EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE

AN INQUIRY INTO IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIANS OF ALL AGES

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 9 MAY 2012

SESSION ONE

Members

Dr J.M. Woollard (Chairman)
Mr P.B. Watson (Deputy Chairman)
Dr G.G. Jacobs
Ms L.L. Baker
Mr P. Abetz

Hearing commenced at 9.30 am

O'NEILL, MS SHARYN
Director General, Department of Education, examined:

AXWORTHY, MR DAVID
Deputy Director General, Schools, Department of Education, examined:

HEALY, MS JUANITA
Executive Director, Statewide Services, Department of Education examined:

CLERY, MR MARTIN
Assistant Executive Director, Statewide Services, Department of Education, examined:

DOYLE, MR BEVAN
Chief Information Officer, Department of Education, examined:

The CHAIR: Apologies for the delay. On behalf of the Education and Health Standing Committee, I would like to thank you for your interest and your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into improving educational outcomes for Western Australians of all ages. At this stage I would like to introduce myself, Janet Woollard, Peter Watson and Lisa Baker. On my right are Brian Gordon and Lucy Roberts, and from Hansard we have Liam and Amanda. The Education and Health Standing Committee is a committee of the Assembly of Parliament. This hearing is a formal procedure of Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house. As this is a public hearing, Hansard will be making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document or documents during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you could provide the full title for the record. Before we proceed to the questions we have for you today, I need to check: have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIR: Before we start with the questions we have for you, it was not meant in any way to be an ambush, inviting you in today! We are actually very keen to assist in any way that we can to make recommendations to the government so that the concerns that have been put to us—where people would like to see more staff, more support—so we can put those to the government. Brian sent you questions last week for the areas that we are interested in. Obviously, following discussions today, there may be some other questions that arise. As you have had an opportunity,

Sharyn, to look at those questions, rather than us firing, would you maybe like to make a presentation on those areas and then let your colleagues come in and back you up, and then we can come back to anything that we feel has not been addressed?

Ms O'Neill: Sure. Chair, before I do that, Peter made a joke about a cast of thousands; the questions and the topics are very wide ranging—they are enormous, each and every one of them, which is why I brought some people with me, because obviously I am not going to know all of the detail. As you would expect, if there are questions of detail that we are just unable to bring to you today, we are obviously happy to provide that to the committee.

The CHAIR: And we are quite happy with that. If there are any questions that come up that you were not ready for, then just say and we will give you the question by way of supplementary information; we are quite happy with that.

Ms O'Neill: Great. I will just check if I have the questions in the right order for you. One of the first questions that I have in front of me is around "Can't hear, can't learn"—an educational and health issue. The question was around chronic ear infections and the issues that can arise subsequent to that, around disengagement behaviour and poor learning outcomes. I guess the first thing we would say, as the question points to, is that we know there are children, particularly Aboriginal children, who suffer from chronic ear infections, and I think the question says that at a recent breakfast that was drawn to your attention, and also particularly in the goldfields, but of course it would be the same in the Kimberley and in the Pilbara.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Actually, and in the great southern.

Ms O'Neill: Yes; I do not think it is particular, but it is more concentrated, perhaps, in some other areas. The question was: is there a collaborative strategy in place between Health and Education? There is, of course, in a broad sense; for example, we have school health nurse collaboration and we have a number of memoranda of understanding between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, specifically about health generally, in terms of health —

The CHAIR: Are you aware of how many—you brought up school health nurses—how many school health nurses we are short of in WA?

Ms O'Neill: I could not say that we are short, because they belong to the health department and the service is provided to schools, so there has never been a discussion about shortness. Every school does not have a full-time nurse, and I do not have — Unless someone else has the figures?

Ms Healy: I do not have the figures, but there is an allocative mechanism that the Health Department uses to determine how much each school has of a school nurse, but it is not a full-time allocation per school.

Ms O'Neill: Schools will always say that they could do with more school health nurses. That being said, the role of the school health nurse is an interesting area. It is not, as some people would specifically imagine it, a full medical role like you would normally anticipate a school nurse to be. They have a large responsibility in terms of education in schools around health issues. They do provide some immediate medical assistance, but their role is not what a lot of people imagine a school health nurse might do. They do not administer health care in the way that people might anticipate they would.

The CHAIR: From the breakfast, having spoken to some school health nurses, I would agree with you—some schools have no drug policy, no drugs at the schools, and so have to phone the parents to say that Johnny has an earache, or whatever the problem is. But what was very interesting at the breakfast was hearing that, in fact, at some schools, not just from the two key speakers, but from speaking with people at that breakfast, a protocol was drawn up many years ago, particularly in relation to children with ear infections, to enable the school health nurses to treat those children because it was known that those children, when they went home, they were not going to see someone and it was not being treated, so there is a protocol that we were told about. Would you

have a copy of that protocol, or would we need to get that from Health? Could you check and see if you are aware? We do not expect you to have it now, but we would like to follow up on that.

Ms O'Neill: If it is a question of whether a school or a group of schools has a protocol with their school health nurse, as opposed to the total system, we can certainly have a close look into that and provide you with that, if such things exist. The memorandum of understanding states the relationships, the roles and responsibilities, so it would need to be vested in there, if it is part of their role and responsibility. That being said, individual schools, by agreement with the school health nurse, do have variations, so perhaps we could gather some more information.

Mr Axworthy: One of the issues is the pressure on the school health nurses. The MOU we have is that the nurses will engage in screening and follow up with whatever capacity they have. In reality, virtually all of their time is taken up in the screening rather than the follow-up, so the follow-up is then referred on and of course one of the problems that we have is that the families that are likely to follow up on a referral and take their child off are not the same as the families that are most suffering from middle ear infections, so the poorest of the families in the more remote settings do not have the wherewithal or capacity to necessarily follow up on a referral, even though it has been identified that their child may have a hearing problem, and that is —

The CHAIR: That is what we heard about in some schools; the school nurses are doing the ear examinations and following on from that ear examination are then able to give the child the antibiotics necessary, and at the end of this year the committee will be making different recommendations to the government. There were several schools that we went to, hearing about the sound systems and teachers wearing recorders and having the Auslan teachers—hearing is such a big problem in some of those schools. I wonder what part, maybe, Education can play in trying to get a formalised policy whereby the school nurse does—I was told, particularly, in the wet season—maybe examine all the children in a school on a Monday morning, and if the school policy is no drugs at the school, then have someone from the pharmacy bring those drugs to the school and maybe after the child has had that ear infection on one or two occasions, have that child then referred to the —

Ms O'Neill: I think the issue does revolve around, as I said, the role, as it is currently standing, of the school health nurses and the extent to which they can and will engage in the follow-on activities that you are suggesting, and there are some schools and school health nurses where that happens particularly, but my advice is that that is not a system-wide institutionalised approach to follow up. As David rightly points out, they tend to do the initial screening, the referral, and then families find themselves in the general referral system which we know, for some of these families, is inaccessible. Of course we know that schools in many, particularly small, communities are the hub of the community, so it is a sensible place for some of that work to happen. We also know that some senior high schools—we are talking large schools; 1 500 students—may have a full-time health nurse, and it is scaled down from there, so some small senior high schools or secondary schools and, in fact, primary schools, you might be looking at a day a week, possibly less than that. So in a remote community where needs are often much higher, you might have a fly in, fly out arrangement that is a little more ad hoc and therefore the follow-up is problematic. That being said, obviously chronic ear infections and problems are directly linked to the development of speech and language and so it is critical that children are able to hear well for their general speech and language development, so from the educative perspective, certainly the point you are making about screening, and we are talking about referral and treatment of diseases, the department could be engaged in a more systematic support of that. Initially it is the health department that takes carriage, and that is where the children are, so it is a good place to capture for that assistance.

[9.45 am]

So some of the follow-on assistive mechanisms that you referred to—for example the amplification we have in the Kimberley in particular, but not only in the Kimberley—we put an enormous effort

into ensuring that teachers are skilled for that, that the equipment is contemporary and up to date. The teachers, if you have been into those schools, will tell you that it can make an enormous difference to the learning trajectory of those students. A lot of work has been done there. Also, our WA Institute for Deaf Education gives assistance and has audiologists who work in this area in a specialised way. We also have visiting teachers in the deaf area who work not only in the metro but have an outreach capacity into country areas. So that is bridging the gap between, I guess, the diagnosis and the assistance for students in their learning. We have produced various resources for teachers because clearly it is one thing to identify the problem, and some parents engage in the follow up, and then schools do have a very large job to assist their students in their learning given the issues that they have at hand.

Mr Axworthy: One of the other problems with this—you alluded to it—is that it can be periodic. So whilst you may screen on one particular day and a child's hearing is normal, particularly in the south west in the winter time kids get colds and flu and they get a recurrent ear infection that was not there in January or February when they were screened at the beginning of the year, but suddenly is there in June, July. So the need for not just a one-time screening, but the availability —

The CHAIR: During the wet season, weekly screening?

Mr Axworthy: Yes.

Ms O'Neill: There is a once-off screening in the entry screening program where students are screened for hearing and vision problems, but of course we know that it is not just that one point in time in the early years. In fact, as students are getting older and more independent, often problems can occur.

The CHAIR: It was actually a paediatrician who recommended to us weekly screening and treatment during —

Ms O'Neill: We would be happy to work with the health department if they were in a position to provide the screening.

The CHAIR: School health nurse, community health nurse, Aboriginal health worker—someone who could do that.

Ms O'Neill: Obviously we would be happy to work with them.

The CHAIR: My deputy chair is kicking me under the table because he wants to ask a question.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I am interested, Sharyn, because you are saying the big school have one and the little schools do not. It concerns me that the health department says, "Oh look, it's up to the schools to do it", and the education department is saying, "We haven't got a set policy on if you've got 600 kids you've got to have a healthcare nurse; if you've got 400 or if you've got 200."

Ms O'Neill: Peter, it is per capita, so it is a formula determined on you get a certain amount of health nurse per number of students you have. So everyone will have access, but if you have 10 kids your access will be much smaller than if you have 1 000 kids.

Mr P.B. WATSON: But the 10 kids are the ones who generally need it the most —

Ms O'Neill: They could be the ones —

Mr P.B. WATSON: — where the 1 000 at the big high schools in metropolitan areas might not necessarily need as much those small schools.

Ms O'Neill: That is true, but I think commonsense also prevails here. While we have an agreement with the health department, we would not wait for a health nurse to come on their one day a month or something. Teachers are highly attuned to hearing issues because of the relationship to ongoing learning, and so it is not just dependent on the school nurse. Teachers would often be talking to parents about encouraging parents, obviously, to have children screened themselves and have medical intervention. I think you are quite right; if you were a small school, if you have a small

allocation because you only have 10 children but two of them have ear problems, that is a problem, but that is how the resources provided to us are distributed by the health department.

Mr P.B. WATSON: So is that wrong, what they are providing? Do you think that needs to be looked at?

Ms O'Neill: Well, I am not in a position to —

The CHAIR: You cannot ask one department to criticise another—that is our role.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I know, but you are saying that it goes on the criteria that the health department make —

Ms O'Neill: Yes.

Mr P.B. WATSON: — not what you would make.

Ms O'Neill: Look, if there were more resources, we would welcome more resources of school health nurses. We work closely with the health department, and they do respond on the occasions where we say we have a particular need in this place. So it is not that there is a formula and everyone can just wait for their turn; if there was a critical need, we would be talking to the health department and they would, ordinarily, provide the assistance. It is not only the responsibility of the school or the school health nurse; families also have a responsibility in this regard.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Just going on the Kimberley, you have kids who have FASD and they have ear problems—they are lost.

Ms O'Neill: Well, I guess in response to that, also, in remote communities it does work slightly differently because the school is often the only government agency in the community, and then there are also some health services, which on a number —

Mr P.B. WATSON: This is not so much in remote communities; this is places like Roebourne.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, but in a number of those places there is Education and there is Health—the extent to which Health is there is different in different places—and they often work inside of the school because that is where the students are. In places like Roebourne we have Aboriginal and Islander education officers—AIEOs—who work closely with health workers, and so it is a much more collaborative effort, perhaps, than it sounds in the way we are describing it. But certainly regular follow-up care for ear health—early examination, ongoing examination and regular follow-up care—is something we would welcome, and we would welcome to work with the health department on that.

The CHAIR: We would obviously be very interested to hear if, following these hearings—even before we put our report on the table—anything happens in the area. We would obviously like to hear that, so that we could maybe say in our report that we are congratulating you rather than recommending this, and that this has actually been done. It really was shocking; we just could not believe the number of children up there. Again at the breakfast, one of the ear surgeons suggested not only having the children screened in the wet season but throughout.

Mr Axworthy: All through the year, yes.

The CHAIR: And that the equipment for those checks could come to $5 000 a school, but that someone at the school—if not the school nurse—could be trained to use that equipment and the photos could be sent through by telemetry to Perth. If it was not the school nurse, someone who was qualified to immediately kind of give the antibiotics from the protocol, and then it could go through by telemetry and a result could go back.

Ms O'Neill: I think there are some innovative ways—we already have innovative ways—where we deliver extended services. Certainly that is the intention—there are 10 of them at this stage—of the child and parent centres where the school health nurses are. That is a very close collaboration in that

new announcement, where the school health nurse will actually be on the school site. That is new, and we think that is a great advance in terms of this sort of work, albeit it is 10 places.

The CHAIR: Well done.

Ms O'Neill: That is something that we would certainly point to. As I said, we are often the only people in a community and our technology is probably the most advanced and sophisticated—I am looking at my CIO because he will nod, I am sure—in some of those remote communities where we have stable IT connections. So there is an opportunity to maximise the use, for example, of technology to assist in that. You are quite right—I am not a medical person, so I am not making that assumption—I am sure that some of that work with appropriately trained people could be done by people who are not school nurses. That, obviously, as always, takes us into another space about who could do that work—who could take it on—the level of training, the level of responsibility, and the industrial implications of that. But just putting that aside for a minute, I think some innovative approaches could be contemplated in this area. But we will take up your offer, Janet, and if we have things we think it would be useful for you to be abreast of, because they are positive and innovative in this area, we can certainly provide that to the committee.

The CHAIR: I have not had an opportunity yet, and I do not believe the other committee members have, to look at the report that was done by the Senate into ear problems throughout Australia. But we will obviously, as part of this inquiry, look at that to see what recommendations were made as part of that inquiry, and possibly which of those recommendations have been adopted in the different states. We knew nothing about it until that breakfast, so I am not sure whether you would have had anyone looking at that either, but that might also be something that you might want to look at and see.

Ms O'Neill: Yes. I am not sure whether the committee has a copy of the memorandum between our department and the health department for the school health nurses.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I would like to see that.

The CHAIR: Would we be able to get a copy of that from you?

Mr Axworthy: Yes; certainly.

Ms O'Neill: I am sure that would be appropriate. I just want to check about the formulas.

Mr Clery: For the allocation of the nurses?

Ms O'Neill: Yes.

Mr Clery: I am not sure if they are actually in the MOU.

Mr Axworthy: No, they are not.

Mr Clery: They are more sophisticated than a per capita allocation. They do factor in elements, to my understanding, around SEI, around distance, and also around the number of —

Mr P.B. WATSON: SEI?

Mr Clery: Socioeconomic index. So they obviously correlate highly with some of the problems that we are talking about, which goes some of the way towards providing some additional support in that space.

The CHAIR: We would really appreciate looking at the MOU and maybe that additional information, so that we can see how that fits with the picture we have been given —

Ms O'Neill: We could describe to you the allocative mechanism, and I am just asking if we could show you, school by school, how much each school gets in school health nurse time—obviously understanding there is a bit of flexibility. We would need to check that with the health department.

Mr Axworthy: I think what is important is that we purchase—basically it is a purchaser–provider arrangement that the education department purchases services from the health department. What we

purchase is nominated in the MOU, so that the service agreement is stated in terms of what service will be provided, and that is a guarantee, if you like, that every child will be screened on entry into school for certain things, that there will be this, there will be that, and we pay a certain amount of money for that. The health department then determines how to deliver on that, and obviously if there is any concern that we would have that it is not being delivered on, we would speak up. But the health department then builds that into their general community health delivery services, and in different regions it operates a little bit differently, so the metropolitan area operates differently from how it may operate in a rural setting or in the Pilbara or in the Kimberley or in the south west.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Great Southern, please!

Mr Axworthy: Sorry, sorry; Great Southern—in Albany.

Ms O'Neill: Janet, I will contact Kim Snowball, because obviously it is a memorandum between both departments, let him know that the committee is seeking it, and I will seek to provide it on behalf of both us.

Mr P.B. WATSON: We talk about the kids who are disadvantaged, like with FASD or who cannot hear, but what about the bright kids who are missing out? These kids—Indigenous kids, too, who are quite bright—do not get the attention. Do you worry that they drop out, too, because all the attention is going to the other kids?

Ms O'Neill: We worry about anyone who potentially might drop out, and while the resources are weighted in some way towards these factors, which most of our resources are, we would expect any child who is suffering ear problems to receive the required attention.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I know that, but all the attention is going to these kids, and these kids who are bright who might not have the ear infections or anything like that are not getting that impetus to go up.

Ms O'Neill: Do you mean generally students who are bright?

Mr P.B. WATSON: Yes.

Ms O'Neill: That is whole other area. That is the group of children who we would determine to be gifted and talented, and we have a large number of programs across the state in that area.

Mr P.B. WATSON: But I am talking about regional areas. You might have a classroom with four kids, and two kids have FASD and two or three kids with hearing disabilities—the average group—and then you have three or four kids who are bright but they are not getting that extra attention because they are bright. It is just human nature; all the attention is going into the other areas, but these kids need —

Ms O'Neill: I think you are right to raise it, Peter, because in any regular classroom I think what teachers will say to you is that the demographic, over time, is changing somewhat. They report—we know it is true—for example, that there are more students with autism; we have seen a growth of up to 14 per cent, I think, of students with autism. So you are quite right; in any one classroom you could have students with autism, you could perhaps have someone with a learning difficulty, you have Aboriginal students who are perhaps struggling in areas, mental health issues are on the rise, and then you have students who are particularly bright.

[10.00 am]

So we agree that teachers are stretched to ensure that every student is receiving a good level of instruction and stretch. But saying that, we provide a lot of resources for schools to ensure that everyone gets their fair go. In fact, we provide about $54 million a year in supplementary resourcing for schools, so that where students of the different natures that you are describing are there, additional resources are provided to be able to cope with those particular differences that might exist between groups. We also have, for example, particular programs for extension in

primary school. You would be familiar with the PEAC program. In high school, we have gifted and talented programs but we also have some specialist programs. In regional areas we have just opened—or the minister has announced—something in Bunbury for the future.

I think it is a challenge. We are certainly not backing away from the challenge. Teachers receive a good amount of professional learning. But I am not pretending that it is not a challenge, it is, because I think they have got the full range of students. I mean, there has always been a full range of kids. I think I would be honest in saying that they are even more challenging than they have been.

The CHAIR: I was actually quite surprised when we were in the Pilbara. Our secretariat had put together a table for us showing the funding for different schools. I think my primary school has something like $5 000 per student and I think at my high school it might be $8 000 per student—a per capita formula. In the Pilbara I think it was $20 000 to $25 000 per student. To go up there and see, to think, that it was $25 000 per student and yet we have these sound boards and these Auslan teachers and all the problems up there.

Ms O'Neill: And indeed, increasingly, students from backgrounds other than English, with skilled migration and the like. Particularly in Kalgoorlie, the Kimberley and Pilbara, the multiple languages of the Aboriginal children that they are bringing and also the great southern, obviously, we face that as well. Twenty-five thousand dollars as a recurrent cost per student would be on the light side, in fact, in those areas because it is not only the cost of the additional resources. It costs us an enormous amount of money to house people. In the north west there is the attraction and recruitment to get people to go. Lots and lots of additional costs make up that cost per student. But, certainly, education support in those more remote places, Auslan, all the things that you are talking about are there. That does not take account for our visiting services that we provide outreach into those areas. I think Peter raises a good point; teachers will tell you exactly that, that they feel challenged. There is a lot of support there, but nonetheless I visited a school in Geraldton probably last year. In the one class there were three children with autism. Parents want those children mainstreamed. The teacher was doing a fabulous job, and schools do really good work around this. That is why we are trying to give them more and more flexibility. They had reorganised themselves such that the kids you are talking about, Peter, were able to at different times go into other areas and do extension work. Actually, they were working with kids who were older than them because they were so bright. You can never hope to cater for every single difference inside the classroom, so what our schools are very good at is creating programs. In your own schools, you will see multiple programs that schools put in place to be able to ensure that everyone gets the kind of extension that they need.

Mr P.B. WATSON: Mount Lockyer Primary School has got great programs there.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, fabulous.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I am thinking about the carers. There are some kids that just do not quite fit into a thing; they have not got ADHD or bipolar and they are probably half of one and half of another or a quarter of another, so they do not qualify to get that carer, but they are still disruptive in the classroom. Is that a concern?

Ms O'Neill: They are the students that perhaps do not end up with a medical diagnosis but they can be really difficult anyway. Look, it does bother us because sometimes it is lower level disruption that can cause a lack of productivity in the classroom and because of our concern we initiated a piece of research, which ended up being called the Pipeline Project, with Edith Cowan. It was over three or four years, it was the only piece of work that has been done in —

Mr Axworthy: Longitudinal study.

Ms O'Neill: It is the only piece of work that has ever been done in this space which talks about low level. So, it is not the kids who are kind of really at the top end disruptive; they are the sort of kids

that you are talking about perhaps, who sometimes fall between the cracks—that is the sense of it—because they have not got a diagnosis of anything in particular. That piece of work was really interesting because it talks about the productivity of those children and the children around them as well. What we do have in schools as part of what we call the SPRA funding, which is the supplementation, is we give schools an amount of money—Juanita might be able to help me with this—for a learning support coordinator. Have you got the total?

Ms Healy: Yes. For this year we allocated $8 million.

Ms O'Neill: An additional $8 million into schools for schools to use flexibly, Peter, to actually help with those. So they are not kids that attract Schools Plus funding or ed assistants —

Mr Axworthy: They do not have a label of anything but it is for those children, just the children that you are talking about.

Mr P.B. WATSON: So does that provide carers?

Mr Axworthy: It is provided to the school as a lump sum that they can turn into whatever they wish. They can buy resources and some of those resources may be an education assistant or it could be anything that they choose.

Mr P.B. WATSON: So that is allocated to all schools in WA so each school gets an allocation.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, every school gets a —

Mr Axworthy: Basically, yes, they do. That is without there being a specific diagnosis but on the expectation that in every class there are children, as you were saying, that are a bit of this and a bit of that and they cause problems, they cause additional stress on the teacher and it causes the teacher to have to provide a differentiated program in order —

Ms O'Neill: And that is based on our policy, Peter. We have an educational risk policy that requires all government schools to establish and implement procedures for any students that they believe are at educational risk for whatever reason. So, regardless of whether there is a medical diagnosis, if a teacher deems someone to be potentially at educational risk, they are required to work through that, have plans in place and so the learning support coordination money is provided to schools as part of a total and they can use it for whatever they like to be able to assist with that. We also put $11.7 million in supplementation into schools for behaviour support.

Mr P.B. WATSON: With that money, if they do not use it on that, can they use it for something else?

Mr Axworthy: Yes.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, so over the past few years, what we have done is said schools need to be able to use this funding more flexibly because what happened in the past, Peter, when it was tied—for example, it used to be given as an FTE and in some schools, particularly small country schools, they might have got the equivalent of one and a half days and they could not get someone on for one and a half days and so they said it would be better for us to have the money as funding because they might be able to bulk it up and have full-time for a particular period. So, the school just said we just need to be more responsive with this allocation. Most schools use it for a person. I am convinced that schools use it for the purpose that they are given it for because, as you hear when you go into schools, these are the sorts of kids that teachers—if they have got an education assistant through Schools Plus, then they feel like they have got the support—want the help with. We know that students of this nature often cross into the behavioural problems and so this government and the previous government have had a strong commitment to behaviour. For example, just this year, an additional $11.7 million into the behaviour area. Again, it can be used flexibly. Again, schools do often use it for staff because some of these students simply need some mentor to be with them not only in the classroom but in the playground where many of the issues happened.

The CHAIR: Following on from that then, because that is $80 million, one of the things that we were made aware of in our previous inquiry—this is not down with your questions, but Brian and I have just come back from a FASD conference—was that at one of the schools in the Kimberley a member of the staff said to us that they thought that probably 25 per cent of the students at the school could have FASD.

Mr Axworthy: Yes.

Ms O'Neill: Yes.

The CHAIR: You remember that.

Ms O'Neill: Yes, we do.

The CHAIR: Because we put it in our report! Following on from that—and you mentioned how parents are wanting their autistic children in mainstream schooling—we were made aware that in Canada, one of the provinces, Manitoba, they currently now have a school for children with FASD, specifically for children. When you think of that in terms of Fitzroy Crossing where it was 100 out of 400 students, then you think is it time to look at other models. One of the other things that we became aware of was that—and I am not sure when our AEDI is next, whether it is this year or next year when it goes out.

Ms O'Neill: Next year.

Mr Axworthy: Next year, so it is now getting ready for next year's.

The CHAIR: At that conference it was also reported to us that whilst, you mentioned earlier that children may not have a medical diagnosis, we do not have a diagnosis, as you know, for FASD at the moment—that is something that our committee is looking at and there is a federal committee also doing an inquiry into FASD—but we were told that next year under DSM–4, 2013, there will be a diagnosis in there for FASD. It is not called FASD; it is maybe called cognitive and behavioural and developmental problems—that is, kind of an umbrella term for FASD. But they also have tools that they are currently using in schools, so, yes, they are way ahead of us in terms of diagnosis and because that of diagnosis, funding. But they have tools in schools, and I believe that our AEDI was based on the Canadian AEDI —

Ms O'Neill: Yes, that is right.

Mr Axworthy: It was.

The CHAIR: They now have 12 questions that they have added to the AEDI to help identify children who may have FASD. So it is 12 questions that have been administered by the teachers. What the teachers are saying now, I believe, is that rather than them being separate, they want them within the AEDI. But, again, I would ask that the department consider looking at those questions and those tools that have now been added because whilst we do not have the diagnosis at the moment, I think the writing is on the wall and we will get it. The sooner we all know, the sooner we can identify those children and start giving them additional assistance, the more likely it is that they will be able to merge at school and be successful at school and after school.

Ms O'Neill: I think at the last hearing we talked a little bit about this as well, and we would be happy to have a look at those tools. It is interesting the notion of a school for FASD and whether that would be a good thing or otherwise. The fact that a whole bunch of kids in a school have FASD kind of makes it part of the way there. But it was interesting that you were saying that it is not called FASD but it is called the cognitive intellectual development because—I think we talked about this last time—in our eight categories of Schools Plus, we do not have a category, as you know, called FASD, and that was the topic of our conversation. But we have categories, for example, global —

Mr Axworthy: Global developmental delay.

Ms O'Neill: In regards to the label, whether it is called FASD or it is called something else, we believe that the students are always identified under one of the other categories because if they have FASD, they always show under the global developmental delay or one of the other categories. So when we are around in schools, we agree it would be useful to be able to identify specifically children with FASD, but they currently already, by virtue of their characteristics, end up being funded under one of the other categories. There might be a couple of students—I think you might have raised a couple—actually that might have fallen out and were not covered, but the advice that we have is that by virtue of the problems that manifest through FASD, these students are almost always picked up in one of the other categories.

[10.15 am]

Mr Axworthy: In addition to that, what we now do is we screen all children as they enter preprimary school. We screen those children to ensure, if there is any risk—we call it literacy and numeracy screening, but because of the age of the children it is pre-literacy and pre-numeracy. We are looking for those precursors to the development of good literacy skills and good numeracy skills. Clearly, children who have any kind of global developmental delay or cognitive disorder would perform poorly on this.

The CHAIR: Have an IQ less than 70.

Ms O'Neill: That is right.

Mr Axworthy: But similarly, those children who have a specific learning disability that does not affect their global development or their global cognitive development would also get picked up at this point. Our point in doing this is not just so we can screen, it is so that we can start tailoring programs immediately on those children. We do not want to give them a label to say, "You're going to fail to read" or "You're going to fail to progress", but we want to pick them up early so we can tailor a program to pick up any of the deficits, which is a similar notion to the AEDI, except the AEDI is more on a whole population basis whereas what we are talking about is at the individual student basis. We want to screen those children. It enables us at that point to pick two very distinct groups of children, or three distinct groups of children I guess—those who are showing very advanced signs of having already, at the age of four or five, made progress that normally you would see in six or seven-year-olds with their reading. We want to make sure those children do not get held back as they move into their formal learning. Those children at the bottom clearly have not got, what in the past we would have called "don't meet the readiness for formal learning", that show us their oral language is impaired, that they need a lot of extra work with phonetics, that they probably need some more direct instruction; an explicit teaching of things. Then there is the large group in the middle of course who look like normal children and are moving along nicely.

The CHAIR: We were told how in Canada they have specific packages for children with FASD to help them with reading and mathematics. Would you be able to provide us with supplementary information at some point? There is no urgency. I guess you would need to check across different schools. If it is not within the 10 days we normally get supplementary information, that would be fine; if we could have it within a few weeks.

Ms O'Neill: Janet, what are you actually after?

The CHAIR: They have specific online packages for children who are having problems. In Victoria at the moment, at the beginning of the semester, some schools will put online, "This is the curriculum for the semester; that is what we're going to be doing", so that parents at home know. If it is preprimary and dinosaurs, parents do not find out until the end of the term but find out at the beginning of the term so they can help their children.

Ms O'Neill: What we might be able to give you is some examples. We would have 770 different versions, because every school would develop their own version of that. We have a syllabus document, and we are going into the national curriculum. We produce high-level resources

including digital resources—in fact we lead Australia in some of that work. We provide system-level packages of information, but school-by-school they would develop their own. We would be able to give some examples.

The CHAIR: Any examples that you might have that are in the public domain, that we can list, so that anyone who is reading the report can see there is a child who is three or four—as people become more knowledgeable about the symptoms that accompany FASD, if they are concerned their child may have, we would have a list of, "At this age, these are some packages."

Ms O'Neill: We might have some phases. We have a commercial arrangement with a group called WestOne that used to be part of the department when we were joined. I did not know if they were available publicly. But you think they are available to schools?

Ms Healy: Yes, only to our schools. We do have explicit literacy and numeracy year-by-year packages which teachers in our schools all have access to, and which they use.

The CHAIR: Are they online?

Ms Healy: Yes, they are online.

The CHAIR: Maybe if we could have that list as well; that would be lovely.

Ms O'Neill: Janet, can I add one thing: as you have been to Canada, did they speak about the MDR—the new middle years index? It might be worthwhile the committee having a look at that. In Australia, South Australia is trialling it. We are the only other state that is involved in that trial. We only have a handful of schools involved, but nonetheless we were very keen, for all the reasons you are talking about, because it relates not only to the early years. Students can develop, as you know, symptoms, conditions and behaviours later on. There is now coming out of Canada the middle years index. That will supplement what has been found in the ADR.

The CHAIR: I appreciate you informing us about that. We tried to get to as many sessions as we could, but unfortunately, if that came up as part of the conference —

Mr P.B. WATSON: You mean to say you missed one!

The CHAIR: Have you seen the timetable? We did our best going to different rooms.

Ms O'Neill: Perhaps we could forward to you what we have, or at least website links or something.

The CHAIR: That would be wonderful.

Ms O'Neill: It might be useful to at least know a bit about that. It is pretty new in Australia. We are one of the only states involved.

The CHAIR: We will have a five-minute break.

Proceedings suspended from 10.21 to 10.28 am

[Mr P.B. Watson took the chair.]

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am really interested in the vocational education and training component in schools and how the profile of that may have changed over the last three years. It was going gangbusters with a very strong push by government to see more VET embedded in schools. I detect a shift away from that, but I could be wrong. I wanted your comments on that. That then links into the subsequent question about participation, coordinators and managers and how all that is working.

Ms O'Neill: You are quite right—there has been a lot of push around VET over some time. Of course there has always been a vocational component in schools, but over, I think, probably the last 10 years, that has really exponentially grown. Of course pre the leaving age changes, some students—in fact the greater proportion of students who were interested vocationally—would leave school and pursue it. Interestingly, with the leaving age, my observation—at the time I was involved in the policy, there was a much greater anticipation that students would go to TAFE. As you know, they could go to any of those options: employment, to TAFE, and apprenticeships. Many

more stayed than was anticipated. That is an interesting thing. This is just my observation: in part, parents know where they are when they are at school. Of course the fees are voluntary, so there were not necessarily more opportunities in terms of employment for people to go to. I guess the sum total is that there ended up being more students in schools than we thought. Vocational training opportunities continue to be a challenge for us. I do not think there is any foot off the pedal or gas in terms of vocational education and training, certainly from our perspective. For example, in 2009—if I give you a couple of years—79.9 per cent of year 11s did vocational education and training. Some kids do it full time; some do a mixture.

Mr Axworthy: They completed a unit of competency.

Mr Clery: That is a completion rate per unit.

Ms O'Neill: So, 79.9 per cent of year 11s completed at least a unit of competency. That rose to 81.6 per cent in 2010, and rose to 90.8 per cent in 2011. That gives an indication. In year 12, for the same time period, it would go 84.9, 87.2 and 94.4. Correct me if I am wrong, that is —

Mr Clery: That is actually referring to the percentage of students who commence a unit as opposed to the proportion of the cohort.

Ms L.L. BAKER: What you said then: does it mean the number of students who successfully completed their unit?

Mr Clery: A unit of competency.

Ms O'Neill: A unit of competency.

Mr Clery: Probably a better indication is the number of students who actually, by the end of year 12, have completed a VET qualification.

Ms L.L. BAKER: That would be cool; thank you.

Mr Clery: In 2011, we had 5 300 students in public schools complete a VET qualification. That is up from 3 500 in 2009.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Out of how many of those ones who completed?

Mr Clery: Sorry?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: You said so many completed it—out of how many?

Mr Clery: Completed a qualification. That is out of the total year 12 cohort of approximately 12 000 students. That has been a huge growth in the last two years. That has also been a growth that has happened, encouragingly, at cert 2 level or higher.

Ms O'Neill: There is more, and at a higher level. We are pretty encouraged by those sorts of results.

[10.33 am]

Mr Axworthy: I would say there has been a change, if you like, in emphasis. I think at one stage there was a general push to make available to students a lot of what we call vocational educational opportunities. As we have realised that children—I should not call them children at this age; they are young people—are now starting to take up those opportunities, we are now trying to make sure that they get onto what we call a pathway that leads them to something. So rather than just do a bit of this and a bit of that and a bit of something else, which by the time they leave school does not lead them any further towards progressing later on, what we want to do is move them into a pathway. For some children, that pathway may be an academic pathway that can take them into university and whatever. Another pathway may be a very clear trade-oriented pathway that leads directly into that. For others, it is about engaging and sampling the outside world. But we want to then build that up so that at least they get a certificate I and ideally at least a certificate II. Now our push is that we want children, if they are going down that vocational education training pathway in schools, to get a certificate II, which is really the entry level to go on. It is not a recognised

qualification that will necessarily immediately provide them with a job, but it is entry into the next stage of their training.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Thank you for that, David. How successful is that pathway into TAFE? You say you have got so many thousand kids coming out. How many of those actually get accepted by TAFE? Do you have any idea?

Ms O'Neill: We do a destination survey, so if out of that there is some information that we can provide, we will be happy to do that.

Ms L.L. BAKER: That would be great, just on the number who are accepted.

Mr Axworthy: What I would say is that the Department of Training and Workforce Development of course have also over this period of time been changing their view of what goes on in TAFE to a certain extent, and it is now very much geared towards skills training for the workplace. It has always been that, but it is now very tightly geared to that. So the number of programs and courses that they run is directly related to where there are skills shortages.

Ms O'Neill: I think the challenge is exactly that, that DTWD, with their focus on skills shortage areas, actually hold the preponderance of funding for vocational education and training, and so they structure those courses. People sometimes expect there to be a one-to-one course correspondence, and there is in a lot of ways, but we have also a bunch of students who are not yet in the certificate II–III space. So we use vocational education also for that group that sits a bit further back here, for engagement. A lot of those students want to do nail artistry or that sort of work, which is great for where they are at that time, but TAFE is not offering anything in that field. So we are trying to always over time involve the continuum, such that this focus on the skills shortage does not lock out those kids who are not quite in that space.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Does that mean you have to work more with other private RTOs in the training sector?

Mr Axworthy: Yes.

Ms L.L. BAKER: How easy or hard is it for you to strike up those kinds of relationships across the system?

Ms O'Neill: Schools do it individually really well, and they receive additional funding, which we call engagement funding.

Ms Healy: We have got 21 public schools, and that includes two senior colleges that also operate as RTOs themselves.

Mr Axworthy: So they in their own right can deliver the training package.

Ms O'Neill: So we do it in different ways. They get additional funding. Some are training organisation in their own right and go through the accreditation processes for that. How difficult is it? It depends on where they are located. They may be located in the metropolitan area where there is more industry and an economic base for those kinds of programs. In country areas, we also have good relationships with—to give you a good example, Peter—the TAFE in Albany and the health stuff that is emerging there, which is really spectacular, and with community groups. So what we need to be doing into the future, and we are doing it now, is work more closely with those groups, because they need a sustainable funding base to be able to continue their work. It is sometimes a bit dependent on just who and what is around in the local area. So they are pretty creative.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Can you run me through the FTE count for the participation officers in the last four or years?

Ms O'Neill: It started off at 100, when the raising of the school leaving age was first introduced. Two years ago, it was reduced to 50. So they are the participation coordinators.

Ms L.L. BAKER: It was 2010 when it was reduced, was it not?

Ms Healy: Yes, it was. At the moment for each education region they have a position called engagement and transition manager, and then we still have the participation coordinators attached to each region. At the moment there are 14 engagement and transition managers and 49.5 FTE for participation coordinators. Then we also have our EVE coordinators. Each region also has an allocation of an EVE coordinator who supports the schools to develop a VET program.

Ms O'Neill: Sometimes people focus just on the participation, but there are actually three layers of support that work across the system.

Mr Axworthy: The participation people were there, if you like, to deal with non-participation—that is, to try to make sure that people who were not participating did participate. Their task was to follow up those people.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: So this is to make sure that the kids are actually going to their courses?

Ms O'Neill: No. These are the kids who are not doing anything.

Mr Axworthy: These are the kids who would in the past have left school at year 10. What we found was that year 11 has come around and they are not there, and they have not enrolled in anything. So then they are chased up to get them into either a school program, a training program or employment, or a mixture of all of those.

Ms L.L. BAKER: From memory, those participation officers were put in place when we put up the year 12 leaving age; we supplemented it with the participation officers at the time.

Ms O'Neill: Yes. At the time when the leaving age was raised, we knew that there were all these students who used to not have to come to school at that age and now have to come, and some of them do not want to come.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: And some of the teachers do not want them to come either!

Ms O'Neill: We have a list of them. We know who they are individually. The role of those people is to target and find them, because they are in the shops or at home, and connect them with a meaningful program.

Ms L.L. BAKER: So you have 49.5 FTE of those participation coordinators?

Ms Healy: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: South Australia is considering a funding model under which the funding will follow the student rather than be simply given to the school at the start of the year, to encourage schools to work more proactively on retention. What do you think of that idea?

Ms O'Neill: Well, we think a lot about that idea, and we instituted our own review of funding not very long ago, and that is with cabinet now. The problem that we have with all sorts of funding—with that model in South Australia they will find this as well—is that theoretically it is a good model, obviously, because we have high levels of mobility. As you would know as local members, that would mean that if, for example, class X has 18 students, and three or four leave, and the funding follows them, they will lose part of that teacher. So the reality on the ground is that there would be restructuring more than we see it now—and you know the reaction you get from parents if you try to restructure at any time. At the beginning of each year, we have the projection of the enrolment, and we fund on that, and then we have the actual enrolment and we have to make some adjustments.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: How soon do you know about the population of your school so that you can do these sorts of things?

Ms O'Neill: It is very complex. In about August, schools do a projection. It is only a projection. You do not know until day one who is actually going to turn up. You can be pretty certain about the bulk. But we had some schools this year where 40 additional students turned up on day one. We did not know they were coming. Some parents will let you know, and some do not; or they have

decided over the Christmas holidays to leave. So you might gain 40 that you have never heard of before, and you have lost 25 that you did not know you would be losing. That is why there is this mad scramble on day one where sometimes we have to shoot extra teachers down to the school to bridge the gap. So you can never be certain. You can be certain within a range, but there is always flexibility, because parents have a choice. They are meant to enrol and tell us by August the year before, but history shows—it is same for every other state—that people's circumstances change and they move and they will tell you when they are good and ready. The act provides for parents to be able to enrol their children in their local school, and schools have to take them. If parents move into their local area, schools have to take the children. The prediction of enrolment is not an exact science by a long shot.

[10.45 am]

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Do you get many come, say, a month later, especially with fly in, fly out?

Ms O'Neill: Yes, all the time.

Mr Axworthy: At the moment, children are arriving every day in a school somewhere because the numbers are actually growing.

Ms O'Neill: We had 7 000 additional students this year. That is additional, on top. It is the first time it has happened in that quantum. I think I might have mentioned this last year that we did have a couple of thousand extra last year; 7 000 extra this year; just less than half probably in the early years.

Mr Axworthy: There is a baby boom coming through.

Ms O'Neill: Yes; talk about the birth rate growth.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is it also people coming over for the fly in, fly out?

Mr Axworthy: Yes, it is.

Ms O'Neill: Yes; we are having interstate migration and the overseas migration. Of course, as soon as you have that, you also have an additional burden—when I say burden, I do not mean that negatively—of costs around 457 visa people with language difficulties and backgrounds.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: How do you work out your budget on things like this?

Ms O'Neill: You can ask me that in a couple of weeks, Mr Watson!

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I know, but I was thinking that it must be difficult.

Ms O'Neill: It is difficult.

Mr Axworthy: It is difficult.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: If you have 7 000 extra children each year and they have to be in by August the previous year —

Ms O'Neill: Which they are not, because the reality is —

The DEPUTY CHAIR: That is right.

Ms O'Neill: The problem with that is when a large proportion of them are kindergarten students, you actually do not know because you have never engaged with them before. So schools are becoming really skilled at being out at the local community play groups, parent groups, trying to get a sense of how many students there are. The simple fact is while the rule says enrol by August, particularly in low SES areas, they will turn up on the day of school.

How do we manage in terms of our budget? We do a lot of modelling and a lot of projection. That is why we ask schools to project their enrolments. They do that on the basis of the August census. Then day one comes and then we have a February census. But it is true to say there are high levels of mobility around Australia and people moving in and out of schools all the time. In the August

census they project. Let us say their projection says they have X number of students and that gives them, let us say, 50 staff, on day one, if they have had a massive influx, we give them additional staff, if they have lost a bunch of students, we will adjust their budget down. But from then on in, for the rest of the year, if they get additional students, we fund them, but if they lose students, it is not taken away from them because class structures are set.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is it the same for independent schools?

Ms O'Neill: Do you mean public independent schools?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Yes.

Ms O'Neill: Yes; it is the same.

Mr Axworthy: Yes; once the budget is struck. The unders and overs exercise happens about the second or third week of term. Then if, as Sharyn said, a school has an increase, that would result in an additional 0.4 of a teacher—so if they have more students that equate to that—we give them the extra resources, but if they lose they do not lose the resource.

Ms O'Neill: The management of the budget is difficult because it is demand driven. If people turn up; it is a public school, so they need to be serviced. It is always a pretty fine balancing act.

Mr Axworthy: When I say that schools do not lose is, the exception is that if a school has a student with disabilities, that is targeted at that student—the school may an get extra resource, may get extra teaching time or an extra aide for that student—and that family moves from that school and turns up at another school, we ensure that the new school gets the additional resources immediately.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: So it is transferred from one to the other.

Ms O'Neill: Theoretically it is. If you take, for example, Tambellup or a school in your location and there is a student with a disability and they get a teacher's aide, and the teacher is there for a couple of years, under the government's mode of employment policy, they become permanent. We try to redeploy them to somewhere close by. The person is a long-term Tambellup resident; there is a limitation on how far you can ask them to travel. It is a challenge for us. Sometimes we have to maintain that person at that place because they are a permanent staff member and we cannot move them. But we also have to fund where the child has moved to. So it is challenging.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I have one question left on the participation issue. In relation to the DEWA funding that you get around participation —

Ms O'Neill: Did you say DEWA funding?

Ms L.L. BAKER: Yes — to work with students in years 11 to 12, would you like to comment on a statement I have in front of me about the disengagement process impacting on retention, starting earlier than years 11 and 12. So, basically, where should we be investing?

Ms O'Neill: If we take the year 11s out of it for a moment and talk about disengagement per se, a body of research says that a group of boys in about year 3 start disengaging from schooling in general. There are various transition points, but they are arbitrary points in the schooling sector, so it is different for different groups of kids. The research has raised boys in year 3 as a particular issue that warrants some attention. Year 11 and 12 children's disposition to their learning is well set before 11 and 12. So if you are focussing on engagement and focussing only on years 11 and 12, you have left your run a bit too late. Our focus is on engagement right through all the schooling years. That is why we put such an emphasis, I guess, on things like student services, particularly in secondary. Engagement is not, and should not, be characterised as only a secondary problem.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Can you enlighten us on why boys disengage at year 3, in that research—just a synopsis.

Ms O'Neill: Have we got anything?

Ms L.L. BAKER: From memory will do.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: They start following footy teams!

Ms O'Neill: Obviously, it is not all boys in year 3.

Ms L.L. BAKER: No; some?

Ms O'Neill: But some boys. I have to follow that up.

Mr Axworthy: A large number of theories are put up. One of those is the degree of feminisation of primary schools and the lack of male role models in primary school. I am not saying that is the reason, but that has been speculated on as a particular reason. The other thing is that, typically—this is not a Western Australian thing; it is not even an Australian thing; it is a worldwide phenomenon—girls do develop quicker in those early years. Boys do seem to lag behind and by the time you get to year 3, it can be quite noticeable that the best students, the ones that are achieving well—the top students—tend to be the girls. A number of boys say, "Well, I'm not going to play that game, I'll play the other game where I'm better", sort of mentality, if you like. These are not cut and dried; these can be addressed. But, as I say, there are a number of theories. I have not seen anything in the literature that suggests any really hard physiological explanation other than the fact that it is known that the neurological sheath of boys develops slower than it does in girls.

Ms O'Neill: There is also in the curriculum and the pedagogy et cetera that it is the typical point at which there is a bit of a movement from the conceptual where you have a lot of play; you have a lot of tactile, concrete —

Ms L.L. BAKER: They have to write something! I did not say that!

Mr Axworthy: It gets abstract; it gets hard.

Ms O'Neill: There is a shift to the discipline of writing and sitting at the desk a bit more. It is changing the concrete, I guess, to the theoretical, so for some students, particularly some boys, that can be a period —

Also the other noticeable point of transition or disengagement for Aboriginal boys is around year 5 or 6 where they are starting culturally to be more akin to a man. Particularly as we are a highly feminised workforce, the acceptance of the authority of the women is a huge issue. That is one that is a bit more obvious.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Thank you.

Mr Axworthy: We talked here about engagement. There is engagement and when kids start to disengage there are early signs of disengagement. They are still coming to school; they are still sitting at the desk and still have a book in front of them, but they are not tuned in to it. Later signs of disengagement are where they start acting out and not coming to school; they start truanting and their attendance drops down to non-participation. We talk about participation and engagement. Now, clearly a lack of participation is the ultimate form of non-engagement. Part of that pipeline project was to look at picking up the early signs of disengagement among kids to find those soft signs early so that we could intervene before it got to the stage of —

Ms O'Neill: I think it would be really useful if we could provide you with a summary of the pipeline project, which was actually about engagement. In just looking at the analysis, they say there are about four groups. There is 60 per cent of students who behave productively. They said that about 20 per cent of all students were disengaged with instruction, were not aggressive and were not non-compliant; 12 per cent of students were engaged in low-level destructive behaviour such as calling out and seeking attention; and about eight per cent were aggressive and non-compliant. It is quite interesting and it does talk a bit more about all those contributing factors to engagement. We would be pretty happy to provide you with that because it might go to some of the questions you were talking about. I think it does talk about boys in particular. There is one other

element to it. This particular study makes the relationship between disengagement and classroom learning and they say most students who exhibit unproductive behaviour—they are not doing much—do not have psychological or medical problems; they are just disengaged.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: If you can provide that by supplementary that would be good.

Getting on to attendance, is non-attendance getting better or worse as a percentage of the school population over the last 10 to 15 years, and how does WA rate compared with other states in Australia as a whole?

Ms O'Neill: The short answer is that it is stable. I have got that here somewhere.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is that stability statewide?

Ms O'Neill: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: What about the various regions? Obviously, there are regions up north that would be.

Ms O'Neill: In 2009, 91.08 per cent of students who attended regularly and we are at 91.14, so it is a marginal increase, but it is fairly stable over time. I thought a bit about this last night knowing we would talk about it. What is interesting, which I do not think we have given consideration to is that when the leaving age increased—we talked about this earlier—we now have all these students who, ordinarily, would not have to be there and who now have to be there. While we have said over a long time it is stable and attendance is difficult, last night I was thinking that the fact that it is stable, I think, is quite remarkable given that we have several thousand additional kids who used to not be there, a bunch who actually do not want to be there. While we get criticised for not improving it, I think it is remarkable we have managed to maintain it at a stable level. That being said, irregular student attendance is a real problem for us. What we brought today, if I can ask someone to find it, is a bit of a breakdown of, what it means for you specifically if you do not attend. For example, if you did not come for an average of five days a term between years 1 and 10—there would be a number of kids in that category—you would miss out on approximately one year of school. If you missed one day a week when you were in school from years 1 to 10, you would you have missed two whole years of school.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: What is the regular attendance; you have 90 plus?

Mr Axworthy: We say 90 per cent attendance. Anything above that is regular. Below 90 per cent, down to 80 per cent, we would classify as being indicative of a child being at risk and then the level of risk gets more and more severe.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is it 90 per cent non-attendance?

Ms O'Neill: Attending on 90 per cent of the occasions when you could attend.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: That means if you are below that, you are at risk?

Mr Axworthy: Yes. That is not necessarily —

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I see a lot of kids in Albany walking around the streets and they would be below 90 per cent.

[11.00 am]

Mr Axworthy: That is the problem, Peter. When we talk about non-attendance, we think of the truanter—the kid who does not go to school at all or the ones whose attendance is one day a year sort of thing. There are some children like that, but not many, and they are not really the major problem. The major problem is those kids that drop out, take off a day a week and do not think much about it or they skip this and that. They are the ones that you see.

Ms O'Neill: One of the worst groups is in year 1, interestingly.

Mr Axworthy: Those are not children who are skipping school.

Ms O'Neill: As David said, they are not the ones who are bunking off at lunch time; it is their parents. It is a legal requirement to be at school. As you might know, recently the government changed so that preprimary is now compulsory as well. We have done a lot of work in this area. We have done a huge parent campaign over the last couple of years, and we have put a lot of effort in. We have, I think, 40 AIE schools which receive additional funding. As you know, schools actually do a lot of work in this area, including feeding students, going around picking them up, bringing them to school and extended services after school to maintain attendance. We have mentors for Aboriginal students. I have been fairly public about my view about the mutual obligation around attendance.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I agree.

Ms O'Neill: But there is only so much you can do. We are doing a lot and we can do more and we will do more. But, at the end of the day, for young children, parents are choosing not to bring them. We have responsible parenting orders and, of course, prosecution available to us and all of those instruments are there, but they are not straightforward. Then, with the older students, some of them are choosing not to be there. There is always this great confusion around attendance and truancy. Truancy is where there is a long-term pattern of not attending. People ask whether we have a truancy rate. There is no truancy rate. The reason for that is we have a figure for non-attendance, but for some children non-attending is because they have had the flu for two weeks and for others it is that they are just not there. Parents do not always want to tell us that the reason the students are not there is because they do not know where they are themselves. Truancy in itself is a difficult concept, but we know there is a small percentage of students that attend less than 50 per cent of the time. They are at serious, serious risk and they are the ones that the commissioner would tend to have involvement with and that you would see causing havoc around and about. We also have students whose whereabouts are unknown and we maintain a list of students. On that are students who leave the state altogether and just do not tell us, and we keep trying to pursue them. It is quite a complex area, but it is absolutely critical to students' progress and success that they are in school. It is a legislative requirement: they have to be there by law. We have done a lot of work. We have had a whole strategy around this and we will continue to work through those. The best strategies are the ones that the schools come up with because they are individualised and the schools have very good relationships, by and large, with parents. The parents are very often the same parents that DCP and the police are working with, so we have good collaboration around that. We are always asked the question, "Why aren't you prosecuting more?" Prosecution is the last resort, but also you are prosecuting the people who are most unlikely to pay and it will have no effect on the outcome.

Mr Axworthy: The ones that we cannot prosecute, because it is intermittent, are the families where for a variety of reasons they determine that it is better for their child to stay at home and have a bit of family time. Increasingly, we are seeing that linked to fly in, fly out arrangements.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: That will be my next question.

Mr Axworthy: A lot of this, again, is anecdotal. I would like to think there is a bit more basis to it than people just plucking it out, but we do not specifically record "are you a fly in, fly out dad?" or not.

Ms O'Neill: Parents do not have to declare that.

Mr Axworthy: They do not have to declare it, but the school generally knows that. In those schools where they know there are a lot of fly in, fly out people, they will say and they know. There is a little bit of the two-week holiday in Bali kind of thing, but more frequently it is just periodic, "It's a good day to go fishing," and that would be a great thing for dad to do with his son or whatever. It is that thing that if they miss a day a week they are missing an enormous amount of school.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: A lot of people will see the trip to Bali when there is no school on as a lot cheaper.

Mr Axworthy: It is cheaper.

Ms O'Neill: And there are no kids there; that is right!

Mr Axworthy: We try to explain to parents that education is a sequential thing. They may only miss one day, but if they miss that little bit tomorrow it is going to be hard to make the connection to what was there the day before. The teacher has to backtrack constantly and while they are backtracking for this kid, they are turning off another kid who says, "I learnt that yesterday and I want to go on." It makes it very difficult.

Ms O'Neill: One of the very positive things we have been involved with, and we are really leading, is the tri-border strategy—South Australia, Northern Territory and us—in which we have 285 schools involved from Western Australia and that, and a handful of those are Catholic schools. It is bringing forward interesting data and it is live data, so it is comprehensive sharing of live data of all of the kids in that area who move about. As an example, between February 2009 and December 2011—so over a two-year period—one student attended nine different schools in that region; one attended eight; two attended seven different schools; and 21 students attended six different schools. That is a lot of movement. What people forget when they talk to us about this is that these kids generally do not leave one and turn up at another; there can be two months' break in between. The data shows that 552 students—there are not that many kids out there—attended four different schools. The other issue that we have is that they go under different names, particularly if someone dies in the local community, so attendance is pretty complex out in these places. But we have won some national awards for that sort of stuff and we are extending it to include some other areas. That is one thing that will be useful.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I was an air force brat, so I went from state to state and I know how difficult it was then. In that attendance rate of 90.7 per cent or whatever, what percentage is there of boys and girls? Is there any big difference between the boys and the girls?

Mr Axworthy: I am not sure if we have the breakdown in here.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Would it be possible to get that?

Mr Axworthy: Certainly, we can you find that.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I have one other question: are there enough truancy officers?

Mr Axworthy: We do not have something called "truancy officers", we have attendance officers. This is where these things cover each other. Every single school has to follow up on attendance, and they are the people that are best placed to do it because they know whether they are there or not. Every region has someone who undertakes an attendance function.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We used to have that at the district education office, which we do not have any more.

Ms O'Neill: What—the officers or the attendance people? Every region has someone designated with the function, but very few would have an officer called "attendance officer" as they do a range of functions. Of course, in years 11 and 12, while it is not strictly attendance, the participation people virtually serve that function because they are engaging them and, as we said earlier, there are 49 in terms of the number of participation coordinators.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: They would have pretty big areas, would they not? I think we have only one for the great southern.

Ms Healy: We do not have the numbers today, but there are a number of officers who are formally classified as attendance officers and who have the attendance badge, so we can find out the data around that.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Can I ask a question which is not on the paperwork?

Ms O'Neill: Mr Watson does!

Ms L.L. BAKER: I am more polite than Mr Watson, though! If you cannot answer this, I understand completely. It has come to my attention over recent months that for the group of kids with the highest suicide rate in Australia—that is the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender children—in Western Australia the Education Department information on bullying in that area is quite difficult to get to if you are trying to access it through the web. You can go back and read the *Hansard* debates about this over the last few weeks on some of the issues being discussed there. Is there any work currently under way or plans to address the growing problem with suicides in that group of children? I know we might not have the figures because it is quite hard to identify them when the coroner looks. Can you comment on that? I know the question is not on the record.

Ms O'Neill: I think we answered some of the questions in this area at least in estimates last year on whether we have a specific policy or program around bullying in this area. I think our answer at the time, which is still the answer, is that it is included in our overall approach to bullying and not separated as a specific group. Are we doing any work to separate it or separately on it? I think the answer is "not specifically".

Ms Healy: That is correct.

Mr Axworthy: The major thing with bullying, like a lot of things, is to try to stop it happening in the first instance. You do that largely in this area by having regular awareness of people about the particular incidents. We have worked very closely with the Health Department over the last four or five years in developing a resource that is called "Growing and Developing Healthy Relationships", which has modules on a whole raft of what frequently in the past were called subgroups or groups of people that tended to end up being the victims of bullying. This would include anything related to sexual identity, transgender or a whole host of those things. It is dealt with quite sensitively in the materials and in the resources in the sense that aspects are introduced for younger children through to adolescents at a level at which one would expect that they can deal with the concepts and understand what is going on. I know that is not dealing specifically with bullying, but if we can create in our school culture a more tolerant and more accepting view of all sorts of groups and an understanding that relationships are formed in a variety of different ways and existing different forms, both in the school and outside of the school in the wider community, that is what we would be aiming to do.

Ms O'Neill: Part of the challenge in schools on this is the difficulty that young people have in talking about it, identifying themselves and reasons for that, which is why we are talking about it, because of the consequent bullying that occurs. Certainly over the last few years I have heard some commentary from teachers at school in this area. I think it is the growing confidence of some young people to say to their peers that they are gay or transgender or something—I am not suggesting it was good when it was hidden—but I think we have to look at ways to support them. But as important—not as important, but equally important is educating the rest of the student population who are the ones that make it easy or hard. I think that our student services people are reasonably good, but I think there is more that we can do in this area. It is not an easy area, because it is so difficult to work with young people in situ, but it is something that we would like to give more attention to. We tend to do it with the Health Department, but it would be wrong to say at this moment that we have dedicated additional work or funding to do it.

Ms Healy: We are also working with some of the subgroups that the Equal Opportunity Commission currently has in place around developing some support resources and fact sheets around homophobic bullying. They would certainty complement the resource that David just talked about. So we are very actively involved with those working groups.

Ms O'Neill: That is a first step; it is a new step.

Mr Axworthy: It is fair to say, as Sharon said, it is difficult for the children, but it is also difficult for some teachers to talk about these things and to get into this space. With our total workforce, there is also a need for us to be aware of this.

Ms O'Neill: I do not think the difficulty is a reason not to pursue it.

Mr Axworthy: No.

Ms O'Neill: I know that you are not suggesting that. We have some first steps with some new resources.

[11.15 am]

Mr Axworthy: I would not want to gloss over the fact that these are very real issues.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: What about bullying of teachers by children, and assaults? Is that a concern?

Mr Axworthy: Yes, especially now with the capacity, if you like, for people to use social media like Facebook and whatever and the ease with which an allegation of any kind can be made, unfounded though it may be. The possibility of that to get some traction in the wider community is immense.

Ms O'Neill: And as you know, there are occasions of verbal and physical assaults on teachers by students. In fact, I excluded a student just on Monday for that reason. There is not a huge amount, but any assault on a teacher or a student, for that matter, is a cause for concern. We have ongoing training about keeping the workplace safe. I have said quite publicly to teachers that if they are assaulted by a student, I actually believe that they should pursue criminal proceedings because teachers—because we are from a human services background, and because often the kids are troubled—tend to not want to make their lives worse but in fact, sometimes intervention and support is not available until there is that tipping point. It is not that I want people to go out and have everyone charged; I do not mean that, but I think the respect of the community for teachers needs to be supported, and I encourage them to take the steps that they can take, and we will do what we can—although it is a civil matter—to support them.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Can we go on to the information communications technology? I can see you nodding over there! Has the federally funded digital education revolution impacted on Western Australian schools?

Mr Doyle: It certainly has, in the high schools, for years 9 to 12, which is the target of the program. There are 228 schools involved in that, and over 49 000 computers have been acquired by our schools in this program, to bring it up to one computer for every student in years 9 to 12 in those schools. All schools have met that target, apart from SIDE, and SIDE is expected to meet its target by June this year.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is there any training for schools on how to set up their ICT resources?

Mr Doyle: Yes, in terms of training we provide a whole lot of tech notes and advice, particularly in relation to our standard operating environment, which I think I mentioned at the last session. We had a lengthy discussion about that environment, and that is offered to all the schools that participate. The vast majority are taking that up and have indicated that they want to have that done, so we replace, bring up to date, and make more technically competent their whole environment to absorb these computers. The standard operating environment is aimed at reducing complexity in the schools, removing technical hardware from the schools and moving that away from the school into the centre, or consolidating bits of hardware by using technical tools. The technicians in schools and others are able to attend an accreditation course for working in our environments, and as I said, under the rollout of the standard operating environment, we produce a whole lot of tech notes and information regarding what it is that is happening, what they can do, and what the processes are around all those types of things. This also goes to the heart of our contracted integrators that schools sometimes use; they do not have a technical resource on schools because of size or priority, but they can contract someone in. Each of those contractors have to be accredited for working in our schools

so that they can manage the standard operating environment and understand how it works and how it should be put together.

Ms O'Neill: There is also a grant to every school for ICT.

Mr Doyle: There is a grant, as part of the overall school grant—a financial grant, and I think I provided information last time about the school ICT grant. That is primarily for maintaining a fleet of devices; one computer for every five kids in high schools, and one for every 10 students in primary schools. The remainder of that funding is available for associated tasks with technology; it can be technical support, it can be professional development, it can be the acquisition of other equipment.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: So there is a specific line item of funding for that?

Mr Doyle: In the school grant there is an ICT grant.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: In a survey by CSA, a significant number of schools without a dedicated ICT officer reflected that school support staff are increasingly unable to cope with the constant pressure from their day-to-day workload. What is being done to address that?

Mr Doyle: I have sympathy for them; I feel the same, sometimes! I am not sure what that means and how I can answer that.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Well, it means that, in some schools, they are spending more time on support than they are on their normal jobs.

Mr Doyle: For all those schools I just mentioned, and NSSCF and those sorts of things, the ultimate goal is that they will have centralised support across the schools. At the moment, schools fit into one of three categories. A standard school is supported in the administration block, but not in the classroom block, because of varieties of stuff that can happen in the classroom. Schools in a number of our programs also receive support end to end, and they would be included in our program that we call "Learning with ICT", and there are about 200 schools in that. They get technical support available, end to end, from central office. Then there is a group, like the NSSCF, that get support in that way. What we do for other staff —

Ms O'Neill: They can use their grants, though, for technical support.

Mr Doyle: Sure, they can use their grants. Priorities are set largely within the schools in terms of resourcing, and they will determine what that might be. The industry standard says something like, when you have 500 computers, you probably need one person to look after them. But that is an industry standard, and it varies depending on who they are. What we try to do, of course, is make the system as simple for them as possible. We put in place strategic contracts so that they do not have to argy-bargy with people about buying equipment; it is pretty straightforward.

Ms O'Neill: We have a help desk.

Mr Doyle: We certainly have a customer service section.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I hope it is better than ours!

Mr Doyle: Well, it is. It is a very highly regarded service, the customer service centre. We do annual surveys on customer service satisfaction, and —

Ms O'Neill: It is open on the weekends, for teachers.

Mr Doyle: — it is very highly regarded.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is it open on the weekends?

Mr Doyle: They are open seven days a week. We go till 10.00 pm weeknights, and on weekends we go from 10.00 am until 4.00 pm.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: What about regional areas? They are saying that they do not get support in regional areas. Is that an issue?

Mr Doyle: It is an issue, distance. The further you get away from major regional centres, the more difficult it is to get any range of skills and, I think, technical skills more so. That is exacerbated by activity in the mineral resources sector and all those sorts of things. It makes it even more difficult to get hold of resources, but I think it is a problem in regional areas, but that is not isolated to technical skills; a whole range of skills are impacted on in regional Western Australia.

Ms O'Neill: There are some schools that pool money and contract technical support, but when something breaks down a person has to travel to come and assist them, so it is the same as problems that we have with maintenance.

Mr Axworthy: With ordinary maintenance, yes.

Mr Doyle: And travel. We encourage schools to try to collaborate on some of those sorts of things. When they are doing a tour, they can ring around to local communities and say, "Do you need techs, because we can get one in".

Ms O'Neill: Our new networks, for example, are collaborating, and they might contract a technical support officer between a group of them.

Mr Doyle: Correct.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I have one last question. How does the smarter schools national partnership address disadvantage, improving teacher quality and raising literacy and numeracy outcomes, work in WA?

Ms O'Neill: That is a huge question.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: You have five minutes!

Ms O'Neill: I will talk quickly! There are a number of national partnerships. There is one for low SES, there is one for literacy and numeracy, and there is one for teacher quality. We receive significant amounts of funding from those. In striking those agreements, there are things that we are required to deliver, and then we have some flexibility to be able to deliver on those. The literacy and numeracy ones have just finished now, or towards the end of this year —

Mr Axworthy: No, we finished at the end of last year.

Ms O'Neill: Sorry, the end of last year. That was a two-year agreement that schools identified through the NAPLAN results. The low SES partnership, those schools, as I recall, were identified by the commonwealth government in terms of using the index of disadvantage. That is a five-year program that we are about three years through, and there are different schools that come on board at different times. They are doing some quite interesting things; we have a group of schools that are looking at extended school services. Some of those schools have additional staff, and they are doing targeted intervention programs. Some of those schools are looking at working with the community, and how the community sector can support students in schools—breakfast clubs, et cetera. The other one, teacher quality, the third one, is—there has been some focus on this recently with Rewarding Teachers. The commonwealth government has announced the Rewarding Teachers funding, where some teachers will be identified and rewarded for their practice. We have, probably under each of those strategies, 10 or 20 overarching strategies and quite a few schools involved. They are time-limited, and so the issue, of course, into the future is, if any of those strategies are useful, the sustainability of that funding. We also have a national partnership in early childhood. That is money that we have always received in different ways. There is more of it, and I do not know the total quantum, but it is part of the change that we have where now we have a national education agreement and the funding that we receive from the Australian government is given to us in a different form—less tied, although, I would say that was the original intent; actually that the tying of the funds to seek outcomes and deliverables has been much more than was anticipated, so it

is all part of the setting. It has been a terrific injection of funding into schools, and I think it has stimulated some different thinking, but any short-term injection of funding is problematic, when you give consideration to what needs to happen post that funding stopping. As you know, with schools it is very hard to withdraw programs when funding comes to an end.

Mr Axworthy: Just one other thing about the partnership is that it was a national partnership for the state, so it covered all three of the sectors, and part of the work has been collaborating with the other sectors. In fact, we have worked very tightly and very closely with the independent schools sector and the Catholic education sector and have a number of particular programs that we share. We share resources and we share the program. That has been a strength, which in WA is very unlike most other states. I will not say every other state, but the thought of the government sector and the non-government sector and the Catholic sector working closely together is just unusual, shall we say.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you for your evidence before the committee today. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made and the transcript returned within 10 days of the date of the letter attached to it. If the transcript is not returned within this period, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added by these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. If you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please include a supplementary submission for the committee's consideration when you return your corrected transcript of evidence. Thanks once again for coming this morning.

Hearing concluded at 11.28 am