

Community LOCK-OUT

The government's new approach to funding Indigenous education has cut schools off from their communities and left students at risk. **Steve Packer** reports.

The federal government's recent changes to targeted funding in Indigenous education have created a "sense of hopelessness", says Carol Fisher, the AEU's acting federal Aboriginal education officer.

Since the changes took effect at the beginning of this year (see box), "schools are not coping well, especially those with a good number of Indigenous students," she says, "but they feel there's not much they can do about it."

The results of the AEU's Indigenous Education Funding Survey tell of a breakdown in communication with Indigenous parents, schools cut off from their communities and confused about how to access funding. Fisher says it's the anecdotal reports that really tell the story.

"A teacher at a school in North Queensland with a fairly high number of Indigenous students told me they wrote four concept plans this year, covering four different types of activities," says Fisher. "The plans went forward and they were told two might go through, so write up submissions for those. With about seven weeks of the school year left, they haven't had an answer on any funding at all."

"That same school had 10 tutors coming in last year, working in small groups and one-on-one with students,

ATAGLANCE

■ **An AEU survey shows that Indigenous education funding changes have hit schools hard.**

■ **New processes have effectively left Indigenous parents and communities out of school activities.**

■ **Thousands of indigenous students have lost their tutors.**

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like teacher's aides or assistants. This year there is about half that amount."

The survey figures indicate the scale and spread of the problems. A total of 561 surveys were received from schools with Indigenous students. They had a total of 17,451 Indigenous enrolments with up to 402 at any one school.

Seventy-eight per cent of schools surveyed had an Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committee in 2004. By mid-2005, only nine per cent had received approvals to run the replacement Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI) program.

There were 227 respondents who reported that the changes are having a major impact on schools, most

significantly due to less engagement by Indigenous parents.

The survey indicated that loss of direct funding at the surveyed schools totalled almost \$2 million in the first half of the year. The money would have supported curriculum, literacy and numeracy development, attendance programs and staff employment, including Indigenous education workers. Cultural programs have also diminished—along with Indigenous student participation in mainstream school activities such as

camps, excursions and sports.

The loss of 447 paid tutors was reported in surveyed schools—265 of them Indigenous—and 2,745 Indigenous students no longer had access to tutorial assistance.

Burden of process

The PSPI's two-stage application process is proving an inefficient burden—obviously for both the receivers and the provider, the Department of Education, Science and Training. Fisher says schools have been putting in concept plans as required and thinking it's business as usual. Then they are told the next step is to make a submission for funding, which they may not get, or that eventually turns out to be less than expected.

Over the years many ASSPA committees have built up trust and relationships with schools to the point where they are virtually left to work out, within the government's guidelines, how they were going to spend the allocated money. The ASSPA system allowed parents to run with ideas about cultural activities for NAIDOC or the Croc Festival in the north, resources, and assistance for students.

Survey respondents reported that this year parents were staying away from schools because they felt

disenfranchised with the new process, having little understanding of the changes or the reasons for them.

Many schools believe the amount of time spent writing submissions is onerous and not worth the small amounts of funding received, and some schools and Indigenous parent groups may not have the capacity to cope with the detailed submission processes.

Replacing the ASSPA committees with a "bureaucratic process of submission" has obviously been detrimental to Indigenous communities trying to access the funding they have been allocated, says AEU president Pat Byrne. "They have become so cynical and angry about this, it has added to a sense of general distrust of the government. The impact is critical because it means parents are not involving themselves in the life of the school community the way they did previously."

That's a tragedy on several fronts. "It takes away the visibility of Indigenous communities within schools, which is important for them to feel a welcome and necessary component of school life, and that visibility is also important for other, non-Indigenous students."

Students without tutors

Byrne says the requirements of the new Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) are "outrageous". Providing assistance only after students fail literacy tests has no logic and is counter to all educational research about the power of early intervention.

"Under the old system," says Fisher, "every Indigenous child in the school had a funding allocation. This year it changed to apply only to children who fail the literacy test in Years 3, 5 and 7. That is, it's only children in

Years 4, 6 and 8 who are entitled to that money."

It reminds Fisher of Indigenous education funding three decades ago when, for five or 10 years, it went to high schools but not primary schools. "We thought at the time, why don't they start with our little pre-schoolers and early childhood area first? It was like a reward system: if you can get through to high school, you'll get this amount of funding.

Byrne says the students involved are clearly at risk, and the system that was in place last year was clearly assisting them. "It also provided employment to Indigenous people in remote communities. Hundreds of tutors losing their employment has a detrimental, sapping effect on whole communities, especially small, remote ones."

Fisher suggests that schools must continue to educate themselves and their communities about the changes to the funding and to collect information on what is happening. The AEU's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Seminar in January 2006 will canvass ideas for action.

The government's whole philosophy needs a major rethink, Byrne says. "I don't think the situation can be ironed out. There are too many problems with it.

"My understanding is that this view is shared across the sectors. Catholic and independent schools agree 100 per cent with what we are saying. This is a view widely held by all sectors of the profession. But the minister hasn't treated it with any respect at all." ■

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No common cents

Under changes contained in the Indigenous Education (Targeted Assistance) Bill 2005, to cover funding for 2005-2008:

- The Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) scheme and its committees have been replaced with the Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSP), which requires a detailed submission process that effectively directs funding to the most needy, putting schools in competition with other.
- The ASSPA scheme allowed each school committee to allocate funds to a range of activities with guidelines, but determined by the committee. Under the new scheme funds for each activity must be applied for with a separate two-stage submission.
- 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.