interim report before tabling the final report in late June (see box). In a media statement, Crossin said that the funding changes had "jeopardised the progress made in building relations between schools and Indigenous communities".

Climate of distrust

"There is a lot of evidence to show that the new programs have resulted in a climate of distrust between the communities and the federal government," she said. "The committee has found there was manifestly inadequate preparation for managing the process of change. It has been recommended that the Auditor-General critically look at this bureaucratic mess."

Under the changes, the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent

Awareness (ASSPA) scheme has been replaced with the Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPPI), based on making submissions which effectively put schools in competition with each other for funding. The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), which was available to all students, has been renamed the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and is available only to students who fail the Year 3, 5 or 7 benchmarks, with some targeting of tuition in Years 10, 11 and 12.

The cross-party senate committee has unanimously recommended that the Auditor-General audit the efficiency of the new funding application system. It also recommends that discretionary funding be provided for ITAS so schools can self-assess which students are in need of tutoring.

With the PSPPI, the committee recommends that funding revert to a guaranteed per capita basis rather than competitive submissions. It says PSPPI amounts to reduced funding, available to schools only on application, according to guidelines that preclude school community responsibility for decisions about its use. "The committee found that the new PSPPI program fails to empower parents and does nothing to encourage them to remain involved in their school and participate in their child's education."

One-way street

The committee's report has been sent to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, for comment. "If this is an example of the federal government's new policy on mutual obligation," said Crossin, "then after this effort Indigenous people can only believe it will be a one-way street."

ATAGLANCE

■ Under new funding arrangements, schools and communities are now competing against each other for money for Aboriginal support programs

■ The changes have created a funding gap and ongoing confusion

■ Educators fear that Aboriginal families and communities will be discouraged from vital participation in their children's education.



The committee came to its conclusions after a sub-committee held public meetings and hearings in the NT in February, followed by other rounds in Qld and WA. "It is clear from the evidence taken...that the experience of schools and communities in the NT is widely shared across the country," the report said. "In many instances the extent of dismay at what is happening as a result of policy changes is even more evident in some Queensland and West Australian communities and school systems."

Neil Free says schools have found they suddenly have no funding coming through for basic programs and Aboriginal people are "walking away" in uncertainty and confusion. "For example, there has been no money for homework centres, so the trained Aboriginal tutors who were involved are not employed any more. Schools had established ASSPA

committees...but the changes mean they no longer feel part of the school program."

In the NT, some schools, particularly remote ones, finally have some funding under the new arrangements. "But it has been six months of hell," says Greg Jarvis, the state's

"[it] fails to empower parents and does nothing to encourage them to... participate in their child's education."

representative on the AEU principals' committee and principal of Moulden Park School and Neighbourhood Centre, at Palmerston, where half the students are Aboriginal. "There has been no money to assist Aboriginal students with travel expenses, or to provide them with shoes for sport, or for cultural activities."

Jarvis says he knows of some schools that have had funding applications for previously acceptable language and cultural activities knocked back. Schools have to work more to make submissions, and there's no guarantee they'll get the money. That decision comes down to the views of individual DEST field officers.

Cultural revival

"Aboriginal people have been controlling what they do and doing things their community identified with. There has been a huge cultural revival," says Jarvis. "But it seems money won't be paid out for that now. Individual schools are now competing to see whether their submissions get up, and they need to be good at writing them and getting quotes. There's a bypassing of the NT Department of Education and Training,



SENATE INQUIRY

which used to take care of that stuff and share the money around.”

Jarvis says a high school principal in his region told him his school had been losing Aboriginal students because of the funding gap. “They’re probably hanging around the top shops or looking for a job when they could have still been at school.”

He says quite a few NT schools have less than 20 students and the new per capita basis of funding means they won’t qualify for a helper in the classroom like they used to.

“With all its warts, the old ASSPA committee and the related things were really worthwhile because they were at a community level. [Education Minister] Brendan Nelson has attacked the ‘sausage sizzle’ level of getting things done. Well, we had a sausage sizzle not long ago and 10 or 12 people did a lot of work discussing what they were going to do, who is to get money, what they should do on NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee] Day,” he says. Jarvis also believes that many schools will have difficulty getting the community involved.

The senate committee says the new funding application requirements for the PSPI are a “cumbersome two-stage process” where schools must generate a ‘concept plan’ outlining their project, its purpose and the results expected—followed by a final submission if the concept plan is approved. “The committee imagines that, while teachers will become more confident at making submissions, depending on the results of their first applications, they will remain stressful and time-consuming exercises.” ■

STEVE PACKER is sub-editor of *Australian Educator*.

The Senate Committee made the following recommendations:

- 1.** The committee recommends that the government ensure that under PSPI there is genuine engagement with parents and the community to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes for all students.
- 2.** The committee recommends that as a matter of preference, PSPI reverts to guaranteed per capita funding, and in the event that this does not occur, that PSPI be applied for twice yearly, with conditions which recognise the circumstances of individual schools and their diverse educational needs.
- 3.** The committee recommends that the funding formula for ITAS be based not on a consequence of failure to meet Year 3, 5, and 7 benchmarks, but generated by the number of students which schools assess and identify as being in the bottom 20 per cent of their cohort in literacy and numeracy skills.
- 4.** The committee recommends that the government amends its policy to ensure that students from remote areas enrolled at boarding schools in cities remain eligible for the funding that goes to students in remote areas.
- 5.** The committee recommends that the Auditor-General be requested to conduct an efficiency audit on current arrangements for the application and processing of funding for PSPI programs.
- 6.** The committee recommends that local or regional committees which assess funding applications from schools include at least one member with educational qualifications and experience, and at least one Indigenous member active in a school community.
- 7.** The committee recommends that the Minister, through MCEETYA, addresses the need for schools to report on the expenditure of Commonwealth funds in a way which is least burdensome, preferably through a single document which includes data on all programs that have been funded and are currently running.
- 8.** The committee recommends that MCEETYA address the problem of restricted access to student records maintained by state agencies in cases where it is required by schools to facilitate enrolment in another system or school, and where it is for the educational advantage of the student.
- 9.** The committee recommends that MCEETYA look more closely at reporting requirements attached to Commonwealth funded programs to ensure that they reflect criteria based on sound and agreed educational principles, and realistic expectations of learning outcomes.
- 10.** The committee recommends that the Minister addresses the need to rationalise funding grants to minimise the number of applications that have to be made by schools.
- 11.** The committee recommends that so long as government policy continues to require direct contact between schools and DEST officials, that these officials are provided with adequate training in how to deal with principals and teachers, and gain some familiarisation with the operations of schools and at least some rudimentary insight into teaching inputs and learning outcomes.
- 12.** The committee recommends that a copy of the report be sent to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner with a request for comment on the implications of the PSPI program in relation to the progress and achievement in Indigenous education.

View the Senate Committee’s full report at: www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/eet_ctte/indigenoused/index.htm

The AEU’s submission to the Senate Committee’s inquiry can be viewed online at: www.aeufederal.org.au in the Indigenous Education section.

The AEU is conducting a survey into the impact on schools of the changes in Indigenous Education funding. The interim results will be available on the AEU website in September.