

**Extract from the proof copy of Hansard in respect of the Senate Estimates Committee scrutiny of the Employment, Education & Workplace Relations portfolio on 11 February 2010**

**Senator FIELDING**— ... There has been a question raised about disability funding. I do not want to get into that in too much detail other than there is a feeling that one of the downsides—and I think there are a lot of upsides to measuring performance in schools—is that there may be a reluctance to take on kids with learning difficulties. What is your view on those sorts of concerns? It involves extra cost for schools in handling people with disabilities and there are some problems around how much funding they can get.

**Dr Bruniges**—We are seeing a lot more integration of disabilities in schools these days. You have particular units in schools. There are support structures both for teaching and for learning and there is assessment of those students with a learning disability. We will continue to work closely at the national level with associations around what we can do to provide further support.

Just before Christmas, I had a meeting with Fiona Forbes, head of the Australian Special Education Principals Association, who does a great deal of work in that area. Out of the principals' forum last year, the Deputy Prime Minister gave a commitment to some further follow-up around looking at the feasibility of the assessment of learning with students with disabilities. I have also heard directly some of the issues that have been raised through my contact with those associations, and we are working with them to have a look at the range of support we can put in place.

**Senator FIELDING**—There is a concern at the moment that some of the lower performing students in some of these schools get branded and it just creates more of a public shaming for some of those people. So I am very interested in exactly what is happening in that area. It may not be in this area, but it is a bit like GPs being able to refer someone through to a specialist. I tend to think teachers should be able to refer a kid through to a free assessment for a learning disability like dyslexia or something. That way you will know for sure who you are dealing with. It is something that I really believe needs to happen. Years ago I think there used to be some sort of funding for testing of kids with dyslexia and those sorts of things and that is greatly missed.

**Ms Hanlon**—Senator, I think we may have discussed this at the last hearing to a degree. I think I explained that there is funding for students with disabilities that the Commonwealth provides on a per capita basis, but that is based on a definitional issue at the state level. We certainly take the point about students with learning difficulties as a separate case, if you like, to students with severe physical disabilities. Learning difficulties is a growing space. It is an environment where a whole range of other diagnostic instruments are required to diagnose the specific learning difficulties of children. I would suggest that through the national partnership again, one of the emphases be on diagnostic tools to support teachers in mainstream classes to define those learning difficulties as early as possible.

**Senator FIELDING**—The concept I am thinking about is that someone needs to refer these kids through so that they can find out exactly where they are at—not in a negative way but in a positive way, to actually help them.

**Ms Hanlon**—Yes, defining it.

**Senator FIELDING**—This is the problem: it is picked up too late, they fall beyond and, after a year and a half or two years, the best thing about school is coming home; the worst thing is going to school. So if it is not picked up early, they really fall behind.

**Dr Bruniges**—The other part of that is preservice teacher education. What do we have in place when teachers are being trained to help them identify when there is an issue, so that they can act promptly and get expert support by referrals? There are probably a range of programs in different states and territories where early intervention programs exist, but it is certainly an area where we are happy to do more work, both in the preservice field and in our current workforce.

**Senator FIELDING**—How much money would a school receive from the federal government if they had a student with a disability enrolled with them, and how would that compare if they were in a public versus

a private school? Are there different funding arrangements for those in public and private schools? If you have got a kid with a disability, is it the same?

**Dr Bruniges**—Senator, that will depend from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. One of the commitments of the ministerial council has been to look at a common definition.

**Senator FIELDING**—What about in Victoria, for example, which you would know?

**Dr Bruniges**—I know that in the ACT there is no difference. They have a scan process.

**Senator FIELDING**—But in Victoria there is.

**Dr Bruniges**—I am not sure about Victoria. I would have to take that on notice.

**Senator FIELDING**—Could you come back to us then with what they are in each state and territory?

**Dr Bruniges**—Absolutely.

**Senator FIELDING**—Sorry, I interrupted you. Keep on going. There are differences between them.

**Dr Bruniges**—There are, yes. The way in which those processes work in different states and territories is different. I can talk about the ACT, where they have a student appraisal of need, which is quite a rigorous process for all students in both government and non-government sectors and which works out the range and type of support that students on that scale will receive—for example, an additional teachers' aide or additional support material and so forth. It does vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

**Senator FIELDING**—Could you provide on notice for each state and territory what the differences are, because there is a concern about different levels of funding for a kid with a disability whether you go to a public or a private school. That is a concern, I think, to a lot of people. Monash University reported on portable funding for education of students with disabilities. That Monash report was released late last year, wasn't it?

**Dr Phillips**—Yes, it was released in April 2009.

**Senator FIELDING**—It identified some major concerns for the education of these students: inadequate funding levels, lack of national agreement on a set of criteria for assessing disabilities, which you went into before, lack of funding parity across the schooling sectors. What is the plan there? I know we touched on some of the issues, but what is the department's plan for this?

**Dr Phillips**—The department is working across a number of areas, Senator Fielding. On the COAG work plan in 2010 is the commencement of a work project to look at consistent definition of students with disabilities so that we are in a better position regarding data and comparability. There is also, of course, the work being done under the National Disability Strategy. There is the work that has been done recently through the dyslexia forum, and that report is being considered by government. There is also work in the review of the national disability in education standards. There are a range of activities.

**Senator FIELDING**—Yes, it seems as if there are a range of activities, but it is not really tied together.

**Dr Bruniges**—Regarding the opportunity to tie it together, the first meeting of senior officials in education and training across the country will occur on 12 March. One of the discussions that we want to have is about common definition, because that really is the cornerstone of the way in which different jurisdictions do their counts, in and out, for disabilities and, indeed, how those fundings fall out. So 12 March will be the first conversation of the senior education officials to look at those aspects.

**Senator FIELDING**—There was another report released late last year, the People with Disabilities and

Carer Council's report *Shut out: the experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*, which reinforced that teachers and schools lack resources to ensure the full participation of students with disabilities. You can see what I am getting at from here. Is there any move for an additional per capita allowance for students with identified disabilities?

**Dr Bruniges**—Again, we would want to look at that on a jurisdiction by jurisdiction base and identify the differentiation that already exists before we do a common national definition, and then have a look at the impact of that.

**Senator FIELDING**—What are the timeframes? It sounds like there is a bit of work going on, but I am not overly convinced.

**Dr Bruniges**—As you are aware, it is a very complex issue. There has been a quite deliberate placement of that process on the senior officials' agenda to start that conversation early this year. Certainly, we will progress through that timeframe, knowing that, first of all, we will have to collect the information around each jurisdiction, which, as I said, we are happy to take on notice; and, secondly, we will have to work through the complexities of the funding system for students with disabilities in each state and territory.

**Senator FIELDING**—When will that be done, because, quite clearly, most of the reports are saying that there needs to be additional resources, additional per capita expenditure. What you are saying is that that could be the case but you need to analyse it a bit further. I am trying to work out whether we are going to get to a certain timeline at the end and say, 'Yes, we do have a problem in this state or territory. It seems to be across the board, by the way.'

**Dr Bruniges**—Probably the first sharing of that information will happen through the officials' forum. Senator, I cannot give you a definitive timeframe for that at this stage. Each jurisdiction will come to it with a lot of views about their own system and how well it does or does not perform. I guess we will have to look at trying to harness best practice across all of those jurisdictions to make sure that, when we advise the ministerial council, we have captured all of that information. I do acknowledge it is very complex. The reports that you have mentioned have been done externally and are great resources for us. We will be using them as resources to inform that discussion as well.

**Senator FIELDING**—I look forward to getting some of those answers on notice and I will pursue this in the next estimates to see how it is progressing. Hopefully, it will not be in the same state, with people saying, 'There is more analysis going on.' Thanks, Chair.