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HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION

NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION

MR C. SIDOTI, Commissioner

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

AT HOBART ON FRIDAY, 5 NOVEMBER 1999 AT 8.25 AM

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THE COMMISSIONER: For the identification of the tapes at the beginning this is the Hobart hearings of the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education. John, would you like to introduce yourself first for the tape and then make whatever comments you want and then we can have some discussions about them.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Okay, it's John Butterworth representing the Catholic Education Office here in Hobart. I suppose, Chris, the best thing is I just answer your questions in relation to that sheet.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, that will be fine, if you want to go through those.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Do you want me just to read through the answers or - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, that might be the easiest because that way at least I'd know the information as well.

[Student population and retention]

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, all the schools are co-ed. The other one is in relation to Indigenous students - 4% are Indigenous students. The next question is in relation to learning difficulties. In remote and rural areas it's 1.41%, whereas statewide for us it's 1.35. Physical disabilities: point 5% of the students have physical disabilities. In relation to children from non-English-speaking background, there are 2.4% in the rural and remote areas and the home languages range from Greek, Italian, Chinese, Bosnians, Spanish, etcetera, but they're all very, very small numbers. It's usually just one or two families in each case.

I have some figures for retention rates which indicates that the students in rural and remote areas - their retention is lower than students in the city areas. I could give you these figures - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: You might just hand them up, if you like, John, rather than have to read them out. I'll ask Celia to pass them across and I'll have a look.

MR BUTTERWORTH: They are taken over either a two-year, three-year, four or five-year span. I think all but one of them indicates the rural and remote retention is lower than the other areas. Did you want any other - further questions on that, Chris?

THE COMMISSIONER: Perhaps we might just pause there and look at the retention, particularly the seven to nines, 64%, as against 69% for others. Both figures in fact, I think, are below national averages - - -

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, they would be.

THE COMMISSIONER: - - - which I think Tasmania as a whole is as well.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Tasmania is, yes - generally yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does the Catholic system have particular strategies for retaining kids or encouraging them back into the system?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I don't think we have any particular strategies apart from the general encouragement, which is the philosophy, I suppose of all education - is to keep them at school. I suppose five years ago a particular strategy was to build a grade 11 and grade 12 college here in Hobart so that all the high school students were able to feed on to our grade 11 and 12 college. That was in recognition that the country schools in Tasmania, high schools, found it very difficult to staff and maintain grade 11 and 12s, so with the central college it has given a focus for the children. It is somewhere where they recognise - and that's where they will complete their education in the 11 and 12s. So I suppose that's been a particular strategy which has been modelled on the state lines here in Tasmania with the 11 and 12 colleges.

THE COMMISSIONER: We have received a couple of comments, or a comment from a few parents, that their view is that the Year 11-12 colleges in the state system have in fact deterred retention because there is a psychology amongst the kids that high school basically finishes at Year 10 and that those who would normally see themselves at the same school as going through, see this as being a big change and so make a more conscious decision not to go on at that stage. I don't know if there's any evidence for that, other than anecdotal.

MR BUTTERWORTH: I think it's probably anecdotal, yes. There are the two sides to the argument: one is retain your children from Prep all the way through to 12 so that you have the family closeness feeling all the way through and therefore it's more likely for the child to stay on to grade 12; or you have the other argument that you equip your colleges with the best teachers and the best learning environment and therefore that's a natural attraction in the educational process.

I think a disadvantage which country children do have over city children is their ability to mix with different groups within society and, from my experience in the country, you would have children coming to

school - and if you have a child who doesn't fit the normal mould of a country - and I'm not being critical of country children but there tends to be a country mould and a country expectation for children in the country. I would generalise and say boys are very macho. They play their football and they drink their beer and they drive their cars around the car block. The girls are there to offer them applause and to support them. So there's this environment within the country.

You do have children who come through who want to break this mould and, for the girls, it's often to seek academic success in that area and they find it very difficult to leave their peers and seek that particular path in towns where their talents lie. The same for the boys who are artistic. It's very difficult for them to break away from that particular role and I think this is where children in the country are discriminated against. The country towns are not able to cope with the range of persons that are in those towns and I think this is where we see the discrimination occurring and then we see it when they come to town.

The country children still tend to keep their little cluster when they come - the little group - even at these grade 11 and 12 colleges, but it is the children who have survived who have been a bit different. The girls have been academic or the boys have been artistic. They get to grade 11 and 12 and from my observation - it's just an observation - they are the ones that then seem to really be able to fully develop who they are and they have sort of, I suppose - the country people will often say, "They've broken the mould. They followed a new path." That's my observation of course.

THE COMMISSIONER: So in coming to town you've got the Year 11-12 college here in Hobart as well as I think a couple of 7 to 12 schools.

MR BUTTERWORTH: That's right.

THE COMMISSIONER: And the same in Launceston. Where else are there Catholic high schools going to Year 12?

MR BUTTERWORTH: In Burnie the college there goes all the way through to 12, so that basically takes care of the north-west of Tasmania. The Launceston one again goes through from - St Patrick's starts at grade 8, 8 to 12 - and that draws on all the primary schools. So for the Catholic system up north there's the primary schools, the feeders, and then they go to the one high school. In Hobart, as you said, they basically go to grade 10 and then there's the grade 11 and 12 Guildford Young College and then there are two country colleges which go from Prep to 10. One is up in George Town so the children from there - again the retention to encourage the child to go down to Launceston requires a lot of skill and a lot of support in that particular case. The other case is from Cygnet where the children come up after

grade 10 to grade 11 and 12 here in Hobart. Cygnet has a better retention rate because of probably its proximity to the town and the ability to be able to socialise more with the children from this area.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do the schools provide boarding or hostel accommodation?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Guildford Young College does - grade 11 and 12 does. They have it here in Hobart, yes, and that would be the only one.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does it operate as a boarding school or with separate hostel accommodation?

MR BUTTERWORTH: It's hostel, yes. It's basically a separate hostel accommodation.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know how many kids can be accommodated there?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I think it's somewhere around 12 to 20. It's that order. I think it's full each year.

THE COMMISSIONER: It's full each year - right.

MR BUTTERWORTH: I think so. It has only been operating three years. The Catholic Education Office purchased it and run it as a hostel for these students. I think some students who attend TAFE also utilise it as well in the interim period.

THE COMMISSIONER: I assume that there are also significant numbers of country children who would make their own boarding arrangements in Hobart?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: But probably the country kids would be in the minority within the school.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, they're definitely in the minority, yes. I would estimate there's probably about 50% of them - like in the Huon area, Cygnet area - who still stay at home and the others will either be boarding with relatives or brothers and sisters here in Hobart.

THE COMMISSIONER: Okay, thank you. Keep on going.

[Information technology]

MR BUTTERWORTH: The next question there was on computers and Internet. I wasn't too sure whether you got a copy of table 4 which detailed the computer thrust. My numbering was table A10.

THE COMMISSIONER: No, I don't have a copy of it, I'm afraid. It may be with the original submission but it's not with the one that I've got. That goes through it all, does it?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, I think it probably answers it pretty well. What's happened this year is the office has undertaken to establish a database and therefore they've gone through and counted what has been in each school, what bits and pieces of computer have been in schools and they have drawn a baseline, so by the end of this year - well, the beginning of this year three schools had Internet connections out of 37. By the end of this year it's anticipated all 37 schools will have Internet connections and all schools will also have local area networks within their schools, connecting libraries and classrooms, etcetera.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do the schools have to pay the Internet costs and STD charges, if there's no local service provider, out of the general school budget?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, that's right.

THE COMMISSIONER: So there's no supplementation system that, if those who are in country areas have to pay STD, they get some additional allowance?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I'm doing this from memory but I think there was a Commonwealth program which Brian Harradine was pushing.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, it's come out of the privatisation of Telstra.

MR BUTTERWORTH: I don't know whether that's come off the ground or not but there was something there which was on offer and that's all I can, yes, remember - there was something on offer, some help. But that certainly is a substantial cost - is the chasing up of your connector.

[Transport]

It mentions public transport. There's one Catholic school owns the public licences to operate school buses in Tasmania. So all bus routes in Tasmania are contracted and licensed by the department and one school has such a contract. A number of schools have school buses, which they use for excursions, etcetera. The limitation of school buses is more probably a state issue and it has only been raised for the state area. At the moment all Catholic children have equal access to

any school bus, which has been recently changed. However, Catholic high schools in the country have the length of their day restricted by the local state primary school. So basically those two high schools operate in a half-hour shorter day than they would prefer but they have to collaborate with the local state school. This issue has been taken up.

The concern that the Catholic Education Office has is the criteria for bussing, that there has to be eight children at a particular bus stop before a bus will go there, and also the philosophy or the guidelines of the department is that contractors are encouraged to put on large buses - 40-seaters - whereas for us who have worked in the country we would argue that the safer buses are the smaller buses to manage the winding roads without footpaths. Again, that is an issue which we discuss now and then with the transport department in Tasmania. Our argument would be, if the buses were smaller, more children could be serviced and not be left to walk along dangerous roads to schools - is our basic argument. So what is our current need? There are some students who cannot get to schools and we've got no numbers or figures on those at all.

[Aboriginal programs]

Aboriginal cultural studies: yes, it is encouraged. The Catholic Education Department encourages the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural studies from the IESIP funds. The Catholic Education Office, by utilising those Commonwealth funds, employs one full-time home liaison cultural officer, who is Indigenous. We employ, or the schools through this program employ 10 teacher aides who are also Indigenous. Seven part-time resource teachers are also employed through this money and these resource teachers basically have a cluster of schools to look after - four or five schools - so that it's covered in that particular way.

Literacy and numeracy support for low achievers, the Indigenous children - there's an offer through this money and professional development of all teachers in the areas of Aboriginal studies - is money used for - Aboriginal speakers and artists are also taken into schools utilising that particular Commonwealth money.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know in what areas of the curriculum the Aboriginal cultural studies are taught?

MR BUTTERWORTH: In the high school it's primarily taught within the religious education program and it's taught there from the point of "our ancestors, of our roots from our past", and also in the higher grades it's taught as social justice issues; for example, deaths in custody forms a focal part of the religious education program. In the primary schools it's taught more under the SOSE banner where particular historical facts of

Australia are taught bringing in the Indigenous culture and certainly speakers, etcetera, come in to highlight as well.

ASSPA: 17 of the 37 schools have ASSPA committees. Is there anything else on that area? I am just scanning through it.

THE COMMISSIONER: One of the issues raised both in this state and elsewhere is the provision of breakfast programs. Is that provided in any of the schools and, if so, is that done under ASSPA or IESIP funding or is it done through other funding?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I know it's done in some schools. From my memory there was a school in the south which ran it from ASSPA money, down at Geeveston Primary School. There is one of the schools on the west coast which offers a breakfast program but I'm not too sure where they source that money from. It could be ASSPA or it could be other funds. So it has been done, yes.

[Students with disabilities]

Physical disabilities: I suppose the underpinning philosophy is that Catholic education, especially faith development and pastoral care, is available to all Catholic children. I think that's our basic philosophy. So therefore within the schools we have mechanisms in informal support and formal structures; therefore all of these hopefully would support a child with any disability. At the moment the office itself with some of the principals is in the process of forming support and guidelines for enrolment and the support of students with disabilities, recognising that we must be extra sensitive to children with disabilities that we do not discriminate against them in any way. So we are working through a particular support procedure and enrolment application procedure for students with disabilities.

THE COMMISSIONER: With the children with physical disabilities, to what extent are the schools actually accessible? Has there been a program to make them accessible or is it done on a case-by-case basis as required?

MR BUTTERWORTH: It's done on a case-by-case basis, and the informal structure - two years ago when I was principal of St James we had a boy in a wheelchair come and it only took us a matter of two or three months to make the school accessible to him, and in that process we learnt a lot, and are learning a lot, of how to make his life as equal as anybody else in the school. So it happens and we do it on a case-by-case. What we are looking at doing now is drawing up some procedures and things we should do and how we should do them to make sure that we offer to a child who wants our education - that we make the school available to them to the best of our abilities.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does the government, the state government or the federal government, provide capital funding to enable school conversions or is that resourced from parish funds or CEO funds?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Parish funds, CEO funds and P and F funds. There used to be a small amount of money available for minor capital works. It was part of one of the Commonwealth special education programs that so much money could be used for capital funding. It was never in a great deal of dollars but it helped, every bit would help, and it would help to change toilets and put in ramps and things like that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does that minor capital works fund still provide the major funding for it or is it - - -

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, the major portion of funding would come from the schools themselves, yes, at this stage.

THE COMMISSIONER: From the schools themselves, right. Do you know or do you have any view on whether conversion on a case-by-case basis fails to attract students who have got disabilities? Do parents say, "Well, if there's a school that is accessible we'll go there" rather than thinking, "Well, we want to go to this school and can it be made accessible?"

MR BUTTERWORTH: I'm not sure - yes, I think it probably would influence a person in their enrolment application if they knew the school didn't have accessibility for their child who is disabled. I think, from my personal opinion, I would be discouraged to go to that school. But then you do have parents in regions in Tasmania where there is only one school available, so that's their only option so there is no choice. If I had the freedom to choose, then I probably would choose a school which I knew had the accessibility to it.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does the CEO have a staffing formula that is adjusted to take account of kids with disabilities within a school?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, it can be accessed through the special education funding, so a child in a wheelchair, for instance, may require a person to be with them for a good portion of the day in certain subject areas in secondary school and money can be obtained from the CEO which comes from Commonwealth money for the employment of an aide or an assistant in that respect, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Is that done by way of a particular formula for the provision of an aide or is it more a matter of saying, "Well, what do we need to do to provide for this particular child?"

MR BUTTERWORTH: The child would be assessed and therefore rated and so - yes, the child would be assessed and if that child meets that particular assessment, then money would be allocated to that child in that school. The school puts in a submission arguing for that child to be at that particular level.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does the CEO consider that the pool of funds it has got available is adequate to the demands or the needs in this area?

MR BUTTERWORTH: No, I don't think we'd ever consider it adequate - no. Certainly from experience it isn't adequate, no. We have a small source of money through the Commonwealth and then it has to be supplemented with other moneys, either through the magical school budget or from the P and F often taking on the cause and raising money and purchasing particular equipment. At other times, of course, parents or community members coming into the school and assisting with the child on a voluntary basis is the other procedure.

THE COMMISSIONER: So the supplementation becomes a responsibility of the community - the local community - rather than of the CEO at the state level?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, which melds in with our philosophy as Catholic education. As Catholics, we will assist everybody to receive a Catholic education, so it's part of that philosophy - or one would hope so.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you.

[Learning outcomes evaluation]

MR BUTTERWORTH: According to me the next is what programs are in place to assess the learning progress of Tasmanian Catholic school students? The system has adopted the First Steps Development Continuum. This is used in the schools for monitoring the progress of all students. It's a useful continuum because the data can be used for the Commonwealth monitoring and benchmarking as well. So it dovetails very well and that's the First Steps Development Continuum.

We have got a collaborative project with the Department of Education in OER. There is the kindergarten check list as used by all kindergartens. As well as these assessments there is also at sector level individual schools use a range of assessment tools, and I've just got a number of them here. There is the Neil analysis for reading, key maths, TORCH which is a test of comprehension, MIST - middle infant screening test - South Australian spelling tests, Macquarie assessment of reading. These are just examples of the various instruments we use

to assess students in their learning outcome. The First Steps is the one which we're going with - literacy - and it does tie in very well with the Commonwealth benchmarks and we're in the process of developing the numeracy curriculum, I suppose you could say, at this stage and that's on the drawing board.

[Students with special needs; students at risk]

The majority of our schools employ a special education teacher who has the responsibility to look after the children with special needs. The special needs can be of course physical disability, a sensory disability, learning disability, emotional disability - the full range - or to those children who hopefully are gifted as well. We try to cater for those in the same way through the same person by employment of a particular person.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know if there are special programs for children who have behavioural difficulties?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I'm trying to think - I suppose the most common one in Tasmania for Catholic schools, Tasmania, would be - the nearest thing to a program would be Rogers. I'm trying to think of his first name. He has presented a particular method of dealing with children with behavioural problems in classroom situations; therefore it's classroom management skills. That is sort of a common - it's a Rogers, let's say, technique - a commonly encouraged method for teachers to use in the classroom.

For children with the more gross behavioural problems we bring in psychologists, who we contract on an hourly basis, or counsellors who also come in on an hourly basis. Again, any of those programs at this stage are very much looking at raising the self-esteem of the child and letting the child discover who they are as a person. So it's really looking at them as a person so, when they better know themselves as a person, they are able to relate more openly to people. We do bring in those types of support and I've just recently done some statistics for the year and up until August this year in the Catholic Education Office there were just over 300 children had been seen by psychologists or counsellors in our system and the majority of those were for behaviour.

[Exclusion]

THE COMMISSIONER: Does the CEO keep statistics of expulsions or exclusions from schools?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I'm sure there probably would be a record of expulsions. Exclusions are very much left to the schools themselves. I'm not quite sure if the schools would keep a record of any students they have excluded for a period at the time but - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, but if there was an expulsion or someone was asked not to come back next year or something, that would be reported through to the CEO central office?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, it has to be. Yes, the principal has to inform - within the Catholic system a principal cannot expel a child unless they get the approval of the director-general or his nominee for that expulsion. Exclusion can be done by a school principal but the school principal then notifies the director that that exclusion has occurred.

[Cross-sectoral collaboration]

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you. Question 6 dealing with cross-sectoral collaboration.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, there is a limited amount of collaboration between a state school and a Catholic school in a particular area. The collaboration depends very much on the relationship between principal-principal of the two schools and the staff and the staff of the two schools. The CEO, I'm sure - I don't think ever verbally expressed it - orally expressed it - but I think they would encourage Catholic principals certainly to liaise and be collaborative with the state school principals in their area.

We are not aware therefore at the CEO level of any sharing that does go on but from experience I do know that, when I was in the country, sharing used to go on. The sharing was primarily first of all socialising with the other staff so you established the environment for people to informally mix and, through the informality of a nice atmosphere, sharing goes on at that level. Then from that we even then went to sharing of first aid certification. We were able to collaborate on that and bring in a person, and staff from each school joined in that particular course. There is sharing always going on of sports equipment, even books, but it's done very much on a teacher-to-teacher basis as the sharing, or parent-to-parent basis for fares, etcetera, so it does go on in country schools but it's certainly left to the principal and the schools and it can change when a principal changes or a few staff members change.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know of any examples, John, where a staff person has been shared or a significant facility like a library has been shared?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Not in Tasmania, no. I do know of a staff member who has been shared and she was shared basically two days and three days and she happened to be a very talented teacher who lived in a country town and the state schools were very interested in her service full-time and so was the Catholic school and the

arrangement she liked in the end was to work a few at each place. She was a very valuable link between the two schools and she was an exceptional person.

THE COMMISSIONER: Was she employed, I would guess, on two separate contracts?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, on two separate contracts.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yesterday we were in the Queenstown-Strahan region. Queenstown has got a Catholic school and a state school. They have difficulty in attracting teachers there, particularly specialist teachers.

MR BUTTERWORTH: That's right.

THE COMMISSIONER: The two areas mentioned were arts and music, both of which could only - in the state system - have somebody part-time and have difficulty attracting anybody part-time obviously to come and work for two days a week in Queenstown. Are there any systems or structures, mechanisms, by which the two schools could discuss, "We'll jointly employ somebody. One or other of us will provide a full-time contract and the other can sublet or, alternatively, we will advertise together two contracts that make up a full-time job"? You don't know of that kind of an approach being taken anywhere?

MR BUTTERWORTH: No, I'm not aware of that approach being taken but I can't really see that the Catholic Education Office would have any problem with that approach being taken by a local principal. The office certainly would assist in the legalities of any employment condition and hopefully would be able to encourage them and assist them in doing it, yes. So hopefully we could react positively to the suggestion, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: It seems to be that the problem lies more in the state system, I must say, to that kind of an approach.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Right.

THE COMMISSIONER: Again it seems to me more ideological than other reasons, but I will be asking them later today too and see what they say here.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, I think it's achievable, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thanks, John.

[9 am]

MR BUTTERWORTH: The important thing, I think, about sharing between the two systems for teachers, the main avenue of course, is the professional associations, like your English association, English teachers - they are very, very important, and I think that's where a lot of cross-system sharing goes on, as well as at the secondary assessment level too. They're the two major bodies. Question 7, staff incentives?

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

[Staff incentives]

MR BUTTERWORTH: Principals on the west coast: they receive an annual allowance for that particular siting of the school. They receive assistance with housing and also with travel, and I've written down a favourable consideration for further appointments. Teachers are offered housing assistance and they too are offered favourable consideration for further appointments, so that's the attraction to the west coast. But at the moment we're having trouble finding an appointment for one of the schools on the west coast, attracting - this is to Rosebery, I believe. It's still vacant and that has been advertised since June, July. So it's pretty typical of the difficulty we have.

THE COMMISSIONER: How much are each of these allowances or bonuses?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Of the order of \$2-3,000 for the west coast.

THE COMMISSIONER: Is that the annual allowance the principal gets?

MR BUTTERWORTH: That's just an annual allowance for the principal, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is the housing subsidy and the travel subsidy or assistance?

MR BUTTERWORTH: The travel subsidy is - whenever the principal has to travel out of the district they're paid 47 cents a kilometre I think it is - they receive an allowance there.

THE COMMISSIONER: So that's out of district travel for work purposes or for any purpose?

MR BUTTERWORTH: It can be work or any purpose, yes - occasional, any purpose.

THE COMMISSIONER: If the principal wants to visit relatives in Hobart or Queenstown, that would be covered, would it?

MR BUTTERWORTH: If they were tied in with work.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, they come to Hobart for a meeting.

MR BUTTERWORTH: They're encouraged to tie it in with a meeting. And they get removal expenses paid if they've got furniture, etcetera.

THE COMMISSIONER: Is the teacher at Rosebery the only example you can think of where there is a teacher lacking and recruitment problems?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, there's a principal lacking there - yes, a principal still waiting, I'm sorry. Both principals on the west coast moved on this year and we've had one replacement but it's been very difficult to find a second person. Teachers are always difficult to attract to that area as they are in the more remote areas in Tasmania. In Tasmania we regard Cygnet as a remote area. So there can be difficulties there attracting again specialist teachers in the secondary area. What you alluded to before that occurs in the secondary school is where you may need a cooking teacher or a teacher of Japanese just for one or two days a week, and it's to make the offer attractive enough for them to come down, and that's the problem the secondary schools face in those areas.

[Professional development]

Question 8: are there any professional development programs offered outside Hobart and Launceston? Yes, there are. The Catholic education primarily offers professional development in faith, and these are offered at least twice a year in areas outside Hobart and Launceston. When there is a new teaching strategy or a new change in technology, looking back over the past few years, we generally offer one a year outside of those cities of Hobart and Launceston on average. There has been First Steps workshops going on around the state, Aboriginal studies, etcetera. They're the ones that have been running for the last few years.

THE COMMISSIONER: So when you say offered twice a year or once a year, do you mean there's a course that's taken on the road once or twice a year?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, certainly. So the one that goes around twice a year is a course on the road. So it goes along the north-west coast and then down to Hobart, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it may in fact be offered half a dozen times while on the road.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, that's right. So a lecturer or a presenter who facilitates is brought over from the mainland for a week and they do the road trip and we try to include Queenstown or Rosebery as often as possible for the teachers, and also the community in that area. A lot of these courses in faith development are often taken up by community members as well, which makes it financially viable for us to run the course.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do they tend to be day-long or multi-day courses or evening courses or school days or weekends?

MR BUTTERWORTH: The ones at the beginning of the year tend to be a day-long course, so it's a day like a Thursday. I think it's Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday in February the first week - in February we're running these courses along the north-west coast. The other times of the year they tend to then be evenings for two hours, and the evening slot is usually around 7.00 till 9.00 over four evenings over an eight-week period, and that's usually the winter months as well. So we try to vary it for the participants.

THE COMMISSIONER: How do the schools go in finding relief teachers for purposes like that?

MR BUTTERWORTH: There is difficulty. Yes, the principals on the west coast and the remote areas, they find it very, very difficult to get relief in professional development for their teachers.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does the CEO itself centrally do any arranging of relief?

MR BUTTERWORTH: No, we do not.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's entirely localised.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, it's entirely localised.

THE COMMISSIONER: Are there any permanent relief teachers available on a district or regional basis?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, you can tap them in through the state system but I think generally what happens is the school builds up their own group of relief teachers and they're the ones they generally call on. I think schools tend to like to have people back who have been there before and who they feel comfortable with and they know the students tend to feel comfortable with, so you tend to build up your reserve

bench which you call on, but the reserve bench is very, very thin in some areas.

THE COMMISSIONER: But the CEO wouldn't fund a school, for example, or a couple of schools, for a full-time relief above teacher numbers to work in three or four schools or a cluster of schools or something?

MR BUTTERWORTH: I think it probably would, yes. Yes, if that particular structure was needed, yes, I'd feel confident the CEO would find the resources to assist it, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: But you're not aware of that arrangement anywhere at the moment?

MR BUTTERWORTH: Not aware of it, no.

THE COMMISSIONER: The question of teacher relief is one thing that comes up absolutely everywhere, as you can imagine, that it's very difficult, and teachers generally who move into these areas get snapped up very quickly as full-time teachers within the schools.

MR BUTTERWORTH: That's right, yes. Yes, the grapevine works very well.

THE COMMISSIONER: That's all the eight questions that we gave you notice of, John. Were there other matters that you wanted to raise?

MR BUTTERWORTH: No, I think the point I was trying to make before about the students who are discriminated against in the country areas - you know, the girls who want to break the mould and the boys who want to break the mould - I think that to me is where we need to put help in some form to those particular children who do not fit the local mould and there's a very lonely existence for them. They're the ones who I am sure feel rejected, they're the ones you see standing quietly in the playground by themselves, and they're the ones you fear may do something dramatic or devastating. And it's to look at those particular children, who are quite normal, quite regular but a little bit different. They want to change the world.

That's where I really see help is needed in the country. And I'm not saying that against the country people at all, I respect the country children. It's just those children - they are the lonely ones in the classrooms and the lonely ones in the yards, and they're the ones you fear you're going to read about in the paper the next weekend.

[Suicide prevention]

THE COMMISSIONER: Are there suicide prevention programs that run through the schools? I mean, just taking up your last point, that they are the lonely kids - - -

MR BUTTERWORTH: They are, yes. I think most schools in the Catholic system would access it, probably not annually, but perhaps on a two-yearly basis they'd pick up a theme. They'd run with it in RE, the preciousness of life, but occasionally on probably about a two or three-year cycle they'd make it an issue within the school and really raise this awareness.

THE COMMISSIONER: So again it would be done on an ad hoc basis rather than a structured program to ensure that schools are getting regular - or staff get regular training in suicide prevention.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, it would be left to the autonomy of the school to run with it, and for the Catholic system the principals meet with the director once a term, and that's where the CEO may put out reminders, etcetera.

THE COMMISSIONER: A bit of advice.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Yes, and that's how the system would cater for it, yes, and any other issue.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you very much for coming in, John, particularly, as I said, so early in the morning. But given that we've got a full day we're very grateful that you were able to come in early and go through it all with us.

MR BUTTERWORTH: I'm very happy to come. Thank you for the opportunity.

THE COMMISSIONER: If there is other information that comes to your attention or those within the CEO that you'd like to send on, please feel free to do so. Thank you.

MR BUTTERWORTH: Will do. Thank you very much, Chris.

[9.15 am]

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you very much for coming along this morning. I know you've introduced yourselves twice already, but just for the record, if you'd just go along the line again and perhaps also indicate the areas of the department you're from. Then you might like

Alison, or any of your colleagues, to go straight into any comments you wanted to make of a verbal nature and we can then have some discussion. We set aside a long period of time; we may not use all of it, so don't feel as though you need to fill the space. But we found very early in the piece that we had so much to talk about with state education departments that it was better to set aside a decent block rather than find you and we becoming increasingly stressed because we had material we still wanted to cover. Thank you.

MS JACOB: I'm Alison Jacob and I'm the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Education and my responsibility is the strategic development area of the department.

MS DUNN: My name is Lyn Dunn. I'm the Acting Principal of the Tasmanian Open Learning Service which has within it the Tasmanian Open Learning Service school, which is the distance education school of the department.

MR YOUNG: I'm Graeme Young. I'm the Principal of Newstead College but I'm also the principal who coordinates the secondary colleges open learning network which provides distance education and open learning to Years 11 and 12 throughout the state.

MR LAYCOCK: I'm Chris Laycock. I'm the Coordinator of the Education Web site. My responsibilities extend across the divisions of education associated with the delivery of teaching and learning programs via the Internet and the Web.

MR KNEVETT: My name is Mitchell Knevett. My title is Manager, Information Resources, and I'm with the information management branch within the Department of Education, and my responsibility is strategy and policy issues to do with information management and information technology.

THE COMMISSIONER: Good, thank you all.

MS JACOB: Commissioner, we have actually prepared just a little bit of contextual information which I don't know whether you'll want to go into or not, but just to perhaps put the department in a bit of context.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, I'm happy if you did that.

MS JACOB: Then we've also prepared, as much as we possibly could, responses to the questions which you sent to us a couple of days ago as a result of our submission, so we'd be very happy to work through those.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, please.

MS JACOB: As these people have indicated, they've all got particular areas of expertise that you might particularly want to go into in some detail.

THE COMMISSIONER: Certainly the IT area is an important one and distance education equally, so I'm very grateful that you've come along to give us your expertise in those particular areas, so thank you.

MS JACOB: I've got all of these things in writing so I don't know whether you'd like me to provide that to you as we go.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, that might be easiest, Alison, if you wouldn't mind.

MS JACOB: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you.

[Departmental responsibilities]

MS JACOB: Basically the Department of Education, as you would know, has responsibility for not just schools but for other services such as libraries, which we think is a really useful thing to have, and community access centres which is increasingly becoming part of our overall network, and archive services. We also have responsibility for youth affairs and more recently for child care services. We really do take in all of those things.

We have an annual budget in excess of about \$650 million and our overall client base is around 270,000. That includes 75,000 children who are in the school system and about 50,000 students who are in the TAFE system. Of that 75,000 students in the school system, you can see the breakdown there on that table, of the types of schools they're in. I think that is probably fairly self-explanatory.

[Student population]

Just a little bit of overall contextual information: I think it's worth noting that we do have a declining population and in the age group that mostly affects the schools - the 0 to 4 age group - we have the highest decline of any state or territory and that's obviously going to impact on our enrolments over the next few years. However, the total number of students in our schools at the moment is relatively stable, although there have been some changes between the primary and the secondary sector. The largest increase has actually been through enrolments in open education, which I guess will be of particular relevance as we talk later on.

It's also perhaps worth noting that our share of the enrolments in the government school system is actually increasing in comparison to the non-government system, which is a bit different from other states. I suspect that's probably more economically based than anything else. I've also noted there that because of the declining population we will have several schools in the next few years - particularly in some of our schools with secondary groups of students - that will be under the 50-student mark. We see that as a fair challenge. How are we going to be able to provide a comprehensive curriculum for at least eight to 10 country schools over the next couple of years who will have less than 50 students? Some of them will have less than 10 students in the secondary years.

[School management]

As far as school organisation and management, I think it's worth noting that Tasmania has gone a fair way down the track of devolution and schools do have increasing responsibility for their own decision-making, but they don't have responsibility for staffing. That's still something which is outside their control and so that's obviously an issue for many schools. It's also worth noting, I think, that despite those increased roles and responsibilities, there hasn't been any increase in the kind of resource level that schools have had to deal with - with the kinds of things that they're dealing with.

Some schools are developing a more flexible organisational structure and that's something that we're actively encouraging, so increasingly schools are doing things like offering evening classes, offering online classes, having students working from home and so on. That is certainly something that we're actively encouraging. Another development that we're actively encouraging is schools to do more things together, to have some kind of cluster networks so that they share resources, so that they share facilities, particularly where there are a number of small schools that otherwise might not be able to do that.

Quite often school communities are taking that initiative themselves, where they're realising that if there are three schools in a very small area, and alone they're not able to do some things that they'd like to be able to do and not have the level of resources that they'd like, if they pool their resources and become a combined school they are able to function a lot more effectively. That's, for example, happened in Ravenswood in Launceston where the community made that decision and combined their primary schools and the high school into a combined school which is working relatively well.

[Student performance]

I just picked up some student learning and curriculum issues which I think are important. I think it's worth noting that generally speaking Tasmanian students are still performing at a level below national averages on the kinds of testing programs that we have access to. However, over the last couple of years there have been some substantial improvements and we're particularly heartened by the fact that the Year 3 students in the latest round of testing in relation to the national year 3 benchmarks - 84% of our Year 3 students achieved the benchmark which we understand from other states puts us towards the top of the range of the states' performance, which is quite a contrast to our record in previous years.

We think that's probably because we've put a lot of emphasis into literacy, particularly in the early years, over the last four or five years, and we think that's therefore having an effect. We'd have to say, though, that as we go up through the school the performance of some of our older students, in comparison to Australian averages, isn't as good.

Some of the specific literacy and numeracy programs - and I did actually bring one of our - which I'm happy to leave with you - a literacy and numeracy plan that details all of our literacy programs to give you just some idea of the kinds of programs that are in schools. I think it's worth noting that some schools have really lifted their standards by using some programs that have been introduced in the last couple of years. In particular I'd want to mention a program called PASS which is short for Program of Additional Support and Structure. That program has been implemented into a number of schools and the schools' records show that that is having an incredible effect in terms of improving their literacy results.

We're also picking up the Spaulding Literacy Program, which has caused a lot of controversy in some of our schools because it's a very structured, formal program, but again the results seem to indicate that is having a substantial effect and we hope that's one of the things that's contributing to the overall levels. It's actually worth noting, I think, that with the national literacy awards that were announced by Dr Kemp a couple of months ago, the state winner of that award was a very small country school, Smithton Primary, and three of the other finalists out of five were actually small rural schools. So I think it showed that where the schools have picked up programs they're actually able to show that they've made an impact and that they really are helping their kids to improve their outcomes.

We'd also like to just mention that post-compulsory education in the state I think has changed dramatically over the last few years and it might be something that Graeme will want to comment on later, but we've also just had a review of post-compulsory education which has

resulted in a number of recommendations for what the state should be trying to achieve as far as post-compulsory education is concerned. Again, I'd be happy to leave that list of recommendations with you. It is still a draft because what we've done is put that out for consultation and people are still responding to us. But it specifically does, for example, pick up the problems of low retention, low participation, low tertiary entrance from country areas and so on, and some of the things which we think we need to do about that. I'll leave that report with you.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thanks.

[Information technology]

MS JACOB: The other major change in terms of curriculum, I suppose, over the last few years has been the introduction of computers in schools. Chris and Mitch will talk a bit about that later. It's worth just emphasising that I think it's been a really significant cultural revolution in our schools, not just in terms of having computers in classrooms, but what that's done in terms of teachers thinking about the way they teach and the way children learn. I think it's had a marked effect.

We have some schools which we think are doing particularly well. We have seven lighthouse schools that were kind of at the forefront of having computers introduced into their classrooms, and there's a little booklet about that, which we'll give you later on, that details what those schools have achieved and how much change it made in their schools. We also have a network of what we call good practice schools, many of which again were in country areas. One of the things we found is that the country schools have actually been much quicker on the uptake of using information technology creatively, probably because there was a necessity to do that if they were going to be able to offer a reasonable curriculum and so on, as opposed to some of our urban schools that have been very slow and sort of on the back step.

We'd also like to just let you know that we are reviewing early childhood at the moment and that's largely because of the department taking on responsibility for child care and the fact that we felt we needed to better articulate what was happening in the child care sector with what was going to happen in our schools. We are also about to embark on a major curriculum review because we believe that the curriculum as it stands in our schools at the moment is not meeting the needs of students adequately and also it's totally impractical for teachers to actually be able to implement what they're being asked to do.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does that cover the whole period - K to 12?

MS JACOB: It will cover the whole gamut, yes. Just finally on curriculum I'd want to note that open learning is certainly a growth area and we think that one of the issues there is a marked lack of appropriate materials for people to use online. I mean, online access for these students is still very limited - and Lyn and other people will be talking about that later on - but it's certainly a major issue for us in terms of the paucity of good quality learning materials for students to be able to access online. The Discover Web site - that Chris will talk about in a moment - we think is something which has huge potential to revolutionise the way that students are able to access courses online.

[School management]

Very quickly, in terms of accountability, that's also been a major shift within our schools over the last few years. We've introduced a process that we call assisted schools self-review, which is really helping schools to review themselves by looking at data that they have available to them, by undertaking their own surveys, their own assessment programs and so on, in conjunction with their school community and the department, to come up with what we call a partnership agreement. I'll leave an example of that with you.

Every school now - by the end of this year - will have a partnership agreement. It's quite deliberately a very brief document, the idea being that some key findings about the school are just detailed and then the most important part of the partnership agreement is basically the outcome targets that the school agrees to try and achieve over the next three years. They include things such as literacy and numeracy, but they also look at things like parents' perception of the school, what teachers think about the school, the school leadership and so on.

Most schools have really taken on the idea of having a partnership agreement very positively, and I think it's been a very useful mechanism. It's replaced what used to be a very impractical planning process in some schools, of them having countless numbers of objectives and so forth that they were trying to achieve. It's limited it down to a few things which they really are feeling very serious and focused on. At the end of every year the schools are also now required to report on their progress towards those outcomes. So every school community will now have the opportunity to really know whether or not their school is achieving what they set out to achieve. I'll just leave those documents with you.

[Equity policy]

As far as some of the equity issues - and certainly we'll pick up some of those in response to the questions that you've asked - but I guess we'd want to just emphasise that we do feel pretty strongly committed towards equity. We do have a strong equity policy and within

that we are attempting to improve outcomes for educationally disadvantaged groups, but I think I'd also have to say that up until now the performance in many of those groups has not been as good as we'd want and, in particular in some of our subgroups such as Aboriginal students, we think that we have a long way to go and we'll talk about Aboriginal students perhaps later in response to your particular questions.

[Exclusion]

I've also detailed there some information about suspensions and exclusions from school just to give you some idea of the numbers of students that are excluded from school. The rate is relatively steady and at the moment the rate - well, the rate in 1998 was 4.89 per hundred students. That's the number of suspensions per number of students, rather than the number of students who are suspended. In most schools that rate is quite low, but we do have some schools where there is an unacceptably high rate of suspension. Also noted there is that in 1998 we had 107 exemptions from school. That's basically children who were 15 who, for some reason, have been exempted from having to remain at school until 16 - which is our compulsory school age. We think that rate is still too high and we're trying to reduce that.

I've also noted that we are in the end stages of a major review of inclusion of students with disabilities into regular schools and I'll speak about that a bit later in relation to some of the questions you asked as well, but I think that review is certainly going to have some very far-reaching recommendations as far as the use of resources and the areas where resources are certainly not meeting needs.

[Parental involvement]

As far as involvement of parents in the wider community - and obviously you're going to have an opportunity to talk to people like Susan later today - but I just want to note, I guess, that within the process of assisted school review we believe that there is the opportunity for parents to be quite genuinely involved in what their school is doing and in school planning activities, but again, I'd need to say that I think some schools are doing that very well and some schools at the moment are probably paying lip service to that requirement. We're trying to look at ways in which parents can be more creatively involved. 173 of our schools have got school councils and that's another way in which parents can be involved.

I guess we're in a climate of a fair bit of market competition and it's probably worth noting that there has been a substantial increase in the number of applications to open non-government schools that come from fairly small communities, in particular small country communities or small Christian communities who have applied to our Schools Registration Board to open a school. This year I expect that there will

probably be three new small country schools opened under the requirements of the Schools Registration Board.

We also have a Tasmanian Education Council that is composed of members of the community that also provides some advice to the minister on a variety of educational issues, which is another way that we hope to get some community input. That's really all I'd like to just note in terms of some introductory, contextual information.

THE COMMISSIONER: Obviously there are a lot of things there that I would like to go back over, but maybe if you just keep going with material first and then I can come back to issues.

MS JACOB: We could go either way: we could either go through your questions or I could get the people here to just give five or 10 minutes on their particular expert areas - so whichever you'd prefer.

THE COMMISSIONER: I don't know if I've got a preference - maybe the second, yes, if we have a couple of minutes on each area first.

MS JACOB: It gives me a break, too.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

[Distance education]

MS DUNN: I'm representing the Tasmanian Open Learning Service school and would start by saying that distance education has existed in one form or another in Tasmania since 1919. The current form, TOLS as we call it, was established in 1997 after review of the then Tasmanian School of Distance Education. TOLS caters for students from K to 10. It's staffed on a district high school model. It's also staffed to provide services to other schools in Tasmania and this has usually been rural and remote schools where there is a need for additional subjects, usually languages other than English, because of lack of availability of teachers in those rural areas. This year we have provided that educational service to over 200 students in rural and remote areas.

We also operate schoolrooms in Launceston General Hospital and the Royal Hobart Hospital, and from February to September 1,653 students accessed those schoolrooms. Tasmanian students can access TOLS using pretty strict criteria and they include isolation, travel - Tasmanian students who are overseas or interstate - medical reasons, either psychological or physiological, pregnancy and postnatal and exceptional circumstances. That's an increasingly significant part of our enrolment and it refers to students who, for one reason or another, need to spend longer or shorter periods out of the classroom.

I can go through the eligibility as far as isolation is concerned, but it's basically a Commonwealth government guideline about how many kilometres a student may be from the nearest bus and/or school. I have those and I can detail them later if that's - it's just pretty boring stuff.

MS JACOB: We've got them to provide to you.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, if they're handed up, that's fine.

MS DUNN: It's fairly fundamental stuff. At the end of October this year there were 333 full-time enrolments at TOLS. Of that 333, 51 were isolated students, which is 15.4%. Of the families - when we look at the data there - 75% had one enrolment at TOLS, which means that 25% had two enrolments. Of the students registered at TOLS, 53% received STAS - which is the State Student Assistance Scheme.

We operate by providing each student with a pastoral care teacher and that teacher is responsible for the provision of an education program. Sometimes students have access to specialist teachers if it's deemed to be appropriate, particularly in the senior years. Teachers communicate with their students regularly, at least once a week, either by phone, email - and we request visits at least twice a term. So there's a very strong communication pull between both student and teachers.

Several times a term we have activity days where students and parents are invited to come together to join and participate in an educationally meaningful activity. We also have workshops around the state where students are able to focus on a particular subject. We find these to be increasingly not well attended, and we're confused by that and trying to find out why that is so. It relates to a problem that I'll come back to, to talk about.

Each student has an educational program which is prepared based on the individuality of the student and in relation to the current circumstances and the literacy and numeracy levels. TOLS has the responsibility of preparing curriculum units so we not only teach but we have to prepare the materials that we do teach. These are known as curriculum packages. Increasingly and in line with best practice these contain a mix of media material and so most of them would have an audio cassette, a video cassette, an online component and increasingly, access to a chat room relative to that subject. It's interesting to note that we have now strong connections with all the materials producers on the mainland and our units compare pretty favourably, but we're also trying to work with them so that we're not re-inventing the wheel in terms of curriculum production.

One of the questions asked is if we in fact can compare the results of our students with other students in classroom schools. We have just gone, as Alison talked about the ASSR, the assisted school self-review, and the data there shows that we compare favourably. We are comparable in almost every way with a district school. For example, of Year 3 to 8 students tested in the progressive achievement test, literacy program, 85% were working at grade level or above. I note too that the English grade 10 results - we had 52% of the kids do a syllabus 416, which is the middle range course, 54% of state students were doing similarly.

It's interesting also to note that the ASSR data reveals that 94% of surveyed parents believed that we were meeting the academic needs of their child. 97% of parents believed that the school is caring and of the students surveyed, 100% of secondary students enjoyed the work that they were doing. We double-checked that because we couldn't quite believe it. We weren't sure that secondary students (indistinct)

MS JACOB: I'm not sure I believe it either.

[Distance education – information technology]

MS DUNN: So we went back and it is in fact true. Of the isolated enrolment group, 53% have access to a computer and of that 53%, 44 can access the Internet. But we obviously are trying to increase that and we have very strong connections with the community access centres because we're encouraging our students to go to those. We have a strong push in information technology and I'll list some of the things that we're doing.

We encourage information and communication components relative to IT in our curriculum units, have a strong use of email with our students, high internal use to try and get modelling going. We have chat rooms so that, for example, those kids doing grade 10 science can come together at a certain time and actually talk about their research processes. We've just launched a student lounge which is our virtual assembly, and we have staff doing virtual duty, which amuses them no end. We have a duty of care, you see, on the Net which is really interesting. So we bring in interesting people to talk to the students and tell them about their lives - DJs and surfers and you name it. It's starting slowly but everyone is excited about the chance that once a week at a certain time our students can communicate to each other. If they want to go into another room and have a private chat, they can.

We've bought a computer network hub of 14 computers and we go around the state, staff go around the state and take workshops with students and parents, teaching them the fundamentals of computer use. These have been very, very successful. We also have a degree of

recognition as experts in this area and so we are guest speakers at various state and national conferences. We have an online magazine called Magnet and we have a fairly strong Web site which students access in order to use research pages and research activities relative to the curriculum packages that they're doing.

[Distance education - applied learning and socialisation]

The issues that are - amongst many - occupying us at the moment are two, I guess, that I'd mention in relation to isolated students: applied learning and socialisation. It's very difficult for us to think of really effective ways in which students, for example, who want to do woodwork or drama, can do it in a meaningful way that will gain them TCE results, because short of leaping around their lounge rooms, it's very difficult to give them sustained dramatic experience. We're working very hard because there are certain criteria in their assessment that necessitates, for example, that they work well in a group over a sustained period. So IT is helping us with that, but we recognise that there are some subjects we can't provide, because of applied learning requirements. We're hoping the Net will get over that to a certain extent.

The other thing I touched on earlier is the socialisation aspect. We have a strong belief that particularly in the secondary area kids need to sit behind the bike sheds and talk about stuff, and be together and just have that subliminal learning that's so important. We are trying to do everything we can through chat rooms, through activity days, through workshops to do that. But there are significant issues about transport and the cost of transport, about many isolated students who find that difficult or threatening. So they're two areas that we're really working hard to try to overcome what we see as problems for our students. It's not only about education but also about issues that relate to them as adolescents particularly.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you.

[Distance education – senior secondary and VET]

MR YOUNG: What we call the senior colleges open learning network was created after the same review that Lyn just mentioned, so we've just come to the end of our third year of operations. What we have is responsibility for Years 11 and 12, and that generally means the provision of TCE syllabuses, although we do have half a dozen VET syllabuses that we also provide.

I should perhaps explain that we service students throughout the state regardless of whether they're remote or not, and with the limitations of the mandated departmental computer system it's not that easy to ascertain who is urban and who is rural. In my later comments I

have tried to identify things that do apply to rural and remote students rather than the urban ones, although sometimes they apply to both.

Because of that same computer network I can blame them for not having a lot of detailed statistics about the characteristics of our students but I understand that Alison is going to table some in a moment. But the raw figures are that we deliver 751,000 student contact hours, which is a curious concept for distance education, but that's in fact what we are staffed on, so that's the equivalent of the contact hours the courses would have if they were on-campus clients.

Many of our students are part-time but applying what would be the normal formula to turn them into full-time equivalent students, we have in the region of 1,520 students which I think is about five times as many as we had when we started the program three years ago. It's 50% more than we had in March. It's a very rapid growth area. I think a lot of people are surprised how fast it's grown. Obviously we're meeting a previously unmet demand.

We are essentially open access to Tasmanians. We don't try - and I believe we're probably precluded by some informal agreements from the mainland from actually trying to have mainland students in our distance program. The only students we have on the mainland are those who started with us and then moved to the mainland. As I said, it's open access. We apply the Education Act provision though that people are entitled to two years' post-compulsory education - that's 11 and 12 - and if they're part-time of course it's the equivalent of two years. Year 13 is at the discretion of the principal and we're just instituting a system that next year any applicant for a Year 13 will need the specific approval of the principal of the college delivering those courses.

Perhaps another indication of our size is that if we were a one-campus college we would have the equivalent of 68 full-time teachers. So those sort of statistics make us about as big as most of our colleges. Most of our colleges are in that 1,100 to 1,400 range for FTEs. I think I might have neglected to mention that the eight colleges are combined in the consortium to deliver this and the teachers are based in each of those eight colleges.

THE COMMISSIONER: If I can interrupt, Graeme, by eight colleges you mean existing on-site high schools, or only open learning colleges or TAFE?

MR YOUNG: In Tasmania we have a separate college system for Years 11 and 12.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

MR YOUNG: You know eight such colleges with campuses and they're the ones we're talking about.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's in those eight.

MR YOUNG: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, okay, thanks.

MR YOUNG: Which means the teachers are - almost all of them are mixed-mode teachers. They teach some classes face-to-face and others by distance education. We offer a great variety of subjects. Under the Tasmanian Certificate of Education most of our subjects can be divided up into smaller units, so it's a bit hard to count them meaningfully sometimes, but we offer 29 A courses - they're courses that take approximately a third of the year; 17 B courses which can either be two-thirds of the year or a whole year in some cases with less contact; 22 C courses which are whole-year courses, and as well as that we have 29 whole-year courses, or C courses that are in fact pre-tertiary; and as I mentioned earlier, 16 VET courses, usually certificate 1 - what did I say, 16? I meant to say six - usually certificate 1 and certificate 2.

So if you add those up that's notionally 103 courses, but some of them are subdivided. I do have a handout here that lists the syllabuses by college and the number of students enrolled in each one, along with our new handbook that was off the press yesterday. There is also in that a table indicating next year's range of offerings from the colleges, which is slightly different - this year it's slightly expanded.

[9.45 am]

[Distance education – difficulties for rural students]

I'll move onto the difficulties for rural and remote students. I think a lot of it is that open learning is by itself a very difficult mode of study, whether the student be urban or rural. Lyn has covered many of the things already. It's also true that the rural and remote kids have some extra problems and they are often compounded by personal circumstances. These may be things like past educational history as well.

Some of the difficulties, as I said, Lyn mentioned: a lack of support and resources. These are not in any order of importance but, as is already mentioned, the lack of access to computers and the Internet. Sometimes there's a local school which allows ready access for students after hours, and sometimes during hours. Without that, though, it's very difficult for students who don't have computers, and

our stats from a previous survey 12 months ago are very similar to Lyn's.

Much of this evidence I'm giving you now is anecdotal. It's from talking to teachers rather than from the actual gathering of hard data. A lot of students report to the teachers considerable delays in getting access to community access centres. They have to book a long way ahead in at least some centres. There are also personal circumstances that come into a lot of these things I'm going to mention.

Teachers report that students are often reluctant or unable to travel to a community centre, be that an access centre, a library or whatever. The problems may be lack of transport or there may be lack of funds or there may be personal unwillingness for a range of reasons. Lack of transport I think is perhaps one of the crucial things for a lot of these remote students as it relates to other things.

Many of our courses require students to be involved with their communities. If they're, for example, doing a child studies course they may be doing a topic like SIDS or adolescent health or whatever, and an urban student will be expected to access local community health services and so on where the information is. These things may not exist in the country areas.

It even gets down to things that are obvious when you think about it, but I hadn't thought about it until someone told me they couldn't even get copies of the modern videos for doing a media or an English study. If a particular video is set, there's no local video store that has up-to-date ones and they can't do that unless they can get into town, and then of course there are questions of borrowing times and so on.

Telephones are another difficulty for many of the students. They often lack telephones. They often lose their telephones when bills are apparently not paid. One of the other things that we find for both urban and rural open learning students is they're often very mobile. They often seem to lose their accommodation, for whatever reason. Even where there are phones for remote students, the initial phone call may be an STD call. Usually there are arrangements where the college will call them back but, again, personal circumstances come in. There seems to be often, according to teachers, a reluctance to make that call and it relates again to personal circumstances.

What I'm going to say a little bit later, but perhaps now is more appropriate, is that because of past educational histories and whatever else may be in people's backgrounds, many of these have very low self-esteem, very low communication skills, a very low opinion of their own abilities and they've got to deal with communication in a difficult

way - by telephone or by written communication - and in some ways many of these students are the worst equipped to be dealing with that.

As an aside, as a college principal, we often have students wanting to transfer from on-campus to open learning when on-campus gets a bit difficult - assignments are due or whatever - and typically they're the students with the poorer literacy skills. Colleges all have devices in place to try and keep kids face to face because we realise that's where they have more chance of success, but still there are some - in my college there's a policy against it but I still had 20 students during the year who found reasons for moving full or in part to open learning during the course of this year.

Well, I diverted from talking about telephones. Telephones of course are a means of providing a one-to-one tutorial and sometimes they're a means of teaching. For example, all our LOTE classes are in fact conducted with one-hour or 30-minute telephone teaching once a week and these students need a telephone to participate in this but they also need to have appropriate communication skills for using a telephone, and lots of our teachers report that not all of them have these.

I was talking about lack of access to community services. The same thing happens with educational services. While the students are students of the Education Department, they have less access to the usual services such as guidance officers, social workers, career advisers, student counsellors and so on. Theoretically these are available; it's just that they don't get there to access them.

Nor do they usually participate in educational activities that an on-campus student will. Again, it's similar to the evidence that Lyn has given - things like group activities, excursions, tutorials; again, a particular difficulty with practical work. The classes that we have that have the greatest attrition rates are those involving practicals, particularly in science, because you do have to travel to an urban centre to a laboratory to do some of your pracs. Some of those courses have 40% attrition rates and one can understand why.

Perhaps the most crucial thing that they miss out on is a lack of contact with other students and with their teachers, so they find it very difficult, particularly if they've been out of education for a while - and I should have perhaps stressed that with the open learning network, as with our secondary colleges, lots of the students are returning after a gap from education. The longer that gap has been - or perhaps I should say as well, if their educational experience has not been very intense prior to this, they have great difficulty in judging expectations and standards when they're on their own. Some of the work done is absolutely marvellous, but it often takes a long time for them to

appreciate it, and of course there's a difficulty with slow turnaround - the mailing out of the material, having it marked and mailed back. It's a long time to get feedback for work that's actually done.

I've made reference to difficulties that arise from personal circumstances. For many of our students these are very real difficulties. Ones that I haven't mentioned are things like, our teachers report often there's a lack of support from the members of the immediate family. For example, male partners of young women give evidence of appearing threatened by their female partner's wish to be educated and improve themselves. I was told one story yesterday. It actually involved physical abuse and references were made to numbers of times when completed work was actually destroyed by the male partner. As I said, these are anecdotes that a number of teachers have, but there are other signs of lack of support as well.

Quite a few of our students are young women and they're either pregnant or they become young mothers, so there's the family and the child-rearing requirements there, but often parents of the students expect these students at home to be doing the chores and the child-minding and all those other things and often aren't supportive in providing the time to do the work. They are the sorts of stories that I think upset the teachers most - when they see a student who wants to participate and is doing well and they see these other things getting in the way.

[Distance education - student performance]

I could have perhaps added that distance teaching is a difficult mode of teaching for teachers. Teachers by nature are probably attracted to the profession because they like dealing with people and they have a certain empathetic nature and they want to see people do well, and it's difficult when their own communication is at a much greater distance, and it does make their teaching less effective. They know less about the backgrounds of the kids, they know less about the kids' personalities and personal circumstances, and it's therefore more difficult for them to be effective teachers.

A question was asked about the relative achievement of these students. As I said earlier, it's a very difficult mode of study wherever it's studied, but it's more difficult in the rural and remote areas. Talking to teachers, different groups of students can be identified. There are some groups who are motivated and have a deadline. They want to get somewhere else along a pathway and they have to have their results in a particular time. These students are very motivated and usually achieve on time. One wonders sometimes at the amount of sacrifice they have to make with other things such as family and jobs to be able to do it.

There is another group that are highly motivated but don't have a deadline and they have these other pressures in their lives - motherhood, whatever - and it generally takes them longer but they do succeed. It's quite common for a student in this sort of category to take two years to complete what would normally be a year-long course, but they do succeed.

There are others who find it very difficult. The use of print based materials puts a very great demand on literacy skills, and I've already spoken about the difficulties with communication skills, because we do have basically a print based delivery. We're on what I might describe as a threshold of moving into online delivery. We do have availability, using a program called Web CT to have discussion rooms and things such as Lyn mentioned, but that has not been widely taken up across the network yet, and with regard to development of materials for our particular courses, the department has recognised the need to develop those materials in this past 12 months and has given us some resources. We're working on 40 different courses concurrently and by the middle of next year we'll have what I'll describe as course materials to augment the print based courses available in those 40 courses.

MS JACOB: It might be worth just mentioning there that that's being funded under the ITIS program, a program called Open IT, which is detailed in the submission.

MR YOUNG: Yes, the RTF is funding the online part and the department is funding the development of print based materials and other prerequisites of that.

As I was saying, some students have great difficulty because there's emphasis upon literacy skills particularly. Teachers also do report that they think the level of achievement of a student at our level depends very much on what they brought to the course, what their previous educational history had been, what skills and academic background they had. Teachers feel that this mode of study tends to be in most cases a small incremental increase in academic achievement during the course of a year, because it is a difficult mode of study.

This is where one of the great advantages of the TCE comes in though, as it's based upon a CBA - criterion based assessment - basis rather than a pass/fail. Students can get assessed for what they actually can achieve and so all of our students will come out at the end - provided they persisted through the course and did some work - with some assessment in some level of the subject. Many of those subjects I listed before at the beginning of my presentation have neighbours which require lower levels of achievement. I think virtually all of them do.

The most difficult area of study and the lowest area of achievement are in those pre-tertiary courses that I mentioned. Pre-tertiary subjects by open learning are very difficult, but many of our students probably are approaching them without this academic background that an on-campus student would have in the first place.

Another set of syllabuses we have that do have particular delivery problems are the VET ones, because these all incorporate structured workplace learning and so there have to be particular arrangements for that to happen in a location where not always appropriate work placements are available, so sometimes the student has to travel out of the area or into an urban area to be able to take a work placement. I think perhaps I'll stop there, thanks.

[Information technology]

MR LAYCOCK: Chris Laycock, the Coordinator of the Education Web site. I'd like to table a folder of information that I'll be referring to this morning, but if I can just run through quickly the philosophy behind the Discover Web site, which is I suppose a new direction in Internet services that the department is offering schools and the education community.

My responsibility extends across the divisions of education that are associated with the delivery of teaching and learning programs. My primary role is to coordinate Internet and Web based technologies across a number of projects, around about 40 projects in the department at the moment, that range from the production of very small information sites through to interactive Web quests and to a number of Internet collaboration tools.

My focus, however, over the last 12 months has been really to create a paradigm shift in how we as educators perceive the primary function of the Web, and that is away from the concept of a static set of information pages towards the concept of Internet or Web services. You will find me referring to this term "Web services" quite a bit because the concept of services promotes a feeling of a sense of place to do with the Web, and this is one thing that the Web actually does very well over traditional communication systems. It can be used to create the concept of a sense of place or, to quote that overused term, an online or a virtual community.

It's a fact that the Education Department in the past, as with other government agencies, adopted the global trend of "publish or perish" which means that hundreds, or in some cases thousands, of pages which were very information-rich were uploaded to the Web, but they remained there, they were very static, they were very passive, and

in most cases they delivered a very corporate or a very commercial message.

The concept behind the change that I wanted to put into place was to develop Web services that develop this sense of place in a site that encouraged people to return, encouraged people to communicate and encouraged people to participate. The sense of community, I believe, is rich in regional and rural areas, probably more so than in urban populations, and I believe of many of the recent distributed communication systems, the Web and the technologies that are developing at the moment really can best offer this concept of a sense of place, but I am not advocating that technology is the complete solution.

In fact many of the technologies and support programs that I'm going to talk through now at the moment are in their infancy, they're at the beginning of a developmental phase, and at the moment the department has probably put more full-time equivalent staff behind supporting these programs than we have in perhaps 15 to 20 years, so there is the support of a number of people with the particular technology in these emerging programs. To achieve these goals of a sense of place, the fundamental philosophy of the Discover Web site is to collect the Web site content from the actual users themselves, from the user base, to encourage return visits; also to respect the contributions of the users and to provide users with both goods and services.

Discover itself offers four major services. The first that I refer to is a structured environment for Net learning. Already both Graeme and Lyn have referred to this product. We purchased a product called Web CT. It's an infrastructure that enables the delivery of online learning. Again, the development of the content - the responsibility for that is passed over to the users, whether it be TOLS, whether it be the online learning network.

Out of interest, at the moment the schools and the teachers who seem to be taking up the challenge of delivering online appear to be teachers from schools in regional or rural areas. As a good example, Smithton High School in the far north-west have been producing learning materials in relation to Indigenous culture. 11 teachers of rural VET at the moment are looking at the development and delivery of curriculum for next year, ranging from aquaculture to forestry.

The environment itself again is built around those concepts of building relationships with students by the use of chat rooms, by the use of communication and collaboration tools. The Net learning area or that infrastructure that's provided by Discover is also going to be the

vehicle for the delivery of much of the content created with the RTIF funds.

Secondly, we have been able to launch a very successful what we call Web forum area. The Web forum area is an ability for users to participate and contribute to a Web discussion in a very, very easy interface. It's proved to be extremely successful for holding short-term events such as online conferences and professional development sessions, so rather than the situation where previously you may have had to have brought 60 to 70 people together in one place in the state for a matter of one day or two days, this Web forum is actually starting to take the place of those sorts of positions, where teachers can in fact converse and share ideas and participate and collaborate in an online environment.

It's also been very successful for a number of collaborative student projects. We have run a successful local history collaboration project where a number of grade 5/6 classes in primary schools throughout the state contributed to talking about their local community histories in an online sense.

We are also investigating and offering a number of different chat or synchronous chat areas. Lyn has already talked about the concept of the student lounge that's offered through the TOL Service, which is a perfect example of how this technology can be offered. We are also at the moment investigating a number of more visual mediums for synchronous interactive chat. Two specific ones are the use of comic or two-dimensional chat rooms where students are actually represented as pictorial symbols on the screen and the second is the concept of three-dimensional virtual worlds.

The 3D worlds is possibly one area that I see as very exciting and this certainly plots out the direction in which the Web is going to evolve in the next three years: the concept of moving away from a flat two-dimensional Web page structure to an environment where you in fact do move, that you do turn, that you do look, that you do touch, etcetera.

The fourth service is one that at the moment is receiving a lot of interest throughout the state and other states as well, in relation to being able to collect information from your users. It's what I term the concept of user-driven content. If you want users to keep returning to a site and using a site effectively, then the easiest way to do that is to put them in charge of providing the content.

Discover has had a databank or an information repository program for us that enables users in a very, very easy manner - in a matter of five to 10 minutes - to be able to actually author and publish a

Web page and have it live on the Web, which means that a teacher at a school finds an Internet site that's got to do with building and making kites and teaching flight in a primary classroom, then within three minutes they could actually have that resource available on the Web as a reference, etcetera, tagged with their name. Again, a teacher may find that a particular teaching and learning strategy that they're using in their classroom they would like to share with others. Again, the databank provides them with the ability, without having to have a lot of Web publishing skills, to actually publish on the Web and to have that strategy put up.

Those major services at the moment are all operational. The site was launched in August and schools are very, very rapidly taking up the challenge of actually using those services. Mitch will cover a little later the concept of access. Access possibly is the biggest issue at the moment. Tasmanian community online centres - research from them has shown that in Tasmania at the moment only 10% of households actually have computer and Internet connection. However, I must add that access to the Internet in regional and rural Tasmania is possibly a lot better than it is in other states, in that local ISPs, who initially set up in this state, were very much aware that they needed to provide local call access and access to as much of the state as possible fairly quickly. I think that statistic at the moment is 98% of the state is actually covered by local call Internet access.

The Tasmanian community online centres, as has already been discussed, are a major issue or a major access area for Discover as well. There are 44 of those now in regional and rural communities around the state. Thank you.

THE COMMISSIONER: Before we move in to Mitch, I've got a note saying that the ABC wants to film unobtrusively. Does that worry any of you? No? Okay. Well, we can tell them to come in and do their stuff, Mitch, while you're talking, so you get to star on TV tonight. Make sure you tell the family and friends.

[IT infrastructure]

MR KNEVETT: My name is Mitchell Knevet. I'm from the Information Management Branch within the department and my area of responsibility is policy and strategy in information management and information technology. I'll just briefly talk about basically the provision of information technology infrastructure that we provide to schools.

As far as the provision of information technology and infrastructure to schools, we provide IT infrastructure grants to schools. That money is provided directly to schools and schools use that for the purchase of computers, networks and technical support, and schools develop learning technology plans which align the expenditure on that

technology infrastructure with the educational programs that the schools want to put in place. That IT infrastructure grants program began last year and roughly \$3.5 million was spent last financial year and that will increase to \$9 million this financial year, with \$7.5 million in future years.

Computers are also provided to schools through a second-hand computer program and those second-hand computers are sourced through state and Commonwealth government agencies, and those computers are appropriately tested and configured to ensure that they can be passed on to schools and can be used.

One of the main issues that we've found in terms of information technology infrastructure for schools is the provision of appropriate technical support to ensure that the technology can be used effectively and actually works. Through the information management branch we provide a technical advisory service to schools. That basically consists of six consultants which are split between Hobart and Devonport up on the north-west coast and that service basically consists of best practice advice to schools in terms of development of IT infrastructure, so typically if a principal wants to know, "I need a network. What do I do?" then we will contact those school consultants and they will provide advice on those sorts of issues, and they will also provide advice on IT products and how to deal with vendors to ensure that the schools can get their best deal.

Related to that issue of provision of technical support, the department has recently started a major initiative called Managed Networks. What that is basically about is the provision of what we have termed specialist technical support. We sort of divide technical support into two classifications: specialist technical support, which is where you require those high-level skills through suitably trained technicians, and the more routine technical support. The Managed Network is about the provision of that specialist technical support and that involves things like if a school needs their network designed or installation of an appropriate piece of specialist software. What we're doing through our pilot program of 40 schools is working with local vendors to ensure that those services will be provided to the school.

We believe that this particular initiative will bring a lot of benefit to rural and remote schools in particular, because those specialist technical support services have been lacking in that area due to the concentration of those skills in the more urban areas, so we're looking to see that that pilot will actually provide those services within rural and remote areas and also foster an industry development aspect, where most services will be available.

The provision of telecommunication services to schools is - we sort of have a multifaceted approach there. Basically, schools which have a need for up to 15 network computers - we provide a dial-up service and that dial-up service is then shared amongst those 15 network computers within the school. Where schools have a need beyond that, we provide what is termed an ISDN service, which is like a permanent high-speed connection, and the standard service that we provide there is a 64K service. We provide that, as of July this year, to 85 schools and we'll be expanding that to more schools, approximately 150, by the end of this financial year.

In cases where that 64K service isn't adequate, what we have been doing - and that's particularly in the case of our larger high schools and colleges - we are providing an increased speed service, so a 128K or 256K service. The rationale for those different levels of service is basically the levels of student enrolment. The provision of a faster-speed service is also done in conjunction with an examination of the actual utilisation of that service, so if we look at the network design to ensure that the network has been designed appropriately we also look to ensure whether like a proxy server is being used to ensure that resources are cached effectively and those sorts of things.

We also have a number of central software agreements where we provide a standard suite of Microsoft products to schools and there is a similar agreement we've got in place with antivirus software as well. The department also provides centrally a school administration computer system or SACS which provides a range of modules to support teachers and administrative staff, and that's centrally provided and there are support services to assist with the implementation of that, and the department also provides a library system to schools. As Alison mentioned, the Department of Education includes also libraries, which is all public libraries throughout the state, so our schools and libraries use the one system and there's a range of advantages which has flown from that, and that system will be being upgraded next year to a more contemporary product which provides access to modern multimedia resources.

As far as major issues, the department works with Education Network Australia through the Schools Advisory Group that they have in place there and has been contributing to the School Action Plan which will be passed on to the National Strategy for the Information Economy which the federal government is developing and through that process we have basically identified that the three priority issues are the issues of professional development, having access to online content which has an Australian flavour - so Australian heritage, Australian culture - and the other issue is bandwidth, providing adequate bandwidth to schools, particularly as those online content resources are used. That's all I was proposing to say at this point.

[10.20 am]

THE COMMISSIONER: Back to you, Alison. Is it best to run through the questions or should we just go into some discussion first?

MS JACOB: Well, we've answered all the questions in writing for you, so it's there, but it's up to you. We're in your hands.

THE COMMISSIONER: Maybe I should just start picking some of the things you've given me, and some of it, I'm sure, will overlap the answers you've got there, but rather than lose the opportunity to ask some questions, it might even be easiest to start from the end and work backwards, Mitchell, if that's all right with you.

MR KNEVETT: Sure.

THE COMMISSIONER: Just taking up that very last point of bandwidth, you were talking about the speed of access. Are you finding in Tasmania that the bandwidth or the speed of the lines is capable of holding or maintaining the access that you want in terms of speed of access from the computers you've got in the schools, or is there a Telstra problem with lines still?

MR KNEVETT: The provision of telecommunication services to schools is through a whole-of-government arrangement, through what's termed the Network in Tasmania contract. That's a whole-of-government arrangement that has been arranged, and education provides its services through that. The provision of telecommunication services progressed a lot over the last year, in terms of we now have much more services at a higher speed, but the studies that we've done have indicated that we can see a massive growth in terms of our requirements for bandwidth over the coming next few years, so that's a major concern for us that we have, that we're in a position to service that need, particularly as the online resources become available, and the types of resources that we predictably see in terms of modern multimedia resources.

MS JACOB: It's certainly a huge issue as far as Discover is concerned.

MR LAYCOCK: I think the ability for us to deliver broadband synchronous communication will become fairly important in the near future, so again you're looking there at bandwidth requirements that exceed currently what Telstra's infrastructure in this state perhaps can deliver at the moment.

THE COMMISSIONER: Does Telstra have a plan to upgrade, do you know, and over what period of time?

MR LAYCOCK: I do know that- again through some of the social bonus benefits from the sale of Telstra - for example, there is a Launceston broadband project on the drawing boards at the moment which will look at the use of significantly different technologies for the delivery of communications in a small metropolitan area as an initial trial, that we would hope again that technology would feed on.

MS JACOB: It's our biggest fear actually that we're going to end up with an awful lot of really good materials that we just can't deliver.

THE COMMISSIONER: I mean, it ties in with costs as well for people in so many country areas, and it must for your system too, I would say.

MS JACOB: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: You mentioned, Mitchell, I think about the - what was the figure - 98% can get local call provisions?

MR KNEVETT: Chris gave that statistic, yes.

[Internet access costs]

THE COMMISSIONER: Right. Sorry, Chris. Once they've got that local call access though, what is the actual cost of Internet access?

MR LAYCOCK: At the moment the Network in Tasmania project ensures that there is access to all schools throughout the state and that cost is picked up through Network in Tasmania, but from the point of view of private homes, yes, 98% is covered at the moment by Tasmania's independent service providers, or private providers. The cost in Tasmania is still relatively high ranging from \$1.35 an hour through to \$5 an hour access time through those providers.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do any of the providers have any unlimited access deals going in rural and remote areas or is it almost all timed access?

MR LAYCOCK: No, it's all timed access.

THE COMMISSIONER: All timed access. You'd be pleased or horrified, as the case may be, to know that in some parts of Australia it gets up to \$10 an hour, so that 5 is certainly well in excess of the metropolitan areas where you can get unlimited access deals. In Sydney these days - again for information, in Sydney - I don't know about Hobart - you can get unlimited access deals ranging from \$7 to \$10 a week. So that people are paying for an hour in some parts of Australia what in Sydney we pay for a week.

MR LAYCOCK: There is one company in Tasmania that offers a monthly flat fee for unlimited access but obviously the quality of service is very poor and not normally taken up.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes. The cheap deals in Sydney are being offered by Telstra Big Pond, amongst others. But I mean, you're the experts more than me. As a layperson I can't see why once you're connected, the cost of maintaining that connection should be \$10 a week in Sydney and \$10 an hour somewhere else in the country. I think we're seeing some reverse cross-subsidies going on, but I'm sure Telstra will enlighten me that that's not the case sometime in the next couple of weeks.

MR YOUNG: Commissioner, it has been one of the great frustrations of the college that we have - actually my college is probably the most advanced technological college in the nation - probably. Until recently from about 9.30 in the morning till 4.30 in the afternoon one couldn't get out of the place, and the department is now doing some trials of giving us more access. From the users' point of view people just don't use Internet. I mean, I've got computers sitting on my desk, two of them in fact, that didn't have access. But I don't try it when the students are there; it's just a waste of my time.

MS JACOB: It's so slow.

MR YOUNG: Yes, it will time out before I get to anywhere. If these sort of benefits that are promised to us are going to eventuate, then access is a crucial question. And a frustration I'd had until this current trial I've just alluded to is that elsewhere in Australia we've also been able to get - schools have been able to get satellite access, but Telstra, I'm told, hasn't been willing to provide the infrastructure for large schools and colleges to do that in this state at a much cheaper rate than their ISDN lines.

[ISDN v dial-up]

THE COMMISSIONER: Just to clarify for me as an uninformed layperson, the difference between ISDN and dial-up is the dial-up goes through the central Education Department computer system and ISDN is direct to the Internet. Is that right or have I got it wrong completely?

MR KNEVETT: The dial-up is basically your standard telephone line, using the phone line, so at either end you have a modem and the modem at your school connects to your computer, etcetera, whereas the ISDN is a separate arrangement, where you have a separate telecommunications line which is permanently connected and provides a high-speed service.

THE COMMISSIONER: I see. I've got it completely wrong then. So ISDN is the direct connection into an Internet service provider without dial-up at all.

MR KNEVETT: That's right, yes. It's a direct and permanent connection and, as a consequence of that, it provides a higher speed in terms of the amount of information you can put down that actual line.

THE COMMISSIONER: So the line itself though is provided by Telstra, I assume.

MR KNEVETT: Yes, that's right. Telstra provide all our services to our schools, through that whole-of-government arrangement that we have in place.

THE COMMISSIONER: Okay. How is the costing arranged for local schools, both for the dial-up fee, if it's STD, and then for the Internet access fee? Is that all provided centrally or does it come out of the school budget and, if so, is there supplementation for the remote schools with more expensive services?

MR KNEVETT: It's all provided centrally. Yes, the same - the determining factor is usually - well, as a policy we've stated that schools will get a level of service appropriate to their needs. So if you've got a small school, then typically you'll have a dial-up service but if there are limitations on the telephone line such that it isn't effective, then we might provide one of those ISDN services, like a higher speed service, because that's appropriate to their needs. And as in the case of colleges, as Graeme mentioned, we are attempting to provide higher-speed services because of the number of people that they have and the limitations on the current lower high-speed service that we provide.

MR YOUNG: Large schools and colleges provide a demand that's not typical of government services. Mitch might be able to help out here but I've been told that a typical Tasmanian secondary college will have as much demand as most government departments in total in the state. There are eight of us scattered around and we have an enormous demand. Until the current trial, if we wanted to - we had one divided ISDN line, 64K. If we wanted to buy another one it would have cost us between \$12,000 and \$15,000 annually, and that was why I made the comparison with the satellite dish because I have the infrastructure for a satellite dish and I can put one of those running for about \$8,000 total, and then I can actually only pay for the actual use of the Internet, not a standard fee for the total line per annum, and I think if I remember rightly, 90% of the use is incoming which can come by the satellite. But

you need a back line provided by Telstra for the outgoing, and that's the facility they have not provided in this state.

If I compare my college with a college like Bendigo Senior Secondary, which is an IT leader, they use a satellite. We didn't ever buy the extra line because we knew that 128K wasn't going to be enough and that's illustrated by the current trial which is offering us 640K. So it was obvious we were never going to be able to buy that sort of service through ISDN lines.

THE COMMISSIONER: So the problem then in not moving to a satellite system here is because the out-lines you say aren't likely - what, in the near future or ever?

MR YOUNG: I can't answer that.

MR KNEVETT: As I said, we're bound by the whole-of-government arrangement that we have in place, and our people are negotiating with Telstra on these issues on an ongoing basis to ensure that that contract is modified and adjusted to reflect the needs of the education sector, and the trial in terms of what's happening with our colleges is a reflection of that - how Telstra have acknowledged that the education sector has particular requirements - and we need to work to ensure that we can address those appropriately.

[Community access]

THE COMMISSIONER: What provisions are there for out-of-school hours use of school computer systems, Internet access and so forth?

MS JACOB: It varies from school to school. It's basically a local school decision, so that some schools - for example Smithton Primary School has actually established a parent resource centre and parents are given keys. They can come and go and just use the facility whenever they choose to. Obviously there are security problems in other schools which don't allow them to do that, but some of the community access centres or online learning centres that have been referred to are in schools, so that has also brought more people into the schools and are using those. But it's certainly something we're trying to encourage schools to do.

Some schools are running, for example, after-hours classes for parents in the use of computers. Clarence High School is an example of that where that's going on. Once you overcome some of the security issues, I think more and more schools will do that but obviously that's a big issue for us.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right.

MR LAYCOCK: As an example, schools have also been giving a little bit more autonomy in the flexibility of the hours that their staff work. I know that at Devonport High School one teacher is doing quite a bit of work in looking at online delivery of the courses he teaches.

THE COMMISSIONER: They have till 8 o'clock on Thursday I think the kids can come in.

MR LAYCOCK: That's right. But he's actually coming into work now two days a week at 12.30 etcetera, and working through till 8.30 in the evenings on two days a week, etcetera.

MS JACOB: And a lot of the colleges, Graeme, would be open all hours - well, not all hours but a lot of hours.

MR YOUNG: That's true, but if we're talking about rural and remote students, my college network is capable of providing dial-up access and it does raise extra security issues and it's something that we'd only had made available to staff recently, but now we have been advised by the department that that access has been cancelled because of fears about security.

THE COMMISSIONER: Security in this sense - what, security of the system or security of the premises?

MS JACOB: Security of information basically.

MR YOUNG: Chris can answer better than I but my understanding is that dial-up access is the usual route for hackers, and by coming in by dial-up access we're bypassing some of the security measures that exist in the network.

MS JACOB: Which is a real problem if you want teachers to work from home and be able to come in and access and get on with things - and students. So it's a real issue.

MR KNEVETT: I think there's an issue too that - as I mentioned, like we're bound by the whole-of-government contract that we've got in place, and there's an issue as to whether individual schools should be providing that dial-up access themselves, given that we have this contractual relationship that it should be provided through Telstra.

MR LAYCOCK: There would also be the private enterprise that would probably have something to say too if we were giving all students in the state access via the government network, etcetera - the 20 Net services.

MR YOUNG: The point is though, they are students.

THE COMMISSIONER: And to get those students within your system you've got a direct responsibility. I can see what you mean though, Chris. I must say they'll scream blue murder but I think it's justifiable nonetheless.

[Community provision and maintenance]

MR YOUNG: And the department does have a roll-out provision of giving us computers for the use of all our students, including the open learning students.

THE COMMISSIONER: How is that going to work? Can you tell us a little bit about that, Graeme, for the open learning students?

MR YOUNG: Alison is probably a much better person to talk about it but basically - actually I've forgotten the total amount of money, Alison. Each school is getting a roll-out based on the size of the school periodically over the next - probably phase 2 of a three-year program.

MS JACOB: The information is in there so I won't go through it all. But yes, it's basically a phased roll-out to make sure that we do have adequate computers in all of our schools over the next what, Mitch, three years?

MR KNEVETT: Yes, this is year 2 of the three-year program.

MS JACOB: I mean the ratio of those will vary but we're working towards getting the maximum number of computers in. The number you need at various stages through schooling probably varies. You don't need as many in the early parts of schooling but you probably need a lot more by the time you get to Years 11 and 12. So we're trying to cater for that. The only schools that have got a kind of full complement at the moment are those lighthouse schools that I spoke about, and they were a kind of trial run, and I think what we found from there was that where - you know, initially teachers were saying, "What am I supposed to do with these?" You know, they were in the corridor and it was a kind of imposition, and now they're saying, "We need more. We can't cope with what we've got," etcetera.

So it has to go hand in hand obviously with the professional development which is something that we're pushing very strongly. Just putting computers into schools is going to achieve absolutely nothing. What we need to do is really teach us a different way of teaching and that's going to take time. Most research would suggest that you're looking at a five to 10-year change in the way teachers use computers so we're not going to expect instant results. But we already can see

from where the schools are using computers well that you can get quite significant changes in the kind of learning that takes place.

THE COMMISSIONER: Is there any provision for distance education students to have access to the departmental roll-out? Do you have a lease computer scheme, for example, or some other arrangement?

MS DUNN: We've looked at that. The problem is that if we put computers in students' homes, there's the issue of access to the Internet and there's the issue of ensuring that the computers remain viable over a period of time, and we can't afford to run technicians around the state. But we're deeply concerned about it because it's an access and equity issue. So until there are more resources, the way we've handled it is to have the network so that at least we're saying, "Wherever you are in the state you can come in and receive training." We're encouraging our parents, who receive a federal isolated allowance, to think about using that for a computer and we would be one of the schools who are heavily lobbying the department to allow us to provide access to the Internet to our students, because for us that is a significant equity balance if we can do that.

MS JACOB: I think the issue of maintaining the computers is probably more difficult. And as Mitch talked about the Managed Network, that's attempting to put a process in place that will allow schools in isolated areas to maintain them, because what we found from our lighthouse schools was that computers break down very easily, and the worst thing you can do to a teacher is basically have them ready to go taking a class that involves using computers and for the thing not to work.

So you have to have ways of maintaining computers and making sure that they're working really well because otherwise teachers won't use them. That would also carry over - if we're going to maintain computers in very isolated homes that would be a big issue for us. I think once we get some of the vendors used to the idea that the contract involves them having to provide a service to remote areas as well as in urban areas, maybe the next stage there will be to look at, well, maybe they can also do something for some of the children who learn from home.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is the average time for that kind of technical support within an isolated school itself? If a school's computer system goes down, how quickly can you get it up?

MS JACOB: Before we had the trial of the Managed Network, I think it would be fair to say that if you were in most rural and remote areas it would depend on when the principal was next going to town and could put the computer in the back of the car and take it in. That might take a

month to get back or whatever. Mitch, you'd have some better figures on that.

MR KNEVETT: Yes, it could vary from a few days to a number of weeks. I mean we have schools on King Island and whatever, so basically it has to go over on the plane and those sorts of issues, so it could be a number of days to a number of weeks, depending on the nature of the problem and where you were and those sorts of things. But as Alison said, through the Managed Network we're aiming to put arrangements in place where that sort of technical support is available in all areas on an equitable basis throughout the state. Associated with that, like vendors will have certain levels of accreditation associated with them to ensure that they've got the appropriate levels of skill and availability of staff to meet those needs.

THE COMMISSIONER: Would the vendors under these contracts have some kind of customer service guarantees?

MR KNEVETT: Yes, they're the sorts of things that we're looking to ascertain through the pilot process that we're doing for our current 40 schools, to actually look at what the vendors will do and what we want them to do and what are the service level agreements we want to see on top of that to ensure that they do it within an acceptable time-frame. Some parts may be important and others less important.

MR LAYCOCK: I think a good example under the current system is, for example, vendors specify that they determine that 85 kilometres means that you fall outside of their on-site warranty and that on-site warranty is only applicable to metropolitan areas, and they define metropolitan as 85 kilometres out of Hobart, Launceston, Devonport or Burnie, which means that under the new Managed Network scheme it will be we, as the customer, who will be actually defining the service agreements that we want.

MR KNEVETT: We do envisage through the Managed Network pilot that approximately 10 more people will be employed in the industry to service the needs of those 40 schools. So once that scales up - if the pilot is continued beyond July next year, that will scale up to approximately 40 people.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thanks.

MS JACOB: It was one of the real lessons we learned from our lighthouse schools because when we first introduced computers into those schools it was all new. The schools in Hobart and Launceston were up and running. You know, they had the whole network organised within days. Poor old Smithton was still sort of struggling to try and get someone to look at this bit or that bit six months later. It was absolutely

useless and in the meantime what you did was turn off all the teachers completely.

THE COMMISSIONER: Just as an uneducated user in our own office, if the system crashes it's very frustrating. Graeme, you want to say something obviously.

MR YOUNG: Yes, with regard to the open learning students, your previous question, the advice I received from mainland TAFE and universities involved in online delivery of courses was not to become involved in actually providing the hardware because suddenly that becomes the all-consuming task and detracts from the job of delivering. This is a personal thing but I'm quite attracted by a scheme that was used at a Singapore school I visited earlier this year. They arrange a scheme where the students and the parents actually purchase the computer through the school on a particular advantageous price because of a bulk deal, and the deal is such that if ever the payments lapse from the family the computer reverts to the property of the school. That was the way they were addressing the issue of getting a computer in the home. The advantage to the parent was the bulk purchase price and the school only had the problem of actually reclaiming those where the payments stopped.

[Distance education – student support]

THE COMMISSIONER: Could we move more now to the distance education area more specifically if that's okay. I think, Lyn, this probably is in your area a little bit more directly than IT. With the number of students that you mentioned who were doing distance education - some were doing it basically full-time and others were doing individual subjects - those who were doing individual subjects are presumably located within schools at the moment, and they just access the open learning system. To what extent do the schools in which they're based provide any supervision, monitoring or other assistance or support for them in the open learning?

MS DUNN: There is on a case-by-case basis. But in every system there is somebody who's aware that the lesson is progressing. We usually teleteach computers and cameras and stuff into classrooms and our preferred number is about six in a group because otherwise it becomes fairly meaningless for the seventh, eighth and ninth child. We do have circumstances where we're teaching up to 30 and 40 students at a time at the one site with one teacher from us. And we insist then that we have one or two teachers who are in the room just making sure that the kids at the back of the room are fully occupied.

So I would say that there isn't a single circumstance where either the kids - where either they don't know - so they know that somebody is happening with the kids, they're not unsupervised at all,

and we've found that there are much better educational results if we deliver in and somebody then can reiterate, "Okay, by next time you have to do X. Have you got all your gear?" Also, if there's a technical failure it can be done and handled very quickly because it happens frequently: somebody has flicked a switch, pulled something out with their foot, done whatever with the equipment. So it's relatively intensive on both sides, but effective.

THE COMMISSIONER: What part of the system bears the cost of that additional teacher support?

MS DUNN: I think that it's local in-house arrangements in that - often it will be, for example, a portion of a class which is either gifted or requires that particular teaching. So while the teacher is dealing with the rest of the students she'll just keep a weather eye on the fact that those kids are in the library doing such-and-such. The teleteaching facility is usually in a library, so the librarian and library aide keeps an eye on the students. We do a fair bit of feedback stuff, and we've not had any problems about people complaining that it's an onerous duty for them at all. I think the schools are so grateful to have the opportunity - for example to present language that this child would not be able to get a grade 10 result for if a teacher leaves the district - that they're prepared to wear a little bit of extra stuff in order to get that child graduated through that subject.

THE COMMISSIONER: When you mentioned before that there is a teacher or a carer - I think pastoral care person for the distance ed students, about how many students would that person be looking after?

MS DUNN: One of the great issues of the century at our place, but at the moment it rests at about 22. That would be regarded - 20 to 22 would be regarded as a full load.

THE COMMISSIONER: If you've got a school that has got a large number of distance ed students, would you look at placing that pastoral care person within the school itself to look after specifically the distance ed students and provide that kind of monitoring and support on site?

MS DUNN: Yes. That's an issue that we're talking about at fairly senior levels with Alison. One of the great ironies is that distance ed students actually often need somebody in their location because they need somebody to encourage and to cajole and to provide their tutoring, and we're increasingly finding that that's really needed. So there are moves for them to think about, "Well, if we're delivering into remote areas, do we have regional tutors or teachers who can provide that support mechanism?"

MS JACOB: It is a vexed issue because clearly that would be a huge benefit if we decentralised the Open Learning Service. On the other hand there's also sort of economies of scale from having everybody working from the same site and students being able to access the specialists that they need and all that kind of thing. I don't think we know which way to go, to be honest.

THE COMMISSIONER: Certainly the results I've seen from other states have indicated that where there is somebody who is not teaching but supporting locally, that the kids actually do a great deal better. But as you say, you've then got to have access to the specialist teachers as well, whether it's online or by phone or in whatever other way you want.

MS JACOB: I think for all of the reasons that Graeme talked about. I mean, often the students who are working in an open learning mode are the students who are perhaps least prepared or least able to be able to do it.

THE COMMISSIONER: There are some schools, some systems where there is a small number of primary schools that actually become the location for the support of distance ed students. So there may be a room set aside in the primary school and the distance ed kids from the district go there because they haven't got a secondary school. Sometimes a primary teacher is given extra money as part allocation between the primary school and the supervision role. Has this ever been done here in Tasmania? Is this one of the things looked at? Are there ways in which the primary schools can be more involved in support of secondary students?

MS DUNN: I don't think it has ever been done formally. I'm aware of circumstances where remote students, for example, have local agreements with the teachers, where they might take the child in for a day to provide that socialisation experience.

MS JACOB: Because Tasmania has a large number of what we call district highs that actually have the full spectrum, they probably - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, K to 10.

MS JACOB: Yes, K to 10. They probably cater for a number of those students anyway whereas there aren't as many - well, the number of primary schools who would be in remote areas where that sort of model would work probably isn't quite as many as there might be in some places. But I think it's still a model that should be looked at. I really do.

MR YOUNG: With those district highs it's a real question of the provision of 11 and 12, and there's a whole range of different scenarios

that can exist in any one location. Sometimes there is an existing group that has a teacher and all they wish is material and other support from the network. Sometimes the group of students is so small that they can't afford to put a teacher there and therefore they want the remote teaching.

At this time of year when those sort of schools are planning for next year I get a number of calls from principals, but there's a basic level of difficulty that resourcing post-Year 10 is based on those notional student contact hours and those hours only go so far, and if the teacher is being used to deliver the course, there isn't the staffing quota generated by that enrolment left over to actually employ somebody in the remote location.

Yesterday I had a call from Smithton High School where they had a group of kids doing pre-tertiary sociology. They're in a school with lots of teachers but they don't have materials or anyone that can actually teach sociology and they wanted to know how we can work with them. But the reaction of the principal was very much like most I talk to. It's difficult for them to see how they can free up enough resource to make a difference.

As Alison knows, there's currently a review on these sort of shared enrolment situations, and I know one thing college principals have suggested - I don't know whether it will be taken up because it has resource implications - is that a student that is shared in such a way should perhaps be entitled to have the equivalent of 1.2 full-time equivalent in terms of staffing, because that would allow both delivery and some support in other places.

It's not just with open learning. There are many other ways colleges provide enrichment, educational experiences for students that can't be in the local school. We have students who come into my college to do advanced mathematics from local high schools. We provide about 100 students with small contacts per week in music in schools that don't provide music, mainly in primary schools. So there's lots of things like that, but it has to be resourced. And it's difficult for students if their hours of enrolment are only allowed to be counted up to the first 750 hours.

THE COMMISSIONER: This suggestion about 1.2, is that being considered by the department?

MR YOUNG: Well, at the moment it's just a proposal from college principals and it's probably the first Alison has heard of that.

MS JACOB: I mean basically what has happened - as it would be obvious - is that open learning has just bloomed. I guess what we're

trying to do this term, we've actually got someone working full-time to really, I guess, come up with a more systemic level plan of how we're going to manage this industry that has grown up that we want to encourage because clearly, as Graeme has said, it's meeting a need and they're kids who would not otherwise be involved. And yet we do have to sort out some of those resourcing issues, we have to sort out some of the delivery issues, we have to sort out some of the coordination issues, pastoral care issues. So we've got someone who is hopefully by the end of the year going to give us some recommendations that we can work with.

THE COMMISSIONER: It won't please you to know but it might interest you to know it's an issue in almost every state at the moment. Particularly it's been suggested in some places that where students are in a high school and they are doing one of two subjects, that in fact money be transferred from the high school in relation to that pro rata time of the individual students. Of course the high schools are horrified because they're looking after the kids on an eight-hour-a-day basis anyway one way or another. I think the 1.2 proposal is certainly the more creative way of looking at it, but from the department's point of view it's more money. I can see the issues.

[Cross-sectoral collaboration]

With the students who are doing individual subjects, are they all located within government schools or are some of them within non-government schools as well?

MS DUNN: We have a contract with a private school in Magra and we deliver Indonesian to Magra. This is the third year of that particular contract, and there's some doubt about whether we'll continue it but by and large our mandate is for only government schools.

MS JACOB: That's on a fee-for-service basis.

MS DUNN: Fee-for-service basis, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Fee-for-service basis that is. So that's about the only instance that you know of where that kind of thing is happening?

MS JACOB: Well, in the case of colleges because, as Graeme said, we don't have any good information on who's actually doing open learning - we don't have any information about the courses - we don't know where they are. They could well be in non-government schools. In fact we have anecdotal information that some of them are the teachers in the non-government school, so we just don't know, and that's one of the things that we need to get a much better body of information about because clearly if we're going to start resourcing these people at a

higher level we really need to know where they are. Graeme, do you want to add to that?

MR YOUNG: We've changed our enrolment procedures for next year to actually ask a specific question on the enrolment form, "Are you currently enrolled at a school and, if so, which one?" Because they all enrol with their home address so we have no idea of where they are as far as their schooling goes. We still don't of course know whether they will answer that question but at least the question will be there. We do know that we are delivering to - I think the number is as small as four students studying Indonesian at a north-west coast private school.

THE COMMISSIONER: Other than the one that Lyn's referring to?

MR YOUNG: Yes, a different one, yes. It's just a coincidence it's Indonesian.

[Senior secondary access]

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you have any ideas what the factors are in a student or a family deciding that a child will do open learning or distance education rather than going off to a college? It seems that the numbers who are doing full-time distance ed in Years 11 and 12 are relatively small which implies that most of them are in fact going off to the colleges in other towns.

MR YOUNG: It's exactly the same thing, as far as we can ascertain, as you'll find on research on retention in the state in general for 10 to 11. There's often a reluctance from parents to allow what are probably just 15-year-olds to move to a big city or a large town and to live in accommodation which may not be exactly the way they would like it to be. There has been a reduction - well, there were in the past more government supplied hostels than there are currently, and some of those were dormitories which weren't very attractive to the students and their parents, but that provision has been reduced, so there's more reliance upon private accommodation.

I think accommodation is one of the most crucial decisions that parents or remote kids face when it comes to this area but obviously you'll hear evidence about that from others later today, I think. What our teachers perceive is this reluctance to have kids move away because of the fear they won't come back because that is the experience of so many of them. Once they've had their education and training they get employment away as well. Kids have a different perspective of it after a couple of years in town to what their parents do.

MS JACOB: I think it's worth noting that our retention between 10 and 11 is where we lose the students. Once they get to 11 they tend to stay on and we keep them. That's our big issue.

[Distance education – delivery modes]

THE COMMISSIONER: I've noticed that, yes. Actually I want to talk quite a bit about the retention rates, maybe after one more - if I could just have one last one on distance ed. Has radio ever been used for distance ed in Tassie or has it always been basically - I assume correspondence before IT? So you had no decisions about moving out of radio which is an issue in some states. It wasn't available. Okay.

MR YOUNG: The other technology which does exist but which isn't used for school students very much at all is videoconferencing. My college actually teaches teachers throughout the state how to teach the Indonesian language by videoconferencing. That's got four separate groups of teachers doing that and we're in our third year of doing it. There have been a couple of times in the past where we've taught students in another college other languages, and that has proved to be an exceptionally successful medium, but it has always had that kind of tutor-teacher system on the other end when we were dealing with students.

The difficulty there I think for schools, apart from the resourcing one of the teacher on the other end, is that most of the remote schools have only a form of software that's called Share Vision that runs on normal telephone lines and is of poor quality and you get quite a jerky picture. If somebody's moving you get it jumping around. You need ISDN lines for a much smoother and better quality transmission and, as we said earlier when talking about computing, that tends to be an expensive provision.

Then the cost of putting the hardware on the end is not that great because you can start with what's basically a normal desktop computer and you can do that for about \$10,000. You can get quite a reasonable little system to teach a small group. If you want to teach a large class, then you're starting to talk about a bigger system because you need to have cameras that will lock in on the voice of who's speaking and that sort of thing. But that is a technology that is going to exist and all that's stopping it happening is money.

[Retention rates]

THE COMMISSIONER: Can we move on to the retention rates. The first thing I had difficulty with was just trying to work out what the statistics actually represent. I know there has been quite a bit of national attention given to those stats of the five lowest regions of retention at 16, of which Tasmania I think comes in with two regions, second and third. By contrast the submission from the department talks about a much higher rate of retention than those stats tend to indicate. Are you able to explain to me, Alison, so I've got some idea about what

each of the - I assume that they're measuring different things, like most things with statistics, but I'm not quite sure what.

MS JACOB: No, we had to actually go and get that report and have a look ourselves when we got your questions. But I guess it's the difference between looking at the state rate as a whole, and while you would be very aware that the Tasmanian retention is still low, that is rising and I guess we said that in our submission. We expect it to get to about 65% this year which would probably be comparable with the average.

THE COMMISSIONER: So that would be 65% to Year 12 or at age 16?

MS JACOB: From 10 to 12.

THE COMMISSIONER: From 10 to 12. Okay, thanks.

MS JACOB: I guess that the figures in relation to the 16-year-olds - I mean the first thing that I was confused about was because they are - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: You got compulsory schooling.

MS JACOB: Exactly. But I found, from having had our people have a look at it, that it's taken in July, 1 July, so a lot of our 16-year-olds would actually be in Year 11 or the equivalent of Year 11, so that's why that looks like that. Does that make sense? Do you see what I mean? It would actually be in the year after compulsory schooling but they would still be 16 by the time that the figures were recorded.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right.

MS JACOB: The other big difference of course is that those two particular regions are obviously areas where we would have lower retention anyway.

THE COMMISSIONER: Wouldn't southern though include at least part of Hobart?

MS JACOB: It doesn't include the greater urban area, according to the reports. In fact we had the same question and we went and had a look at it. It excludes, if we actually look at the map, the greater Hobart area. So it excludes that - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's really that coastal strip going down - - -

MS JACOB: It's the west coast and the north-west coast and it's the east coast and the sort of Huon area there.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it includes the east coast as well.

MS JACOB: Yes, sort of as far as I can see Bicheno on that, yes. So it would take in the areas where we do have low retention. One of the problems in Tasmania is that our retention in our urban areas is actually comparable. It's those regional areas that we've got a real issue with. There have been any number of studies that have looked at the reasons for that and I've no doubt that Graeme would want to chip in as well but I think that the major reason is just the distance that kids have to trouble to access the college or the Year 11 syllabus.

Increasingly that means that we have got Year 11 classes being run in some of our district high schools and increasingly that's related to some sort of vocational education program which seems to involve the kids who may not be sufficiently motivated or really want to go on and live away from home and go to a college. I think the introduction of VET in schools has really had a very significant impact and we say in our submission that we do employ three people that we call rural retention officers whose particular role is to try and work with those district high schools and get them linked in with local industry so that they can become involved in VET-type programs and try and keep kids in the program.

I think we're facing - you know, there's a cultural shift that's needed. There are still many communities and parent groups who really see school as finishing at the end of grade 10. Traditionally the kinds of industry that Tasmania went into didn't require perhaps a lot of kids to go on and they were able to get jobs in agriculture, forestry and fishing and so forth simply at the end of grade 10. But those jobs aren't there any longer, so convincing communities that really school doesn't finish at Year 10, it goes on to Year 12, is a problem for us. I suppose it's exacerbated by the fact that we do have a separate Year 11 and 12 system.

THE COMMISSIONER: I've heard views both for and against that.

[Separate senior secondary colleges]

MS JACOB: Graeme would no doubt want to talk about that. I suppose I want to say that I don't think that factor can be looked at in isolation. I mean, the ACT also has a separate Year 11-12 college system and they have the highest retention of anywhere, so that's clearly not the only factor. Additionally, even in the non-government schools in Tasmania who don't have that college system, the retention is at a lower level than comparable states. So it's obviously more than simply that. In a lot of ways it comes down to what we're able to provide for

children. We simply wouldn't be able to provide the kind of range of course offerings if we tried to provide that in every high school and every district high. We have to be able to sort of concentrate those things in areas to give the range of subjects. Plus, I think, the college people would say, and I would agree with them, that what is provided in the colleges is different from what's provided in the high schools and it is a much better preparation in many ways for kids to go on to post-school life. Graeme might want to add something to that.

[11.02 am]

MR YOUNG: Yes. I do think we have the best 11-12 system in the country.

MS JACOB: He's a bit biased.

MR YOUNG: I think there's plenty of reports - I think I can produce a list, and I had to do it once, Alison, about half a page long of various reports in the 1970s that would support that contention, using criteria like satisfaction from the students and their parents, the range of course offerings and the breadth of them. It is, as Alison said, by concentrating the numbers in a particular area you can provide that diversity. Over the last couple of years we've become the leading provider of VET in schools and it's because of the size of the institutions and the support by the department that makes it so easy for eight colleges to cooperate.

Open learning is another area where - again we're just new to it but the kind of things we're doing are not done anywhere else other than perhaps the Northern Territory in the way we're doing it. But the basic success of colleges I think is about the way they treat kids, as young people in transition to adulthood. They can be treated differently to the Year 7s. And that's where the big benefit comes in with regard to retention.

It's very difficult to show statistically but I'm quite sure without colleges there'd be many fewer Tasmanians who would get 11 and 12 education, because we have literally hundreds of them every year who come back after a year or two's break and they come back to institutions where they're treated as adults, where there are no uniforms. Most of the colleges don't even have bells or PAs or anything like that. It's a very adult environment and it's set up in that way, and we no longer notice those hundreds of what we call mature age students. They're just part of the normal population.

In other states they've had to create separate institutions or TAFE has had to provide them. So if you actually look at what colleges

add to the net provision of educational services, I think it's much broader than the retention figures would suggest.

MS JACOB: That post-compulsory report that I gave you earlier, that was based on a study where we looked at the total cohort of students who were in Year 10 in 1995, and we've followed them and seen what happened to them. Clearly some of the recommendations that are based on that report would support the kinds of things that Graeme's saying. But I think we've just basically got to shift our community perception and expectation that school finishes at Year 10.

We tend to reinforce that. We have leavers' dinners and all of those kinds of things at the end of Year 10, almost sort of signalling the time has ended, whereas really I guess what we're trying to do now is to say school doesn't finish until Year 12 and if you really are serious at looking at future life chances, you must do Year 12. You must go through to Year 12. It's going to take us a while though, I think, for that message to really go through.

[Post-school pathways]

MR YOUNG: It's one of those issues, the nature of which changes over time. In my college now all the - mine's a new college, only in its third year, and since we set up our focus has been - we've always had a big program to get kids from 10 to 11. Now the program is to get them into something after 12, and we've got the college divided up into what we call two pathways, not mutually exclusive. One's vocational. It has the VET program; we have 21 courses in that. And the other is the university pathway, and we have about 50 pre-tertiary classes. By providing increased focus on those outcomes we have dramatically increased the number of kids who go to those destinations.

I think we've taken the number of kids going to uni from 36 in the first year to over 100 last year - this is with the same size college - and the number of kids getting VET certificates - this is speaking from memory - has gone from about 20 to about 100 and there's another 200 kids getting VET outcomes but not the full certificate, because they're combining that course with other subjects. So what we're telling our kids is, "You're on the first step of the next pathway. You're not finishing school. You're starting a training pathway or you're starting a university pathway." We still get kids who go to employment as well, but we have really reduced the size of what used to be the majority of the student population; that is, those who came to college just to get a general education and when they finished it wondered what they'd do next.

That's one reason why we're focusing on the Year 13s that I mentioned before, because we found lots of parents and their kids kind of put kids in college in a kind of holding pattern to wait till they found a job. If they haven't got a job at the end of Year 12 then they want to

come back for Year 13 but we make them think, as they come into the college in Year 11, "What's your pathway through 11 and 12, and where are you going afterwards? You can change your mind but where are you going?" If you know what you're after then you know what college needs to provide you along the way to get that next step. We've created this culture now of being on one of those pathways. So that pattern of classification of enrolments of kids across the college is totally different. We're now kind of bipolar - VET and university - and the general is a smaller group in the middle.

THE COMMISSIONER: Tasmania's the only place that I've heard of that's got a Year 11 finishing school, which you mentioned. I think there are three that have got Year 11s?

MS JACOB: Yes. I suppose what we've tried to do is where there's clearly a group of young people who are not going to go on to a college - and they're usually in some of the more rural areas where there is a district high or whatever - we try and provide something which isn't attempting to duplicate what's happening in the colleges, because we don't want to do that, but providing a course which is going to meet the needs of those people. Often that's got a very vocational orientation, so it's really, I guess, designed for a specific reason - to really try and link kids into jobs and to increase their sort of basic foundation skills. Beyond that we really think if we're going to serve them in any kind of way they really do need to go on to a college.

THE COMMISSIONER: But why would you have a Year 11 class in a school with that kind of orientation in a town that's also got a TAFE? Why not move the kids into the TAFE system at that stage?

MS JACOB: That's a very good question.

MR YOUNG: I'm not sure we have many where we have a TAFE. Aren't they out in the country?

THE COMMISSIONER: Queenstown.

[Staffing formula]

MR YOUNG: As I said, this issue changes though. One thing that I've started talking to people like Alison about is the fact that we actually have a staffing formula that penalises a college for kids that leave between the two censuses that we have, which are the start of March and start of August. The intention of that is to have us keep the students there and give us a financial and staffing penalty if we lose kids. But the world's changed and I'm not just talking about this vocational pathway.

[Traineeships]

We have kids who come to a college and the purpose is to get onto a training pathway and into employment. If you've been doing a VET program for a year and a half and you're halfway through your Year 12, you have a number of nationally recognised VET modules. You're probably getting pretty close to your certificate. If you get offered a traineeship, you're on a pathway, you're doing the same thing you're doing at college in a sense, and you've got employment as well, naturally we don't stand in the way of such a student. But there's also a Commonwealth penalty to a student who finishes a full certificate 2 with us, because once they go to get a full certificate 2 and they move into employment, the employer no longer gets the Commonwealth subsidy for employing someone doing certificate 2.

So we're actually now engaging in the device of not issuing the final module to kids who finish the certificate 2 with us in Year 12 because they can get the subsidy. This is where two bits of government don't work together.

THE COMMISSIONER: Absolutely. Can they come back and get the certificate from you?

MR YOUNG: They'll pick it up by assessment in the workplace with their employer as part of their traineeship.

THE COMMISSIONER: So at the end of the subsidy period they then get the certificate anyway.

MR YOUNG: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right.

MR YOUNG: But this is where the notion of what is the purpose of the kids being at school needs to broaden. I'm not being critical of the department here. I've got all these speeches I've made over the years about how important it is to finish Year 12 and I can quote statistics and blah-blah-blah. I've had to change those now. Now I say, "Unless you're leaving, onto a pathway."

[TAFE]

MS JACOB: But I think your point about the duplication of resources in some areas is a very - you know, we take that point and it's something that we're obviously thinking about, particularly now that our department has responsibility for TAFE, even though they are an independent body and the line responsibility isn't the same as, for example, with the colleges. But clearly it doesn't make sense to have the kind of infrastructure duplicated in the same places and in the kinds

of courses, and we really are going to look at that. We've got - particularly with some of the IT infrastructure - the situation where we've got online access centres, schools, a TAFE campus or a TAFE sort of annexe, all with different infrastructure, all in a very small town, all basically duplicating the same sort of thing. That's just crazy, so we've just got to get much better coordination.

THE COMMISSIONER: Is there any minimum age for admission to a TAFE course in Tasmania?

MS JACOB: Again, in terms of age, I'm not absolutely sure but in terms of what we are trying to do - and that post-compulsory study does pick that up - is discourage students from going in to TAFE before they've completed Year 12, but there are exceptions to that and there are circumstances where that happens. But it's that tension between wanting students to have a good general education before they start to specialise too early or get very narrow vocational course orientated at a time when in terms of their future they're probably going to change directions lots of times. If they specialise too early - we don't want them to do that. We want them to have some general skills first, but it is an issue.

THE COMMISSIONER: Can TAFE run a subject for Year 9 and 10 kids? To take the Queenstown example, the school provides woodwork; it can't provide metalwork. Is there any bar from TAFE providing metalwork as an optional subject for Years 9 and 10 kids in the high school?

MS JACOB: No, there's no bar. It's just that it's something that the department really hasn't looked at and made up its mind. In situations where the schools have actually taken the initiative and just done that, it has happened. It certainly has occurred in various places and I guess what we did with that post-compulsory study was sort of say, "Well, you know, is this what we want to happen? Do we want to duplicate things or do we want to be able to use resources a bit more sensibly?"

THE COMMISSIONER: For reasons that no-one can still answer, in Queensland you have to be 16 - I think it is, or 15 - before you can do TAFE. So there are small towns with struggling high schools and beautiful TAFE facilities not being used and the kids can't use them because they're under 15. I don't know if there's a similar - but obviously if the facilities are there they can be used. It's just a matter of are they being used?

MS JACOB: Yes.

[Cross-sectoral collaboration]

THE COMMISSIONER: Okay. The next question concerned whether there is cooperation and if so, what, between government and non-government systems, particularly in the smaller towns. In a place like I suppose Rosebery or Queenstown there are Catholic and government primary schools. I was told in Queenstown that the school I think can only manage a .4 music teacher and the .6 has to be used - a specialist music teacher - on other things. Is there capacity for the two systems to jointly employ a music teacher and share the music teacher, or jointly employ a full-time relief teacher who's guaranteed a full-time job and so might be attracted to the town on that basis and then work between the two systems?

MS JACOB: It's a really good question and I'd have to say that it doesn't happen at the moment. Apart from in some situations where clearly the economies of scale basically force that to happen - I can think of examples where we provide, for example, teachers for hearing impaired and visually impaired and various other disability areas who work across both systems on a fee-for-service sort of a basis. We're not doing it as far as your examples of music teachers and so on, but I honestly can't see any reason why that couldn't happen. I think it's just simply that it doesn't. The two systems sort of operate fairly differently.

Our system does make available to the non-government system all of our infrastructure resources - so library resources, media resources. Those kinds of things are able to be accessed by the non-government system and they're detailed there.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's school libraries or just the community libraries?

MS JACOB: Well, the central library that provides for teachers and things like that.

THE COMMISSIONER: I see. Right.

MS JACOB: Non-government schools can come and use that, and so on. But clearly they can use the community libraries. Anybody can use the community libraries. I think there's a lot of capacity for that.

THE COMMISSIONER: But could you have, though, a joint library in a small country town between the schools?

MS JACOB: I can't see any reason why not. I really can't. It's been a bit of a struggle even to get the concept of small towns accepting the fact that maybe their community library and their school library could be the same library, and that is beginning to happen. It's happening in two or three places now. Port Arthur's already been one where that's

happened recently. Rather than build a new community library the school library was upgraded, and so that's now become the community library, and it also happens at Swansea, and there's a couple of other places I can't think of.

But again you have to break down people's perception of their territory and their responsibility and all of the objections that people will come up with, like people in the community saying they don't want to go into the school because they feel uncomfortable in the school environment, and that kind of thing. I think, though, that as far as sharing between the school sectors, we do share particularly with the Catholic sector on a number of things, such as our assessment program is a common program. We have a lot of professional development activities where there's linking between the systems. I think it's really just a case of doing it.

One of the barriers may well be that - I think Tasmania's now probably the only state where the curriculum for the school system is not developed for the state as a whole. We have a curriculum in our government system, and the independent system and the Catholic system, what they do is really their own issue whereas in most other states they have some kind of independent curriculum council or board of studies or whatever - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Board of Studies in New South Wales.

MS JACOB: - - - that actually sets curriculum. So I suspect that one of the issues would be whether or not the teachers were using the same curriculum and teaching methods and so on. Again I can't see any reason why that couldn't be looked at. We have looked at sharing between other government departments when it comes to things like social workers and therapy services and that kind of thing, and that certainly did start on the west coast a couple of years ago where we put a speech pathologist in. There wasn't enough work just in the school system but they were able to do work in the Health Department as well and work across the two systems. But that person left and then various other things happened and that broke down.

So I guess what I'm saying is that in principle I think we should be doing more. We're not probably doing as much as we should at the moment.

THE COMMISSIONER: I certainly think that it's - the maintenance of two systems, two major systems, is there and arguments for and against it, I know. I've got my views, everyone else has theirs, but why we can't therefore get cooperation between them, recognising the existence of them, is another matter.

MS JACOB: And I don't think that on the ground level there'd be a problem with that, although clearly there would be some instances where the government school might see sharing their resources with the non-government sector as being a threat to their enrolment numbers, etcetera. But I think those things can often be worked out.

[Relief teachers; professional development]

THE COMMISSIONER: Relief teaching is an issue that comes up everywhere. It's very difficult to find relief teachers in country areas. Is there a plan or an approach from the department at the statewide level to address relief in country areas? Are there permanent relief teachers, for example, provided on a district basis?

MS JACOB: That has been done on the west coast, simply because it was absolutely impossible to find relief teachers. So the department did fund three - I think - extra positions permanently just to allow relief on the west coast. It hasn't happened in other areas and it's certainly - as you say, relief teachers - that's an issue. Most schools would say that they have great difficulty finding quality relief teachers and that really does mean that they can't participate in things like professional development and so on that they want to do.

Even just finding the teachers on the ground who would be available to be there, even if we did put permanent people in, would be difficult for us. Just to get people to live in those areas on that basis is not easy. Just staffing rural schools is difficult anyway. Yes, it's an issue. We're also trying to get teachers to think about other models of accessing professional development which don't necessarily mean they're out of their class and someone else has to come in, and looking at ways in which, for example, we can pay teachers to do PD in weekends or holidays and pay them the equivalent that we'd pay the relief teacher, rather than having them go out and have another person come in, which is always disruptive and difficult anyway.

THE COMMISSIONER: The other thing looked at in some states is having a professional development week or something where the schools actually close; have an extra week's holiday for the kids but the teachers are doing professional development somewhere else in the state during that period.

MS JACOB: We do have some mandatory days that schools have to take professional development with the kids not there. Some of the schools choose to do that on a day in their holidays and others split the time up and do it after school hours and so on. So that does happen to some degree.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, so they approach it in different ways.

MS JACOB: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: In spite of the time we allowed, we've certainly used it. There are a number of other areas, just two that I would like to mention. One is the question of packages in remote areas for teachers, which again is a national issue. It seems that the areas where you actually provide the packages are limited to the west coast in Tassie, as I understand. Is that correct?

MS JACOB: Yes.

[Staff incentives]

THE COMMISSIONER: Right. Does the department have a view on the adequacy of those?

MS JACOB: I think the department's view is that it's aware that whatever the circumstance, we will have difficulty attracting teachers to some areas and obviously there's all sorts of suggestions that are made at various times about what kind of packages ought to be offered; what sort of incentives, what sort of carrots, and so on, can we offer? I think it would be fair to say that's an issue that gets talked about a lot but in terms of definitive solutions we're a bit short on the ground.

THE COMMISSIONER: Have you had a look or consideration of individual packaging, rather than a standard formula package?

MS JACOB: I really don't know; not to my knowledge we haven't, no.

THE COMMISSIONER: I think that again, whatever the arguments for and against AWAs - individual workplace agreements or individual contracts - it seems that they do allow the flexibility for the first time to packages they want. One teacher might want a return trip to Melbourne once a year and less in pocket money, and others may want something different.

MS JACOB: It sounds sensible.

[Transport]

THE COMMISSIONER: The last issue that I was going to raise is just the question of transport, which is a big one and obviously featured strongly when we were in the west coast yesterday. I was quite staggered, I must say, when they said the cost of hiring a bus for a day trip to Burnie is \$780.

MS JACOB: Heavens. It staggers me too.

THE COMMISSIONER: Well, I just couldn't believe it but apparently that's the standard rate. Are schools like west coast or more remote schools given extra budget to cover excursions or travel for the kids to sporting, debating, cultural activities?

MS JACOB: Only in relation to the Commonwealth Country Areas Program. The schools that get that money would often use it for those purposes but the department - well, there is an index that does take into account distance from a major centre that's - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, this is under the resource - - -

MS JACOB: That's right. That's a fairly minor part of the overall index, so I wouldn't want to pretend that schools were well catered for in that respect, but clearly one of the reasons for that is because of the extra costs associated with things like that.

THE COMMISSIONER: So the school would look at it. They'd have the extra budget. They decide what they can and can't do.

MS JACOB: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right. I think we'd better leave it so we have a five-minute break before the next one comes in, but thank you very much for your time. Thank you for all the answers to the other questions you'll leave with us too, Alison, and the trouble you've gone to.

MS JACOB: That's fine.

THE COMMISSIONER: I very much appreciate the detail that you've provided us with and the amount of work that's gone into it, so thank you, and thank you all for coming along this morning.

[11.40 am]

THE COMMISSIONER: Would you like to start, for the tape, by introducing yourself and then make such comments as you like and we can have a discussion about them.

MS ROCKLIFF: Okay, thanks. My name is Susan Rockliff and I am the School Community Liaison Officer with the Tasmanian Council of State Schools Parents and Friends based in Hobart but representing the parents of over 70,000 state school students in Tasmania.

In preparing the submission I visited about five rural communities and spoke to parents in those areas about the particular issues facing them and what their thoughts and feelings were about having children to educate in those areas. However, I didn't include in my itinerary the Bass Strait islands which I feel is a real deficiency but in preparing for today I spoke to several people on King Island and would like, with your permission, to read something out about that.

THE COMMISSIONER: That will be terrific, thank you.

[Evidence from King Island]

MS ROCKLIFF: This was prepared and sent to me by a man called Mr Dick Stansfield who is the chairman of the King Island District High School, which is in Currie on King Island. This is what he wrote:

The factors affecting King Island would not be dissimilar to those affecting many remote and regional areas. King Island has a population of around 1500 with an expected 300 students K to 10 next year. King Island District High School is able to provide good facilities for schooling from Prep to Year 10. However, the size of the school, staffing and general resourcing limitations do limit the scope of subjects which the school is able to offer senior students in particular. This impacts in regard to extended subjects, particularly in the sciences and maths to LOTE, and many of the arts.

Videoconferencing is being trialled in some of these areas. Facilities such as this will become an increasingly important component of the school curriculum in order to broaden our educational capacity, but require additional financial support. Special-need students receive limited external support due to the cost of providing staff from the mainland of Tasmania.

Staffing has historically been and continues to be a problem, it being hard to attract senior subject-specific qualified personnel on the one hand and finding a number of teaching staff settle on the island and remain in the school on the other. The transfer policy may impact on this issue but it is seen as a problem both to the school and to the staff who, for personal reasons, may be forced to resign should the policy be enforced.

Post-Year 10 study is now becoming a problem. The lack of suitable home away from home accommodation - private board doesn't often work - particularly in

Launceston, is seeing an increasing number of students either travelling to Victorian schools or attending private boarding schools in Launceston. This has a serious detrimental effect on those students and families unable to meet the extra cost burden associated with both options and is clearly inequitable. Both the school council and the parents and friends association have taken this issue to government but with no satisfactory response.

The cost of travel is compensated adequately to Tasmania with air travel to Melbourne available, but additional ground travel not reimbursed. The availability of seats has now become an issue with only one commercial operator from Tasmania and students not being able to travel home for weekend breaks unless booked well in advance or by taking extended days from school. These issues have created serious problems for families with students just 16 when forced away from home for further study. Dick Stansfield.

THE COMMISSIONER: Could you leave that with us because we'd like to just - - -

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes, I've actually got some copies. There's four copies there.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thanks. We'll actually put that in separately as well as a written submission because it's good to hear from them. We haven't done so to date.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes. There are a couple of other issues that came up in conversations. Is it okay with you if I discuss those?

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

[Parent expectations of staff]

MS ROCKLIFF: Mostly we found that parents wanted staff to show more interest and commitment to the communities in which they worked and they talked a lot about the inability of getting teachers to settle in areas or wish to remain longer in some of these rural communities. It was interesting that King Island was the only setting in which they said some of their staff stayed too long, that for lifestyle decisions a certain percentage of them settle on the island - perhaps they marry King Island people and they stay there - and I think it's seen that in some cases that's to the detriment of the school and the students because they don't have the opportunity for staff turnover where it might be

appropriate to bring extra expertise into the school. So that's an unusual factor.

[Evidence from King Island]

Mr Stansfield believes that in some cases staff stay too long. On the other hand, principals change too frequently, the school being seen as a staging post on a career pathway. The current principal is in her fourth year at the school. He also raised the issue of lack of role models for students. Mr Stansfield says that there is no unemployment on the island. When questioned he said that so long as a person was happy with labouring work, he or she could find a job.

Mr Stansfield believes that one of the problems the students face is a lack of role models for other careers and occupations. There are two doctors but no lawyers or accountants on the island, of course, amongst other professions, and consequently students' aspirations are limited. I asked Mr Stansfield if the students educated in Melbourne or Tasmania return to the island. He said sometimes they do, particularly if they are content to work in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. He spoke about the accommodation issue which we have already covered.

I also had an opportunity to speak to a mother, a Mrs Donna Whitehouse who has five children all at school at King Island District High, and she told me that many parents were concerned about their children's education, particularly after grade 8. There is one student studying Year 11 through TOLS because there was no other choice for that student on King Island. Donna said that once parents have accepted the necessity of sending their children off the island for Years 11 and 12, they also look at private education because of the perception that accommodation and supervision is superior to that available through the state system. Obviously the very significant financial cost of this makes it an impossibility for most. So I think that's probably all that I can say about the King Island situation in particular.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you. It's great. Any other things you want to add to material you've given us? I'm very grateful too for your having conducted those six consultations. It's given us a lot of material and we haven't been to any of those places that you've been to. We're only doing two spots here so it's very helpful to us that you've actually done it. Thank you.

MS ROCKLIFF: Well, it was really useful to the organisation too because notionally we do speak on behalf of all parents but we don't often have the opportunity to go out. So in a way it was a great opportunity to have an excuse to talk to some of these parents and they took it up at varying degrees of confidence and empowerment. I suppose that's come out over and over again that, in some of these communities, the people are not that confident about their ability to

participate in the political process or they feel that people don't listen to them. So I think it was really worthwhile going out and chatting to them about things. Probably it was outside the bounds of this particular inquiry but I think some of the issues facing rural communities are bigger than education in a way too and I note that I heard Alison Jacob talk about the relationship between the Health and Education Departments.

[Suicide prevention]

Also I think, in responding to a question that you had about youth suicide, that didn't actually come up in particular but Tas Council this year has been very keen for the department to look at a parenting program which emanates from the Victorian Parenting Centre called Exploring Together, and I had the opportunity to participate in a training program for this which was provided in all the states under the provisions of the Commonwealth Strategy for the Prevention of Youth Suicide. It was a very good course and has been running in Victoria for over 10 years, specifically designed for children whose significant behavioural problems place them at risk of suicide.

It's been quite disappointing really that the Education Department has been quite on the whole disinterested in seeing that course or supporting it. Ideally it requires Health and Education to cooperate and provide personnel which can run these quite intensive programs but they've been very effective, dealing with children whose anger or anxiety is quite disabling. I don't know whether that's because of territorial things between Health and Education. It's just been a bit disappointing that there's been a bit of an unwillingness in some of the districts to even look at it. However, in the Barrington district, which is basically centred on Devonport and Ulverstone, they have run one program and have got another and have actually gone to the expense of sending people to Melbourne for training. So they believe that it is going to be very effective and they're going to follow that through.

Whether there are people on the ground in some rural and remote communities to actually participate in that sort of intensive - or run intensive programs like that - I doubt it, but one feels that in places like Queenstown or Strahan that could be so effective - Queenstown particularly I think - for youth because you'd know from passing through there's not a lot going on there for young people. Things like you have to actually leave - Murray High doesn't teach, I believe, any pre-tertiary subjects at all, so where is the pathway there for the universities? It's uphill all the way I think. Did you have any questions that you want to ask me?

THE COMMISSIONER: As I mentioned, we went to Queenstown so I suppose we heard a little bit about Zeehan.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes.

[Transport]

THE COMMISSIONER: Particularly the kids who come down from Zeehan to high school there. We haven't gone at all to the north-east - Winnaleah and St Marys. Did the issue of transport come up with a lot of specifics there? You mentioned it was one of the issues that was raised generally but - - -

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes, well, it's funny - each meeting had its own flavour and the meeting at St Marys - there were a couple of women, or more than a few, from Bicheno who had come with the sole objective of changing the bus timetable from Bicheno to St Marys because students in Tasmania are also transported around by quite a number of bus contractors and I think it's the feeling of a lot of parents that the timetables are drawn up to suit the bus contractors and not necessarily the students.

So I think probably, although I couldn't say, that enormous cost of getting students from - \$720 or whatever it is - may be something to do with this arrangement of these private bus contractors. It may be a feature of that. I don't know. Certainly students are disadvantaged in terms of their school day being a lot longer based on how long it takes them to get home and when the contractors will take them, which in some cases is quite significant. It adds a lot to a day. If children want to remain at home and yet they're facing a bus trip of perhaps more than an hour to school and then home again and they've got to somehow try and fit in extra cultural or sporting commitments as well.

So transport is a big issue, so much so that some parents at my St Marys meeting said that they knew of other families who had completely relocated, had moved into Launceston because they weren't happy with the transport arrangements that were in place and that they were concerned about particularly senior secondary. I would say that overall there is a lot more - there's contentment basically with primary education, the provision of that. Anxiety enters the picture when we talk about high school and particularly senior secondary, the senior secondary level.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, that's not restricted to Tasmania.

MS ROCKLIFF: No. I suppose what I'd say is that a lot of people love living where they do, and they have made a lifestyle decision to remain there or to move there, but they also want to have all the services that are available to city kids. Given our small population here and the small tax base, I guess that's just an unrealistic expectation.

[Distance education]

THE COMMISSIONER: Did any of the parents have kids doing distance education or TOLS for any subjects and, if so, how did they rate it in their discussions?

MS ROCKLIFF: I think they were very happy with it. I met the parent who is the sort of coordination parent in the TOLS - Tasmanian Open Learning Service - recently and she lives in quite a fairly remote - she lives on the slopes of Ben Lomond basically and she has one child, I think, who is educated at home but goes into a small rural primary school one day a week. She talked about the meetings where they get together.

She spoke about the need for the students to have some sort of corporate or group identity so that they're looking at things like designing a T-shirt or windcheater that these kids can wear when they come together for the activity days and things that Lyn Dunn spoke about, which I think probably just highlights that learning at home is difficult and, for young kids, they've got that sort of conceptual problem about thinking they're part of the school or something. Yes, I think they've been very happy with the service in terms of the teaching.

One issue that was mentioned by the department this morning is the turnaround time for the setting of assignments and getting them back to students. That came up in one meeting as being rather slow, which is difficult for mature students because they're often anxious about how their work is in comparison with other students, so it would be good if they could get more rapid feedback, I suppose, about how they're going.

THE COMMISSIONER: I think it's also a problem for younger kids in motivating them, I must say.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: IT: many comments about the cost of information technology and access to the Internet?

[Languages other than English]

MS ROCKLIFF: No, not specifically on that comment. I think that the parents involved in the meetings were people who had access through their school or community access centres. There were also more people who - I guess more parents attended the meetings with children in the primary area and the primary schools are pretty well set up, I think, with computing and that has been one thing that I've recently found out quite a bit about - LOTE teaching, languages other than English in Tassie - and they make good use of the Internet in linking students up with students interstate or even overseas and have overcome that sort of traditional problem of, "Why are we learning a

European language here?" for example. I mean, that's great. That's something that's got better since I was at school when we were trying to learn French and German here and not having the opportunity to practise it very much.

So that's something that's improved and LOTE teaching relies quite heavily on that, I think, linking students up between schools too so that they actually have a feeling that they're part of quite a large number of students who are interested in learning about foreign languages and they're able to access the authentic materials in the target language too from overseas sources, which is good. I think from what some of the department officers said, you can see that the number of students studying LOTE in rural and remote communities is still very small.

[Senior secondary access]

THE COMMISSIONER: Very low, yes. I was interested in the department's comments this morning about the issue of kids going away and the lower retention rate in Year 11 - moving from Year 10 to 11 particularly. There seemed to be an implication that parents not only don't want to send their kids away for further education in the sense of splitting up the family but also don't want to do it because they fear they'll never come back.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes, I haven't got any idea how widespread that fear would be but you can see from the small rural communities that that is in fact what is happening. Once students get away and study somewhere else, it's very likely that they'll go on to further study in Hobart or on the mainland and what would attract them to go back to living in Zeehan? There may be nothing for them, or a place like that, or on King Island or somewhere else. Ultimately they have to earn a living so it's a strange sort of mind-set to get into - "Well, if we educate our children past their capacity to earn a living in this location, we don't want that to happen so we'll discourage them."

I don't know. I think most of the parents that I had contact with were very concerned that their children find - and sometimes they expressed it as a "living" - whether that means a living generated by unskilled labour, I don't know, or whether they want them to go on to further education and acquire qualifications as well. But they were concerned about the future. I think because of the age at which they have to go, which is in some cases 15 to 16, they are concerned about what they would be sending them away to. I think that's a bigger factor - and the cost, the cost involved in having the students board somewhere else is quite a lot and only some of that is compensated by state or Commonwealth funding - offset by Commonwealth funding.

[Assistance for Isolated Children]

THE COMMISSIONER: Offset by it?

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: We received comments in most places that the Commonwealth funding - assistance for isolated students - the AIC scheme - doesn't provide enough money to come anywhere close to meeting the additional costs involved.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes, it would seem that way.

THE COMMISSIONER: They were put to you as well - those comments and views?

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes, I can remember one person in particular talking about that, which I don't think had been a problem in their particular family; that there are some people living in rural communities who, if they're associated with burgeoning businesses, are actually doing reasonably well, or sometimes mining communities. There's actually no shortage of cash but it's not always - yes, some people can afford to send their children away, but lots of others can't. They don't have the access to that sort of money. I think another issue that came up is that once children move away also, if they're not adequately supervised, they develop an independence that some parents find quite threatening too. They are able to access independent living away from home support through the Commonwealth which they see as undermining their authority as parents.

That came up in one meeting where a young girl had moved into Launceston, lived in a college for one year and then decided to move out into a flat and was able to access funds to enable her to do that, and her parents weren't happy about that but didn't feel they could do anything about it - and I think probably subsequently dropped out of college as well.

[Boarding]

THE COMMISSIONER: We actually received a number of comments about the boarding system here, the hostels, where parents it seems are worried about the supervision of their kids. Those kinds of issues have never been raised with me in relation to boarding schools so I don't know whether boarding schools are seen as being a highly disciplined, tightly organised and supervised environment and the hostels are a much freer process.

MS ROCKLIFF: Well, I think so. The issue is I think also that hostels often cater for a much wider range of students. Some of them - I guess the minority but probably would be Year 7 or 12-year-olds and they go

right through to students who are studying at TAFE - I'm not quite sure about whether that situation still obtains in Launceston but I know that it was a concern to parents that quite young children were living in the same fairly informally organised hostel accommodation with much older students.

I don't know anything about the way boarding schools are run but I imagine that they're far better staffed in terms of matrons and housemasters and mistresses than hostels are. Once a perception is built up in a parent community that hostels aren't very good, then it's very off-putting. For some reason, a hostel located near Burnie developed a bad name amongst parents and I think that's resulted in the fact that nobody from King Island is going to Burnie at the moment to college. They're all going to Launceston and it's because of this perception that the hostel accommodation in Burnie wasn't any good.

[King Island retention rates]

There's just an example - actually from King Island. I got some facts about the retention from Years 10 to 11 from the assistant principal. Last year, in 1998, there were 20 grade 10 students. 17 are studying grade 11 and they're dispersed thus: 10 have gone to Assumption College in Kilmore in Victoria; one has gone to Balwyn High School and is living in Balwyn with relatives; two have gone to Launceston Church Grammar School; one to Portland - I don't know whether that's to a school or for a job or something - and three have gone to Launceston College; and one student began Year 11 but has dropped out. This assistant principal said the retention rate therefore looks really good but it's only because there's nothing on the island for them except labouring jobs and the occasional traineeship.

This assistant principal felt that the two major problems facing them were the accommodation - that it was only semi-supervised and very run-down in some cases - and the second problem was attracting experienced qualified teachers. There was, he said, no way of getting them to the island; that a real incentive policy was needed - either more money or accelerated long service leave accrual or something like that.

Alison Jacob mentioned this post-compulsory report which she's given you and the one thing that stood out for me about that was that Tasmania's net fall in population, particularly in the 15 to 24-year age range is quite - well, it's very startling that it has dropped by over 10% over the last 10 years, which must have implications for the education in the future I think too.

[Gay and lesbian students]

THE COMMISSIONER: I was interested that the only place where gay and lesbian issues were raised was when you raised it.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: In spite of the work in north-west Tasmania in the last few years, there's been no real take-up of consciousness, at least, evident amongst the parents you spoke to.

MS ROCKLIFF: No, not amongst those parents. I think from reading that report it seemed as though at least there are some support services, albeit very small, for minority sexual-need students but, yes, there's certainly nothing on a big scale and there's probably still a way to go overcoming cultural problems, particularly in the north-west. It's very hard for students there, I believe, but it wasn't raised by anybody despite my giving them the opportunity - but, you know, not a single bite.

THE COMMISSIONER: Sort of blank stares.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes, exactly. So when you receive that sort of response, you don't go on and push it. You think, "Right, well, it's obviously not an issue here," and the same really with - there were no ethnic groups represented in the parents either. Whether that's because of the whole language thing, that the invitation wasn't circulated to parents in a way that they could respond to. It's just really hard that, if there are parents living in rural and remote communities that have a different ethnic background and if it's recent, then I think things are pretty hard for them.

THE COMMISSIONER: Very isolated.

MS ROCKLIFF: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: That's all my questions, thanks, Susan. Your report is just terrific, and particularly the notes of the individual meetings which are extremely helpful to us. So thank you very much for that.

MS ROCKLIFF: It was a pleasure - and I should say on behalf of all of those parents how much they appreciated even being given the opportunity. They said this - well, even if they didn't say it - although the meetings were often small, they really took the opportunity. But then for all the people who came to meetings, there's a whole lot more who didn't come, and that says a lot about what they feel about living in a rural community and what they can do about it.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

MS ROCKLIFF: So thank you very much for giving us the opportunity.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you, and it's great to have our work supplemented by the work that you've done in those six places which we couldn't get to.

MS ROCKLIFF: Great.

[12.10 pm]

THE COMMISSIONER: Welcome to this inquiry.

MS QUOR: My name is Umi Quor and I work actually for the Education Department as well as for the Migrant Resource Centre, but I'm not representing the Education Department, I'm just with Migrant Resource Centre for today.

THE COMMISSIONER: Okay.

MS QUOR: And because my work has to do with lots of children as well as being a sort of liaison person with the Migrant Resource Centre for Education Department, so I have in a way come across into several cases in the past regarding children's education, mainly from the children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Actually I would like to mention a few cases that, in a way, I was helping about.

[ESL in kindergarten]

Firstly, may I sort of go from my notes and looking from kindergarten to secondary colleges and things that I see as lacking of assistance or seeing that these people in a way are disadvantaged. Okay. In Launceston in the past we had a problem with children who are coming from a non-English-speaking background who are in kindergarten, for example, because these children are actually - they have no access of ESL teachers. ESL teachers will only start teaching from primary level, not kindergarten. So although kindergarten is part of the school, however, the kindergarten children will not get any access from ESL, and therefore they are very disadvantaged because they have no English and many of them were refugees or through family reunion - migration through family reunion.

When I spoke to the Education Department regarding that, they just simply said that they're not providing an ESL teacher for kindergarten. I see kindergarten as such an important year for the children and, unless they are being supported or they are being assisted, then they're going to find it very hard when they are going to primary school.

[ESL in private schools]

Another thing, in private schools - the Catholic system for example - they do not have ESL teachers and often people from El Salvador, Ecuador or the Philippines prefer to send their children to Catholic schools. Later they find they do not have ESL teachers who can support their children. But I'm only saying this for Launceston, not elsewhere, because I have been approached several times by the Catholic schools, if the Migrant Resource Centre has some kind of funding to help these children. But, of course, we do not have any money available for that purpose. Usually then, when something like that happens, the teachers or the classroom teachers will become the support teacher.

[ESL in rural high schools]

In high school especially in the north-east - this is Scottsdale - we had children coming from some Asian countries and again, being such a small school they also do not have ESL teachers. Although they're being provided with support, the support from the school I think is not as - I shouldn't say it's not as it should be, because the assistance is there, the support is there, but not from ESL teachers. Again, when I spoke to someone within the Education Department the problem is numbers, because it's only a few that are living in the area and a few that are going to this certain school, and therefore they only provide ESL for a limited time - limited resource, limited time.

Actually, I know the person who is providing the ESL - the English support for her - but as a result then she became quite - what's the word? - suicidal and depressed because she has to teach LOTE, she has to teach SOSE, she has to teach English, she has to teach so many other subjects. As a result of that she dropped out from my class because she was doing professional development with me. So that's the impact. I see that as an impact of such a heavy load for her. So then not only is it a disadvantage for the child but also a disadvantage for the teachers concerned who are acting as support teachers.

At the secondary college I found that refugee children and migrant children, although they have been supported by a ESL teacher, but when the ESL teacher is not there then in a way they are lost. They are feeling, "Oh, who is going to support me, because my ESL teacher is not here?" In Launceston we have about three ESL teachers. One teacher goes to about four or five schools and another teacher goes to a few schools, so these teachers are being spread thinly over so many different schools. Again, I think that is rather a heavy load for the ESL teachers.

[Refugee students]

I found also that the students, especially the refugee students, many of them are - apart from lacking of language they are also lacking of confidence and as a result they're depressed, they're upset. They can't find support - the sort of thing they want to do - "What I'm going to do - is it right? Is it wrong?" I would like to see at school that they establish some kind of policy - the policy is not only for overseas students - some schools have a policy about helping the students settle and they say they were integrated - which I don't like - or assimilated - which I don't like either.

It just seems that they need continuous support in the school; that the schools have to have a policy to support all the students. The policy must be written, not only just verbal policy that is, "Oh, well, let's be flexible." Unless we have the policy in place regarding the refugee children and migrant - students, sorry - migrant and refugee students, then I think they will remain disadvantaged in those places.

The wonderful thing that I've found in the kind of environment - like the secondary college - is that many of them who came from Bosnia or are coming from Somalia, for example - I mean, because they speak - the ones coming from Somalia speak Arabic and therefore they're going to do the TCE for Arabic exam, and that is wonderful, but the thing is with other subjects they will need support as well. I mean, it's just wonderful to be acknowledged, to be recognised that they're speaking another language, but their needs - other needs should also be recognised.

In your letter it's mentioned about primary school and secondary college, but happens as well at university or TAFE, that mainly that - in some of that is being obviously student (indistinct) because they're putting money in, but what migrant students? What about refugee students who are in there? Who is helping them? There is help, but limited. Many migrants and refugees who attended (indistinct) for a couple hundred of hours, once they finish that then they would like to continue to keep learning English.

Two ways - they can go through TAFE through advanced English, but often they're not advanced enough to go to advanced class. Some of them go to colleges because they can learn English stage 1 to 3, or if they're good enough then they can go to stage 4. But even then there's not enough people to go. Again, we are struck again by the numbers. There's still not enough numbers, so how are we going to get enough numbers when we don't have enough numbers? And how can we meet the needs of all these people to be able to learn, not only in English but in other subjects as well? I think that covers most of my points.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you very much. Taking your last point first, the numbers are clearly - - -

MS QUOR: Are small.

THE COMMISSIONER: - - - a major problem.

MS QUOR: Yes.

[Rural migrant support]

THE COMMISSIONER: Their numbers are very small; therefore to provide appropriate support is very difficult at times. Are there more generalised, though, migrant support workers in many of these regions that can provide support, not just for the students but also for their families - but who can also play an educational role?

MS QUOR: Yes, actually I'm like that at the moment because I happen to be working .5 for Education Department and I'm at Newstead College, and I'm .4 with Migrant Resource Centre. But because I have been within the Education Department system for a long time that makes the liaison this much easier because I know where resources are and if I'm not at MRC then I'll be at Newstead College and then they can contact me at Newstead College and vice versa. Actually you get Education Department people as well relying on me in helping them to overcome some of the difficulties with the families, so yes, at the moment I'm there for that. But in the future - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: But do you get around to some of these remote isolated areas? I mean, Newstead College is just here in Hobart.

MS QUOR: No, in Launceston.

THE COMMISSIONER: Launceston, I'm sorry.

MS QUOR: Actually my Migrant Resource Centre job is covering (indistinct) area, there's George Town, Scottsdale, St Helens, St Marys, Deloraine, Beaconsfield and Launceston.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's a north-east corner.

MS QUOR: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Are you able to get out to some of these remote communities very often, or do you mainly concentrate in the main towns?

MS QUOR: When the need arises - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: You go.

MS QUOR: We go, and apart from that, we have community settlement services work as well, and also we have community project officer at the Migrant Resource Centre, so the three of us try to cover as much as we can.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, I see, yes.

MS QUOR: So if I can't, then the CPO will. If CPO cannot, then the CSS will.

THE COMMISSIONER: So when you're actually dealing with the families, do they raise educational issues with you very much?

MS QUOR: Very much so, especially the primary school. The primary school and the secondary school and the colleges. Often they contact me instead of the CPO or the CSS, the reason being that I'm within the education system as well.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

MS QUOR: It's great in a way because I have a close contact with ESL department, and I have a close contact with the LOTE department, being a LOTE deliverer, and as well as close with most of the Launceston Education Department people.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

MS QUOR: It's just numbers, though. Numbers - they keep saying numbers - "We don't have enough numbers; numbers we need."

THE COMMISSIONER: And also you don't seem to have any dominant ethnic group or groups, language groups at all.

MS QUOR: No.

THE COMMISSIONER: In that part of Tasmania.

MS QUOR: Yes, in Launceston it's dribs and drabs. In the past we have had a number of Bosnian refugees coming in and then last year we had Somali - the Somali people. Since then we haven't had that many at all.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you find that most of the children that you're dealing with leave school early, or do most of them go on to Year 12?

MS QUOR: One problem actually - as you know, some people from the - if I say something like this, will it be inside this room? I just would like to use a case study, that's all.

THE COMMISSIONER: You can use a case study without mentioning names.

MS QUOR: All right. It's only one person, you see, and you just mention that and then - yes. Anyhow, this student is over the age of primary level. She actually has to go to high school but because there's so much of a problem - then she has to go to primary school again and she's about - almost 15. Now, as we are all aware, in Australia we put the child by the age, not by - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Level of learning.

MS QUOR: Yes. So because she has so many problems and then - it's not a learning problem, but more social. But currently anyhow the child is in primary school again in grade 6. She's the biggest child in the whole school.

THE COMMISSIONER: I wouldn't have thought going back to primary school would be a way to deal with the social problem - a learning problem, perhaps.

MS QUOR: Language and social.

THE COMMISSIONER: Language and social problems.

MS QUOR: Language problem, social problem, as well as cultural. I think also because they only arrived - it wasn't that long ago and therefore problems resurfacing all the time. They're quite unsettled actually, they're very unsettled.

[NESB students – retention]

THE COMMISSIONER: What about the proportions moving from Year 10 to Year 11?

MS QUOR: If I looked at some of the Croatian or Bosnian children they are very well - their performances are wonderful. They're very, very academic children, many of them. Only at the beginning, the first year, second year, when they're in Launceston then usually they have problems in a few things. But once they settle, they strive for success, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: And children from other backgrounds?

MS QUOR: We do not have that many.

THE COMMISSIONER: Not that many, so it's hard to generalise.

MS QUOR: Yes, we do not have that many, but with the Chinese in the past - we had a number of Chinese students but they're very businesslike people anyhow, so usually they finish high school or they finish Year 12 and then they stop, and then they work with the parents, unless - not all the Chinese are like that, but some of them - I know about half a dozen who are like that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

MS QUOR: I think what I would like to see is that if the colleges or secondary schools and primary schools put in place a policy for continuous assistance, not on a language assistance, but other support as well - although that child is already speaking English clearly, but when it comes to making assignments, coming to writing assignments, coming to do exams, I mean, they are quite unfamiliar with all those terms and how to do it. That's the support - when it's needed. May I mention about technological or IT education, for example?

THE COMMISSIONER: That was going to be my next area of questions, so go right ahead.

MS QUOR: You first, then.

[NESB students – internet access]

THE COMMISSIONER: No, I was just going to ask the question. Have these children got access to IT? Do they have computers at home?

MS QUOR: No.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do they use the Internet at all?

MS QUOR: No. At home they do not have that at all, but at school of course they have that. I don't think in primary school - the private schools have access to that. They have the access to the Internet and all that. I'm sure that in some primary schools they have that, too, but how much access they can have I'm not sure. I'm not teaching in primary school, or state primary school; I'm teaching at private primary school but not - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Is the reason they haven't got them at home because of income?

MS QUOR: Income. They are refugees.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes.

MS QUOR: Yes, and the saddest part is that usually some of the family at home - over there, wherever it is - usually expects them to help them as well. Expect the family who is in Australia to help them as well financially.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, send money back.

MS QUOR: Yes. Whether they're refugees or whether they're migrant, from what I've found - even the Filipino women are expected to do so, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: In talking to the children, do you find they actually know how to use computers? Are they learning that at school, or because they haven't got them at home do you think they're missing out completely on understanding IT?

MS QUOR: Again, I'm not quite sure, but in state primary school - what I know is that when they are doing LOTE, when they're doing - in northern Tasmania LOTE Indonesian is the biggest language being taught or being learnt by primary schoolchildren. Actually they have a - what do you call it? They have some kind of - what's the word? Some kind of like videoconferencing with a view school so the children can speak to them in whatever language they've learned, and respond to one another. That would be really wonderful if migrant children could have a similar thing to that, with for example, Melbourne or a big centre who could provide a language of some kind.

[NESB students – language and culture]

Many migrants are very concerned that the children are losing their language, that the children are losing their culture. In Hobart perhaps - I mean, they have ethnic school or Saturday school. In Launceston we used to have that, too. We used to have Greek school, we used to have Italian school, Saturday school, Indonesian Saturday school, Hebrew Saturday school - but we don't have all that any more now. Therefore these parents are always concerned, "My children are going to school. They're going to become Australian, very Australian and they're going to demand this, this, this." My Somali families always say, "My children are going to become Australian and they're not going to pray five times a day. They speak back to me," and things like that.

So, for example, if those children have access to teleconference, learning Somali language or Arabic through teleconferencing with Melbourne, for example, that alone will help

tremendously. Fear of losing culture and fear that the children may not be their own children is very scary for them. That is another thing again that is making them move elsewhere instead of Launceston, or moving out from Tasmania - "Let's move to a bigger city, Melbourne or Perth, because there are plenty of people who are speaking our language" - they will say that. Or "We can ask them for this, for this, for this, because we know one another, but here we don't." So there is a big fear of losing culture, of losing the language, of losing heritage, I suppose.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes. They are the only questions I had. Have you got other comments you wanted to make?

MS QUOR: I think I covered some of that. I'm sure that the two I brought down will be similar because they come from the north as well. We would like to see more support, and we would like to see the policy in place in regards to that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you very much. Thank you for coming in.

MS QUOR: Thank you. I hope that I put something into that.

(Luncheon adjournment)

[1.35 pm]

THE COMMISSIONER: Would you like to introduce yourselves for the tape, and then you can go straight into any comments you want to make.

MR LEESON: Good afternoon, Commissioner. My name is Ted Leeson. I'm the President of the Tasmanian Parents Council of Independent Schools and I'm here this afternoon with - - -

MR PYKE: Gary Pyke, head of the Ulverstone campus of Leighland Christian School on the north-west coast.

MR LEESON: Commissioner, what I'd like to do first of all is just introduce the Tasmanian Parents Council of Independent Schools by way of introduction and then for Gary to speak a bit more about his insights and then, time permitting, I'll address some further insights provided to us by one of our delegates from Cressy in fact - as I say, time permitting. How much time do we actually have?

THE COMMISSIONER: Depending on whether you allow me time to ask you any questions, we've got around about 40 minutes all-up for the session.

[Role of the Council]

MR LEESON: Thank you very much. The Tasmanian Parents Council of Independent Schools is basically a group of parents seeking to represent the views of parents at non-government, non-Catholic schools in Tasmania. The organisation was started off in 1973 in Tasmania and it's had its ups and down and, quite frankly, I think most of its members, including myself, wish the organisation didn't need to exist but are firmly committed to the need because there are potentially counter-views and different views being put forward in respect of parents from the two other sectors, being the state school parents and friends organisations and the Catholic schools parents and friends organisations.

Having said that, the Tasmanian Parents Council is in fact an affiliate to the Australian Parents Council and a very active member of that body. Last year I was the vice-president to the Australian Parents Council and in that regard that body represents both Catholic and non-Catholic independent or non-government schools. I suppose the Tasmanian Parents Council really, whilst it is very interested in funding issues and equity for parents of students at non-government, non-Catholic schools, is predominantly more interested in equity in education and choice in education.

I personally am involved with St Michael's Collegiate School in Hobart. I have two daughters and I am currently the president of the parents and friends organisation at that school. However, having said that, I have some personal experience of rural and remote Australia. I started my own education at Devonport on the north coast of Tasmania and that followed with five other secondary schools in three other states of Australia and overseas, including Walgett, New South Wales, for two years - certainly rural and remote.

Having given that introduction, there's only one other point. Of the children in schools in Tasmania, approximately 75% of them attend government schools, 15% Catholic schools and just under 10% non-Catholic, non-government schools, so that's the sector specifically that - or the parents in that sector we're particularly seeking to represent, and of those students our organisation has membership extending to nearly three-quarters of that constituent group. They are just statements by way of introduction. Thank you.

MR PYKE: Mr Commissioner, I have been head of campus at Ulverstone for approximately eight weeks, so I'm fairly new to the job. I

did teach for seven years - the last seven years I've been there, so I think I might have, hopefully, some interesting perspectives for you.

My school has approximately 410 students from kinder to grade 12, but the other perspective that is colouring my comments is that I am also the parent of a daughter with intellectual and physical disabilities, and she has experienced education in special schools, government schools and finished her education in an independent school. I myself have been involved in both government and independent schools for 17 years in total - only the one independent school, but I also taught at Lilydale District High School in the north-east and so I have a bit of an understanding of some of the problems they also experience.

[Student body at Ulverstone]

Our school at Ulverstone and our campus at Burnie have been struggling really to help all families who want to attend our school through their own choice, but at the present time we are trying to evaluate whether our enrolment policy needs a bit of a review, because we have been tending to take anyone who's applied to come, and so at the moment it involves a grade 3 girl who has Noonan syndrome. Previously she had her start to schooling on King Island. We have a grade 7 boy suffering from autism, and a grade 11 who has Asberger's syndrome and who studies partly by distance education and partly at our school, and I'm sure other submissions - you've probably heard the high incidence of ADD and ADHD. Well, our school would be no different to most other schools. We have a significant number of those children.

We have a growing number of enrolments from other local schools of students with learning or socialising problems, we have a small but growing number of Indigenous children, and we have some children who have English as their second language, and these would be children of Dutch, Chinese and Korean origin.

One of the common factors of some of the above is that the majority of them live some distance from the school, and our school is fairly unusual because Ulverstone itself is a fairly small town but we service Burnie on one side and Devonport on the other, and as far south as Sheffield and as far to the north-west as Smithton. We also have one student who travels nearly from Deloraine, so we service a fairly large area but based in a fairly small town. So I guess one of the common aspects is that most of our children travel by bus and some of them travel up to 45 minutes from smaller country towns, mainly inland towns, and some of these children would only be five years old - the ones that are attending kinder or prep.

At present we're struggling to find accommodation in Ulverstone for a boy from the far north-west near Smithton, who wants to commence Year 11 studies next year and who will be travelling home each weekend. The other problem that a lot of our parents have - they have to drive some distance to take their children to connect with the bus, and some of those children in fact travel on two buses to get home and to school again.

[Students with disabilities]

We have a boy who has ADHD, which is attention deficit hyperactive disorder - becoming fairly common around the country - and because of his major behavioural problems we have to regularly call his parents to collect him and take him home. They live some distance away on a farm on the outskirts of Penguin and only the father drives, so it's quite difficult. They are finding it quite difficult to give the school support and they are presently looking to enrol their boy at a school closer to them. Now, the problem is that the only school near where they live is the local government primary school and the boy has already been there and outlived that because of his behavioural problems, and he's only survived several months at our school, because of these severe problems. He would probably be the worst ADD or ADHD boy I have met in my teaching career.

Children with special needs: our autistic boy has been at the school this year against some of the specialists' advice given to us, and that advice was basically that he should either return to Giant Steps, which is the school for autistic children that's been in the news a fair bit lately - and the boy was unhappy there - and the other alternative was a special school of some sort, but in our area there's not a lot of variety of either state or independent schools that he could go to.

So we took the risk and enrolled him and it's been successful so far this year, and that's mainly been because we have had the help of a Commonwealth-funded aide for 15 hours a week and, to balance the other 15 hours that he's at school, his mum comes in for those 15 hours to provide the support that he needs in the school, which is a pretty amazing thing. So there has to be someone with him full-time, which also includes travelling with him on the school bus to and from Devonport.

[Indigenous students]

This year again, due to a grant from the Commonwealth government, we have operated a computer lab for Indigenous students. I've got to be honest: when I first went to the school I didn't know we had any Indigenous students, but we have upwards of 20. Now, this lab has enabled the children to have regular small group sessions in the computer lab with an aide. Unfortunately the grant was for one year only and for the program to continue next year, in 2000 and beyond, we

will have to try to fund it from our own budget otherwise we will not be able to continue the same quality that those kids have been getting.

[Students with special needs]

Our school has a reputation in the community for accepting children with special needs or other problems. The parents may have moved them from a school closer to them because of a perception, accurate or otherwise, that their child's needs were not being met. Sometimes, to be quite honest, some parents see an independent school as a quick fix for their child if they have had problems in the state system, but I'm sure you're aware that's not really the case. The parents sometimes have to make great sacrifices to do this and, to assist, we charge very minimal fees.

However, we are starting to struggle now with the burden of the large number of these children. For instance, our current grade 3 has three category A children in the one class. Category A is the - well, I guess the next step for them would be a special school, so our girl with Noonan syndrome and our ADHD boy are both in the one class, which is quite a strain for the teacher and the school. We are reviewing whether we can continue this and provide the quality of education they need without the finance necessary to do this.

Many of these children have already been to several schools, in some cases which are equally burdened by the numbers and the pressure to provide suitable programs. In an area like ours - there are a number of primary schools in the Ulverstone area but they are few and they are also struggling under, I guess, their own burdens of class size and prioritising their finances and so on.

In my opinion, as someone who has taught in both public and independent systems, these problems are not unique to one system over the other, because children are children. My experience has been that at a number of levels, schools try to help each other as much as possible with students that are moving from one school to another, and in our area we have a very good relationship with the local high school and also several of the smaller primary schools in trying to aid students moving to a situation where they can get the best assistance, and so we have sometimes arranged for our children and recommended to parents that our children go to the neighbouring high school or primary school. In some cases the high school has done the same thing. So we are trying to work together as much as we can.

[Specialist services]

I believe the most significant problem, for our area anyway, is the provision of specialist services such as psychologists, guidance officers, social workers, speech pathology and so on. They are available on the north-west coast but they themselves are struggling to

meet the demand placed upon them. Our school students have access to the government psychologist at Burnie, formerly known as the Burnie Assessment Centre, but there is a long waiting list and students from government schools are given preference, which is understandable. Many parents cannot wait and they seek private help, which is expensive for some families, but because of lack of availability they have to travel to Launceston or Hobart. This is not satisfactory if they need to make several trips, and the ADHD boy I referred to earlier - I think he's seeing about three different doctors or psychologists in Hobart or Launceston.

To pay for private assessments, the parents have to pay or, as is the case with many, the school pays. Recently, to assist one family our school paid for a psychologist to come from Launceston to assess their two children. The total cost was over \$1,000 to the family, which the school then paid, but the unfortunate thing is that's just for the assessment. To provide the necessary programs will cost more. And the reason that person came from Launceston - we just couldn't get them in to anyone locally on the north-west coast; they were just booked out or unavailable at that time.

Our school also provides our facilities to students studying through distance education when they need to have practical activities in science, music and technology. We do not charge for this but do it as a service for those families. Special-needs children of many forms benefit greatly from Commonwealth grants paid directly to the school or through the Association of Independent Schools but, to be honest, this barely scratches the surface. I really feel for the parents and their children who have a learning problem - the children, not the parents - but because of funding criteria, however justifiable, they miss out on funding. Sometimes it's because their IQ score may only be one point too high. If we are all really serious about quality education being available for all children, this problem has to be addressed in both government and independent schools rather than talking about priorities in that area. I think at that stage that's all I'll say. Thank you.

MR LEESON: Commissioner, what I would like to do is to go through Andrew Lang's submission, of which I will provide a copy to you afterwards. Andrew Lang is in fact the parish priest for Cressy, so it's Father Andrew Lang. He is a parent at Launceston Christian Grammar School and a delegate to the Tasmanian Parents Council from the parents and friends body of that school.

[Evidence from Cressy]

Andrew says that he writes not only as a parent of children in rural Tasmania but as a parish priest of a small country parish, with a number of parishioners who face the same issues. Andrew actually was on the parents and friends body for the local school as well, so he has

an interest in both the state sector and the non-government sector. He says his parish centre is located 33 kilometres from Launceston and extends some 20-plus kilometres south, east and west. "Our centre point is Cressy, with a population of 634," and they have two smaller villages - Bracknell, 330, and Poatina, 120 in the parish:

The total population of the parish is 1500, the remainder of which live on properties of the district, mainly sheep and cropping. To the north 11 kilometres is a major regional centre, Longford, population 5000, which has the municipal offices and a small private hospital and some shopping but no major supermarket chain. Longford is 20 kilometres from Launceston and is rapidly developing into a dormitory village.

By accident of history, Cressy is the site of a local district high school. In the past there have been a number of small one-room schools located in various locations around the area which, although having the disadvantage of small numbers, reduced the need for young children to travel long distances. These have been closed and the primary education has been centralised into the district high school.

Many of the children who have attended these schools would have gone to private schools in town for their secondary education -

when he says "in town" he means Launceston -

and of these children, most would board. Now from kindergarten on, children are asked to travel for up to 40 minutes on buses.

Significantly, the major issues are the quality of the education system and the problems of distance and travel. With the increasing importance of education, parents of kids are placing high importance on the quality of education that their children receive, particularly as the rural economy can no longer support employment of all young children.

Parents face three choices: (1) local school up to grade 10, (2) commit to either public or private Launceston schools, mandatory after Year 10, or (3) boarding in Launceston or elsewhere, usually only available post-primary.

The quality of education in the local schools is not as high as can be offered in the Launceston schools, particularly in the post-primary years. Although the high school at Cressy draws from three primary schools, numbers are limited, especially with the overall decline in the rural population, and this means that the local school cannot make economies of scale.

Teachers often commute in from Launceston and are for the most part ignorant of the pressures of life in the country and in small towns. The compulsory requirement for country experience in the education system in Tasmania has meant that many teachers opt to remain in Launceston and do two to three years before moving on. The turnover of teachers is high and continuity rare.

Often these schools have a high proportion of first-placement teachers. Teachers do not connect with the local community and, unlike other rural schools, are not seen in the daily life of the village. Students in the outlying districts can still face an hour on the bus before and after school.

Although Launceston schools, both private and public, offer a better standard of education, the cost is that of time and money for commuting. Typically the students leave at 7.30 am and return at 5 pm from Cressy, with others being brought to Cressy from outlying farms up to 30 minutes away.

After-school sport and other activities often require parents to pick up their children during the week and parents of more than one child may have to make a number of trips each week. In addition, the children's peer group will be centred around the school, and social activities will invariably be in town.

Private schools in particular can have children from both sides of town and hence visiting can mean a 90-minute trip. Children who commute are dislocated from the social structure in their village and there is quite a distinction between those in local schools and others.

Boarding is a difficult option but often a necessary one for those who live some distance from the termini of the bus services. In the later years of secondary education,

the children cannot afford the time that is required for travelling. These are typically those on farms, who have in recent years suffered both economic hardship and a reduction in work, which has meant that more often than not children form an important part of the workforce on the farm. Costs of boarding are increasing out of proportion with other costs, particularly as all schools that offer boarding are seeing declining numbers in the boarding houses.

Typically the support facility for education is also missing. The Longford library is not a good reference library. The children need to do research for assignments. They need to go into Launceston. Technologies such as the Internet are improving access to knowledge. However, if there is no access through the home, public facilities for the community are centred in Longford. Absence of public transport means that parents are for the most part needed to support these activities.

The issue of distance is one that not only impacts on the education of children but on the whole of life. The inability to collect enough children in any place means that the running of youth groups, scouts, guides, sporting teams, etcetera, is almost impossible. In this district many of these activities are centred in Longford, but for children who become involved it means a large commitment from parents, and often grandparents, for travel and time.

Andrew's daughter is a guide, and guides meet for two hours on Tuesday nights. He has the choice of two trips of 20 minutes in the car or one trip and a two-hour wait.

Any extracurricular activity for children requires such commitments. Education in the broader sense includes the outside stimuli of these social and sporting activities.

For the children in rural areas, commitment to these things that city kids take for granted requires significant involvement of parents and commitment of both time and money. With the added pressure on kids of travelling or boarding if they leave the area and the underfunded and underresourced local schools if they choose to stay, it is little wonder that retention rates are

lower. Only committed parents will put the effort into seeing their children succeed.

City based curricula have little relevance concerning future employment or current experience and the district highs should be commended for the development of agricultural based curriculum options.

It is Andrew's feeling that:

Equality in education opportunity would require local schools to be better resourced, and in particular with experienced teachers. This may need some positive discrimination with regard to the funding formula.

Similarly, there must be consideration for the option of boarding for students. Although this is not a great option for children, it needs to be better resourced. Schools that do take boarders are under financial pressure and they are caught in the vicious cycle of reducing numbers and increasing costs, which then generally result in reduced numbers.

Many who board children do so because the travelling required for both parent and child is too much. Most demand for boarding comes from the rural setting who, although many of these people are asset-rich, often have poor cash flows. Often there is no alternative to boarding the children, which in turn leads to further disruption as one partner will leave the farm to work to pay for the education.

The possibilities of rural access to education support through new technologies ought to be considered. The cost of access and equipment are prohibitive to many families and consideration as to how this access should be given is a priority. Priority should be given to development of programs to use this technology in education and the seeking of alternative strategies for education - combinations of distance and face-to-face, for example, which may be three days of school and two online.

These thoughts tend to reinforce the initial document's comments and it's important to note that the same concerns are present in the Tasmanian rural communities as in other parts of Australia. Support for independent schools is important for rural communities,

particularly those offering boarding facilities, for they offer alternatives to at least some in the rural sector.

[Funding for students with disabilities]

Now, in addition to Andrew's comments I just wanted to make a couple of additional comments. The Australian Parents Council noted that the new Commonwealth government funding scheme did not include any new proposal for funding of children with disabilities or special needs. It is our understanding that the Prime Minister and David Kemp, the minister for education, has invited a submission on this and the Australian Parents Council is currently working on such a submission.

The consideration in Tasmania, with a limited number of independent schools having boarding facilities, is rather an interesting one. Most of those boarding schools are under a great deal of pressure and it's felt by a number of those schools that the rest of the school community should not have to support the infrastructure provided in the boarding schools. I note particularly at the school in which I am involved, the bathroom facilities are particularly antiquated, but it was the school's view - the management of the school's view - that if there was to be an upgrade, that cost should be shared by the parents of the children who are to use that facility, not by the other parents. Now, I can understand that view but it also gives me some concern.

There is great concern in Tasmania at the moment and a great ill-at-ease. Whilst the Commonwealth government have produced a fairly generous funding scheme, they didn't tie the state governments to any existing funding arrangements, and also in New South Wales - and it's mooted in other states, particularly Labor states, and I've discussed this with our local minister - the concern that there is by parents in those states of the state government reducing the funds available to non-government schools.

In Tasmania we don't know what the funding is going to be next year. There is an interim funding arrangement in place at the moment, and the consideration for children from rural or remote areas is not particularly favourable with regard to the financial assistance that is available. Unlike the Commonwealth, we don't see that the state will have an ability to increase the size of the pie, so the fight potentially remains on with regard to the sizes of the slices of the pie, and I think that's extremely short-sighted. However, it's the reason for the existence of the Tasmanian Parents Council: to make sure that there is a voice for parents of children at non-government, non-Catholic schools in this state. Thank you very much.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you both very much. Certainly the comment that you made about the disability responses from the school

is a very encouraging one and I can understand, given the numbers that you're talking about, the pressure that the school must be under. Certainly an issue that has been raised with us regularly during the course of this inquiry is just the lack of support for children with disability in country areas, although Ulverstone is somewhere between city and country I guess, but even so, given the drawing area that you've got, a lot of kids are coming in from country areas and it's a very impressive response that you've described.

In Tasmania do you know of any cooperation that occurs across systems in terms of sharing resources or pooling funds to provide additional levels of support or additional educational opportunity for children in schools in some of these smaller communities?

[Non-government sector – IT]

MR LEESON: I know of instances where there is not, and that's the real concern. I'll give you a few examples. Last year, with the previous Liberal government, the premier announced - not last year, the year before last rather - in, I think it was April, they announced the new - the Directions for Tasmania statement, and he came out and said in that, "We'll be funding one computer between every five students in this state." He meant one computer between every five students in the state government system. When we discovered that was actually the case, that they weren't proposing extra funding for information technology for the non-government sector, we had a meeting with the then minister, Sue Napier, and at that meeting we were able to get some concessions from her and those concessions, I thought, were particularly important.

That was, first of all, for her to consider herself as minister for education of all children in the state, not just the state government sector, and she accepted that - but then to say, right, when they do have bulk purchases, whether it be for software, for cabling, for other hardware, professional development or support services, that they consider the non-government sector. She spoke with Dr Martin Forrest at the time and they didn't see that that would be particularly onerous upon them and they agreed, Dr Martin Forrest being the secretary to the Department of Education in this state.

Now, subsequently I believe - and I have yet to confirm but I've had it from very good sources - that the state government education system is about to make a very big purchase of computer software from Microsoft. In doing so, they are able to secure a bulk discount deal but they have excluded - at least it's my understanding that they have - non-government schools from that supply source or that particular contract.

[Non-government sector – other support]

Similarly, whilst it's obviously a priority for children in state government schools to have access to state government education facilities - or at least that's what is seen - it often means, as we've seen Gary mention with the psychologist from Burnie - there's just such a long waiting list you can't realistically wait that long, so in effect the access is denied. So there's a concern, particularly with this Labor government - and I've said to Minister Wriedt that we didn't like her talking about "rich schools". She was tending to try to win favour with the Australian Education Union - support - and, I have no doubt, would love to be able to politically decrease the funding to some schools in this state.

Now, there are six schools in this state that have been operating for a very long time, some of which have been amalgamated, and you're looking at Launceston Church Grammar School, Scotch Oakburn, which is an amalgam of two, the Methodist Ladies College, St Michael's Collegiate, Hutchins Farm and the Friends School. Those schools, because they have been there a long time, have built their capital resources, their capital infrastructure. However, there are still considerable costs in maintaining those, and because parents at those schools continue to pay out a great deal of money in preference to other things, whether it be new cars or holidays, in the majority, then a Labor government is saying, "No, they are rich schools and don't need the funding." Well, that's not the case. Between those six schools, nearly half of the children in non-government schools in Tasmania attend those schools, outside the Catholic sector, and it's important that parents and the children at those schools have access to those resources.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you very much for your submissions. If you'd like to leave us a copy of the documents they would be very useful to us, thank you. Thanks for coming in.

MR LEESON: Thank you very much for giving us a hearing.

MR PYKE: Thank you.

[2.15 pm]

THE COMMISSIONER: Would you like to introduce yourselves for the tape, and then you can go straight into comments you want to make.

MR SMALLBANE: I'm Chris Smallbane and I'm secretary of the Tasmanian Catholic Education Employees Association, which is the union which covers the employees in Catholic schools in Tasmania.

MR SOWA: And my name is Henry Sowa. I've been invited by Chris to attend because of my experience in teaching in some rural schools in Tasmania and Victoria.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thanks.

MR SMALLBANE: The Tasmanian Catholic Education Employees Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to HREOC's inquiry into the provision of educational services to rural and remote communities. We are affiliated with the Independent Education Union who, along with the Independent Education Union Queensland and the Independent Education Union New South Wales-ACT branches have made or will have made separate submissions.

The TCEEA represents the industrial and professional interests of teachers and school support staff in Catholic systemic and non-systemic schools throughout Tasmania. The union has a current membership of about approximately 670 teachers, librarians, counsellors and school support staff across primary and secondary schools. Based on the definitions of "rural and remote" provided in the commission's terms of reference, the TCEEA estimates that many of the schools outside the main population centres of Hobart, Launceston, Devonport and Burnie can be described as rural or remote. However, the number of Catholic schools outside these areas are few and would be limited to Cygnet, Geeveston in the south; Queenstown and Rosebery in the west; and Smithton in the north-west.

Because of our small population it is evident at times that even the provision of extra services outside of Hobart and Launceston is quite often a problem. Because of the remoteness of Queenstown, Rosebery and Smithton the TCEEA tries to visit these areas as much as possible but, due to the difficult roads and the harsh weather conditions that can be experienced from time to time, this is not always possible. Falling enrolments due particularly to the depressed economic situation, lack of job opportunities, falling population due both to transfers interstate and falling birth rate are all contributing factors to making the provision of services to remote areas difficult.

[Teacher recruitment, incentives and transfer]

Difficulties for teachers: for many teachers teaching in a remote area in a Catholic school is not a preferred choice. Oftentimes the choice is a job in a remote area or no job. This is also probably true across both sectors. This then raises the question of the quality of teachers for remote areas. Young single teachers will only commit themselves for one or two years as their friends, social life, family ties are elsewhere. This of itself creates difficulties in feeling isolated, particularly in their first few years of teaching. Catholic schools have no transfer policy, unlike their government counterparts, so spending two

or three years in a remote area does not itself guarantee them a job in city areas. Quite often there is a disincentive in that there is the thought expressed that if you are out of mainstream teaching for two or three years both your teaching and your professional development suffers, and thus you become less attractive to employ.

Because Queenstown has such an itinerant workforce - some stay for two or three years then go; others work during the week but go home for the weekend - houses have a very depressed saleable price. However, this creates quite a good market force for renting and thus it's not surprising to find mediocre rental housing commanding over \$100 a week. Until term 3 this year there was no recompense for teachers in any way for any expenses incurred either in moving to a remote area or staying in the remote area, but now the CEO - that's the Catholic Education Office - is offering rental assistance where rental charges are more than \$50 per person. So if it's \$60 they'll give a rebate or an offer of rental assistance of \$10. This is in contrast to their government colleagues, who can gain rental accommodation in the form of houses or flats at a cost of no more than \$20 a week.

When taking up an appointment in an isolated area, particularly for the first year out, there is for teachers the cost of setting up the house and transfer of their goods to the isolated area. There is no reimbursement for even part of these initial costs. This contrasts, even in our own Catholic systemic schools with middle management - that is our principals - who are often offered free rental, free use of car and free trips to the mainland, if required, two or three times per year. I can also personally give the example of one teacher who had taught for over 20 years in Queenstown and who wanted to teach in Launceston because of family but was refused any preferential treatment. That teacher had to resign her employment and take her own chances in picking up employment in Launceston. That she did so was no thanks to the Catholic Education Office.

Remote areas do not lend themselves to airing tensions and grievances to get them off their chests. These have to be kept within themselves. This often becomes stressful, particularly if the principal's own children are involved, which can often happen in remote areas. Teachers in remote areas feel that their own lifestyles are under very close scrutiny. If you're able to participate in the town's sporting program you have a greater degree of acceptability. Non-sporting types have added difficulties. Many teachers in remote areas are only there during term time. This also works against acceptability. There is often a negative attitude among many teachers who have the attitude of having to grin and bear remote area teaching until they can get a job elsewhere. Turnover of staff works against understanding and continuity of programs.

[Professional development]

Professional development: opportunities for professional development are limited in that this often means spending travelling time of seven hours for a one-day seminar. Isolation and dangerous roads add to the fear of travelling, particularly when alone. Cross-sectoral cooperation is limited to a more or less ad hoc basis based on personal friendship between teachers and/or principals. In Queenstown, Rosebery and Smithton there is competition between sectors for student enrolment at the primary level. Students from both primary schools attend the one high school. In the past teachers in Catholic schools have not gone out of their way to exchange ideas, share resources, and there is a certain reserve from state teachers to the independent sector - the old sectarian issue and the competition for the taxpayers' funds.

Some of this has been broken down, particularly where there are pockets of young teachers, who may be teaching in the different sectors but who have undergone training together for the last four or five years and thus forged reasonably close friendships; however, visiting speakers, courses, are only occasionally shared. There is no constructive mutual planning to share resources. Professional development for teachers is exclusive to their own school as a rule. There is more effort from the high school in Queenstown to estimate joint participation of both sectors, both in the curriculum and social planes.

[Specialist teachers and services]

Access to quality education: access to quality education is made more difficult by the lack of incentives to attract teachers, and the small population centred in the remote areas. Because of these factors specialist teachers in physical education, reading recovery, music, information technology, language, speech therapy are nonexistent, as are opportunities for students to do things such as dance and singing. Because school numbers are low there is the tendency to accept any child with any disability, for which there is no real help or resources other than what the individual teacher can provide. This quite obviously becomes a stressful situation for all concerned.

[Students with disabilities]

Limited numbers of disability students in a particular area further limit the resources available. If you've only got one of one particular type, why send a specialist to help those? Not cost-effective. Assessment for these disabilities is not readily available. Parents would have to take their child say from Queenstown to either Burnie or Hobart. This is obviously a real difficulty and accentuated as many parents in Queenstown and Rosebery are low in the socioeconomic group.

Anecdotal evidence is that there is an inordinate amount of spare time taken up by primary students with activities such as TV, videos, computer games, as there's nothing else to do. Whereas this is probably a universal problem, children in remote areas do suffer lack of things to do, particularly where their population is small and where many of the single adults go home for the weekend. Thank you.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you.

Mr Sowa, would you like to make some comments from your experience?

[Male role models]

MR SOWA: One area that I would like to comment on is the concept of the male role modelling in rural schools. I think it's a generally accepted principle that there are fewer males going into primary schools, for various reasons, and in remote areas there seems to be a predominance of either young females teaching or elderly women who have been part of the town establishment for many years and have contributed over a long period of time. Particularly in Queenstown, where a number of students that I've taught there have fathers who are working in the mines, which means they're shift workers - and I think that adds a considerable amount of stress to the family situation, although I would say, also from my experience, that when the family does have four days off, whether it's during the week or at the weekend, they usually use it as a good quality time and the family usually does something together.

But I think the lack of males in rural country schools, particularly in towns that have a unique situation like a mining town, is something that I think needs some attention, actually. Other than the comments that Chris made, that's about the only area that I just wanted to add something additional.

[Cross-sectoral collaboration]

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you. The issue of competition for numbers raises questions about whether two systems within these communities are in fact viable.

MR SMALLBANE: Absolutely.

THE COMMISSIONER: So what discussion is taking place around that issue?

MR SMALLBANE: I don't think there'd be any discussion taking place and I'm not party to that kind of thing. That would be something for the Catholic Education Office to gauge. The Catholic school, of course, has

had a presence in Queenstown for some - well, they just had their anniversary, didn't they? Over a hundred - - -

MR SOWA: Centenary, yes.

MR SMALLBANE: So they'd be very loath to pull out unless the numbers got extremely unviable.

MR SOWA: If I could add there, I know from my past experience there has been concern in that Catholic community because of the amalgamation of the central primary school and Murray High School, now to become Mountain Heights School. From the point of view of facilities and grounds and so forth, it's going to be a more attractive package for parents to choose and as most of the students do their secondary at the local state high school, then they can see losing families to consolidate their efforts in one school. So there's a growing concern regarding the future of that Catholic school in Queenstown but, as Chris says, having celebrated it's centenary they probably want to keep it going for as long as they can, but I'm less optimistic than that.

THE COMMISSIONER: What has been the pattern of numbers there over the last say 10 or 15 years?

MR SOWA: In the last five years I would say that it's been pretty static at about 120, 125. Prior to the time when the mines closed for a period of four years I think the town population almost halved. A number of people left and it seemed like it was the death knock but then the mine was reopened and some people drifted back. But since the mine reopened I think it's been pretty static. Both schools have been having about 120. So that was my concern; nearly 250 children in primary school where the only males there are the two principals. So it seems that there is a need for some rationalisation regarding the staffing of those schools.

MR SMALLBANE: For an amalgamation to occur major decisions would have to be made about curriculum, particularly the teaching of religion, which is of paramount importance in a Catholic school, and the whole ethos of it. Yet, just on the rational plane, yes, you'd say one school would better serve the area than two in lots of ways. I guess there are amalgamations of primary schools and so on elsewhere where people have rationalised the situation out, but I'm not sure whether we've come together with the government sector in any state. I'm not sure about that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know whether in any of these areas there's any cooperation at all in terms of sharing resources or, perhaps even more significantly, sharing teachers across the sectors?

MR SOWA: I can only speak of my experience in Queenstown regarding that. There's been no effort to do that, other than the fact when there had been some programs, some developmental programs that were conducted at the high school, there's been invitations for the teachers at the Catholic school to attend, usually after school hours. When I was teaching grade 5 and 6 there, I tried to organise a personal meeting with the lady who was teaching grade 6 there, just to compare notes because the students that we teach are pretty much the same sort of students, but that never eventuated. It was a private initiative and it wasn't really fostered by either school.

Considering the schools are less than 200 metres apart, it seemed rather deficient, so I think it's just a mind-set that - you know, people going separate ways and this bit of competition, which I think is very impractical in a small town. I've been in small towns, particularly Myrtleford in north-east Victoria where there was a great collaboration from both schools, and that was a pattern that I think should be encouraged everywhere.

THE COMMISSIONER: One example that seems to me to just reflect where the need or the direction could lie: in both systems people complain - by "people" I mean teachers, students and parents - about the lack of specialist teachers, as you have today. Whereas one school or the other would not have the numbers to support, for example, a full-time music or art or drama teacher, the systems between them could well, in some of these towns. To jointly employ a specialist teacher provides a way out of the complaints that everybody makes about not having specialist teachers, but I don't know anywhere where this has been done anywhere in Australia.

MR SOWA: I think all schools would have to confront the national curriculum guidelines regarding offering of various foreign languages and things, and I don't think either school in Queenstown does offer a foreign language, so it's not really providing the necessities for the national curriculum, so something will have to be done there. Perhaps that may be the way it should go.

THE COMMISSIONER: That's right, maybe a new area. Similarly, do you know of any schools that are actually sharing physical facilities such as libraries, gymnasiums?

MR SMALLBANE: No, I don't know of any.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, okay. What's the relationship between the two unions in discussing any of these kinds of issues?

MR SMALLBANE: It varies from state to state and I'm of - well, fairly good friendships with some of the hierarchy of the Australian Education

Union but when it comes down to fighting for a dollar we're sort of our separate ways a little bit, whereas we think we ought to be combining a whole lot better and saying, "These are our needs," and both of us combining and putting pressure on government to say, "This is what we require." I think a lot more cooperation could be more productive.

[Staff incentives]

THE COMMISSIONER: The comments you've made about the comparative disadvantage of teachers in the Catholic system so far as incentive packages are concerned make a very strong case. Does the Catholic Education Office have any counter-argument other than lack of resources?

MR SMALLBANE: Simply that. They say they haven't got the money to do it.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right.

MR SMALLBANE: And I suppose in the end it's very hard to argue but we're continuing to press them because they're the ones that pretty well run the primary schools throughout Tassie, particularly in the remote areas. The non-systemic schools are basically in the more populated areas - Hobart, Launceston, Burnie, Devonport.

[Post-primary destinations]

THE COMMISSIONER: When their kids get to Year 6 in the Catholic system do they tend to go into the state high schools or do they tend to go away to boarding school? Do any do distance education? What are the proportionate take-ups of the options that are available?

MR SOWA: Last year there were three children from grade 6 who went to Burnie, and they board there with private accommodation during the course of the week and they come home on weekends. This year's grade 6, I don't think anybody is going to board. It's quite a decision for families, which usually are pretty close-knit, to have a 12 or 13-year-old go to boarding school. It's not a decision I would like. If I had a 12 or 13-year-old child I'd want them at home. There had been some discussion regarding whether or not the Catholic school there could provide a junior secondary level. That was under some discussion a number of years ago but there wasn't enough support for the concept.

I think it's just an accepted fact; because most of the parents who have been part of the town have gone to the local state high school, it's just a natural thing for the children to go there. It's a thing which concerns me because I oftentimes wonder whether the Catholic Education Office is that concerned then about schools where that continuity of Catholic education is quite limited. I've always wondered

as to whether or not that comes into consideration when decisions are made regarding distribution of funding, which I think puts a school at a greater disadvantage, but that's only an opinion. I don't know what the Catholic Education Office's philosophy on that is but I know that it is a basic principle to provide a Catholic education from kindergarten to Year 12 if possible, and it's not really possible in our town.

THE COMMISSIONER: Would any children that you know stay in the town and do distance education though, rather than going either away to board or to the high school, or would they all predominantly make the high school choice - and some of them to go away.

MR SOWA: Yes, most of them do the high school choice and then after that I really don't know what happens. How many actually go away to colleges I think is quite limited. I guess in the past there was always the possibility of just following your father in one of the service industries, to the mines or working in the mine, so that was some sort of secure job, but I would think now we have a - I think most rural towns have a youth problem, trying to find something creative and productive for the youth to do, and provide some sort of employment. I couldn't really speak with any authority on that but I know it is a problem.

It's a sad thing because you teach a lot of children at primary school that have a lot of potential and it just seems to peter out because of lack of opportunity. That's a real shame, I think.

[Student retention]

THE COMMISSIONER: Two of the Tasmanian regions have the - I think - second and third highest 16-year-old drop-out rate in the country, and the lack of opportunity I guess is one of the explanations for that. Have you got views, on your experience here, as to what other reasons may be why the retention rate is so small here compared to the rest of the country? Or would you say just lack of opportunity?

MR SOWA: I always see education as kind of a big sort of picture where there's the home environment which is conducive to education. I know from my own personal circumstances my father was quite a - you know, he was a hard-working labourer and what he wanted for me was a better life, but people who work in mines do draw large salaries and they do have some comforts that money provides them with. So perhaps it's a different mentality and a different valuing of education which is perhaps not now fostered sufficiently in the homes. People who can make three times as much as a teacher, without any extended education, is sometimes I think a deterrent to encouraging educational development - you know, human potential. That's about the only point I can contribute there.

THE COMMISSIONER: I know there's been some work done on it but I don't think anyone has come up with a conclusive analysis. Right, thank you both very much for coming in. Certainly it's good to hear from you. Chris, if you wouldn't mind leaving us a copy of your written comments, that would help.

MR SMALLBANE: Certainly.

THE COMMISSIONER: Celia there will take it and look after it for you, and thank you very much for them.

[2.40 pm]

THE COMMISSIONER: Would you like to introduce yourself for the tape, and then go into your comments.

MR COLEMAN: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to present to you this afternoon. My name is Craig Coleman and I hold the position of co-president and treasurer of the Tasmanian Catholic Schools Parents and Friends Federation. I'm speaking this afternoon on behalf of that federation and with some experience in life in regional centres around Tasmania. I've lived in a number of locations within the state, most of my life in rural or regional locations and only the last five years in Hobart, so I have some personal experience of the disadvantages and perhaps life in general in rural and regional Tasmania.

The issues that I wanted to cover with you this afternoon, just in terms of my submission, were the important considerations around the demographics in Tasmania and how that affects things differently in this state, compared to other states; the access to special schools and the needs of special children in rural and regional Tasmania; the post-school opportunities in those centres; the psyche and the context of regional and rural Tasmania and how that compares with Hobart; the financial disadvantages of rural and regional Tasmania and the cultural and social isolation in those areas.

[Tasmania's demography]

It's fair to say that Tasmania has the most unusual population demographic, certainly by comparison to other states in the country, with a population, on the 1996 census, of approximately 460,000. Of that population only 41% live in the capital city of Hobart - or capital city and surrounds - so approximately 60% of the population live in what could be termed regional or rural Tasmania.

THE COMMISSIONER: You'd include Launceston in regional and rural Tasmania?

MR COLEMAN: It's a provincial city, yes. I would, for the purpose of the exercise here, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Okay.

MR COLEMAN: But having said that, it has perhaps less disadvantage than others and most of my comments reflect places outside of Launceston and Hobart.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right.

MR COLEMAN: I'd certainly include Burnie and Devonport in regional Tasmania. The other interesting statistic is that, whilst Hobart represents 40% of the population, it has a larger share of people working in higher professional jobs; 47% of the population with tertiary qualifications for instance work and reside in Hobart. That's indicative, we would argue, of the problems that face regional Tasmania by comparison to the population demographic. It doesn't fit that the majority of people don't live in the city of Hobart and yet all the well-paid jobs and people who are highly qualified and attracting to those well-paid jobs are in Hobart.

If you consider where that demographic is and where the Catholic schools within the state are represented, the Catholic education system has a representation in one form or another in most rural and regional centres around this state. From recollection it's about 46 schools around Tasmania, some centres with primary and secondary representation, but unfortunately in most rural and regional centres only primary representation.

[Access to Catholic education]

The problem that leads us to is that whilst there are some learning units in some of our schools, those learning units are only in city schools in Hobart, it seems. We have problems with access to special education needs for some of our students, some of our people. Recently the special-needs school at Burnie was closed and there are a number of children from Circular Head and from the Burnie community and the Wynyard-Waratah community, who would normally have attended that school, who are now finding themselves having to be placed into mainstream classes without special learning units in those classes. So those children are disadvantaged to that extent.

In the case of the north-west coast the post-secondary school education opportunities - and we're talking now beyond Year 12 - are very limited. There's a campus of the University of Tasmania situated at

Burnie but it really is a learning centre rather than a fully-fledged campus of the university. Most people who live in the north-west coast of Tasmania are either required to travel to Launceston or Hobart to undertake study, or study by distance education.

There is a disadvantage to studying by distance education because it requires a certain degree of change in study patterns and habits for those individuals who are used to the school system - to adapt to that. For those students who are forced to travel to Launceston and Hobart, college accommodation in Hobart at one of the colleges is about \$140 a week. So for families that's very expensive, and families have the option then of sending their children to Hobart to live in share houses and the like and for many of our parents that is a real concern; the thought that their children are left to their own devices at 17 and 18 and 19 years of age, starting out in a strange city, and they have concerns for their safety and wellbeing. They are real issues for those areas.

The other consideration is the psyche of people who come from those areas. In Tasmania it's strongly referred to as parochialism - north-south parochialism. But what aids that in our view is that there is a strong view from people who live outside the city of Hobart - and really perhaps is a parochialism which revolves around Hobart and the rest of the state rather than north-south parochialism - which says all these things come to Hobart and nothing comes to the regional and rural centres within the state. That's certainly reflected in government policy, or we've seen it in government policy in terms of the establishment of various government centres and where government funding is applied.

[Cost of education]

The other concern is the financial disadvantage and I've talked already about the cost of educating a child, the additional cost of educating a child if you're living in a rural or remote centre in Tasmania. But the other consideration is the cost of living for those parents who are outside of that. If those parents want to involve their children in any activity - which is taken for granted in Hobart or Launceston - that involves an additional cost and additional time. Sporting commitments for instance on the north-west coast of Tasmania involve parents travelling on rosters from distances as far away as Smithton to Devonport, and we're talking about travelling times of one and two hours to attend school matches. So there's the cost and the time involved in that

There's also the consideration of families having to consider what they're going to do for their children as they progress through life. Many take the opportunity or the decision that living in a rural area in Tasmania is not the way to go for their child once that child reaches a

particular age - Year 12 - so the whole family relocates to Hobart or to Launceston. The cost of actually having to relocate is quite substantial. Property values vary substantially between centres. The property markets, particularly on the north-west coast of Tasmania, are quite depressed.

Another consideration in terms of the financial disadvantage can be borne out in the SES schools. I'm not sure whether you're familiar with those, but that's the rating which applies to schools for funding purposes under the new government funding arrangements. Our two colleges on the north-west coast - St Brendan-Shaw College at Devonport and Marist Regional College at Burnie - based on census information, have SES scores below 90, which is substantially lower than the average school within our system.

[Cultural isolation]

Beyond all of that, and the dollars and cents, is the cultural isolation. From my own experience I can tell you of families in Circular Head, where I lived for five years, who have children where the school would take those children out of Circular Head for their very first trip to Burnie, which was considered a big event, and those children would have been in grade 2 or 3. So for their first six or seven years of their life they've never left the family farm, or they've never left the district in which they've lived. Whilst that might seem - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Can I just interrupt there. I get the impression that this is a much bigger factor in Tasmania than anywhere else in the country.

MR COLEMAN: I can't speak for other parts of the country. But yes, it certainly is significant, certainly in the far north-west and far north-east Tasmania. Certainly far north-west Tasmania, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: People used to talk about distances and travelling times that are significant, but relatively speaking minor, even compared to the capital cities I must say, on the mainland.

MR COLEMAN: It's part of the psyche that I referred to earlier; it's this perception of what is reasonable if you live in rural or remote Tasmania and the psyche of those individuals. As a consequence of that - whether it's perceived or real - it is a disadvantage to those individuals.

THE COMMISSIONER: Particularly to the kids, yes.

MR COLEMAN: Yes. So we have children there who, for whatever reason, are culturally disadvantaged. They don't see the world outside their own district or their own home. In terms of broad comments, there are lots of statistics I could talk to you about but I dare say that's not

what you'll want from an oral submission in any event, so I'm happy to provide any comment and clarification on any points that I've raised.

THE COMMISSIONER: What I'd like most are the answers.

[Recommendations]

MR COLEMAN: Sure. We see that there are a number of opportunities, to be honest with you, for governments in terms of promoting perhaps a better climate. I think you've hit the nail on the head - it becomes a part of the psyche of these individuals. But to promote that to the extent that it will be a better quality of life, and in the case of Tasmania for 60% of the population who live outside of Hobart - let's take Launceston out and Launceston population is somewhere about another 25% of that, so if we say 35% of the population outside the two major cities in this state - it would promote a better quality of life. Whilst we're talking about whole numbers - they're small - if you talk about the state, that's a significant percentage.

Improved productivity: we talk about Tasmania, all of Tasmania's disadvantages in terms of its isolation as a state, and then within Tasmania the isolation within centres, but if we can deal with those issues - and whilst I'd like to come forward with lots of answers for you on that, it's very difficult to do so and I don't envy your position, but our observation is that if we can get those things right, this is a win for the whole of the country. This is a win not only for those people who are living in that area there, but a win for the rest of the country as well and to reduce the burden on society.

[Youth unemployment]

I mean, unemployment within the north-west coast of Tasmania particularly is substantial. Tasmania has the highest youth unemployment rate in the country. That's largely contributed to by the fact that we're such an - well, we believe - urbanised state. People living in places like Burnie and Devonport - there are no employment opportunities for them and beyond Year 12 not only is it difficult to continue your education, but it's difficult to get a job as well. So they are some of the opportunities we see. In terms of answers it's very difficult to know.

THE COMMISSIONER: I don't want to generalise on the basis of a couple of dozen kids in two places, but one thing that struck me when we were in Devonport and Queenstown was that I think almost without exception the kids talked about wanting to move, whereas in other states where we've been, it's been almost the reverse. I think there's only been one town that really sticks in my mind as a place where the kids said they wanted to get out of town. Most of the others said, "We want to stay here if we possibly could."

MR COLEMAN: Unfortunately that's true of Tasmania as a whole. It's certainly true in Devonport and Queenstown where you've been, but it's also true in Hobart.

THE COMMISSIONER: In Hobart?

MR COLEMAN: I'd say that's true as a fair observation of the whole of the state. You only have to look at the population trends since 1997. We've had a shrinking population in this state and so that's a fair observation about the whole of Tasmania.

[Cross-sectoral collaboration]

THE COMMISSIONER: One of the issues I've raised a number of times is what I see as the benefits of increased cooperation between government and non-government systems. What's the attitude of the Catholic Parents and Friends Federation to that, and have you got any ideas on how that could work?

MR COLEMAN: Sure. We take a view that our systems are complementary. We never argue and we're very purposeful about the way we argue our position, in that we believe that the rights of all children need to be considered regardless of whether they attend a Catholic school, another non-government school or indeed, a state school; all children deserve the right to a reasonable and fair education. So we would never argue that we should have more funding, or more opportunity by comparison to other sectors. That's certainly not our position. We always take the view that it should be equity across the systems.

Having said that, we enjoy a good relationship with the other parents and friends associations or two other parents and friends bodies I should say, to the extent that we share communication with those people regularly. We attend meetings where they are also represented and we speak on many issues in the same voice. I don't see that that is a significant problem from our perspective.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you very much. If you want to put in further submissions or the federation - because I know that you only, I gather, heard about and put your name on the list late in the piece - you may not have had an opportunity to say anything in writing, so feel free to do so.

MR COLEMAN: Sure.

THE COMMISSIONER: So long as you get it into us quickly, because we're almost at the end of this travelling around process, and start looking soon at all the information we've received.

MR COLEMAN: Sure. We could get it to you early next week.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, that's fine. Thank you.

MR COLEMAN: Great.

[3.05 pm]

THE COMMISSIONER: Would you like to introduce yourself first, Alistair, and then into it.

MR HOLMES: Yes. I'm Alistair Holmes. I was manager Open Learning for Tasmania 1997-98, and prior to that I had been principal of the School of Distance Education for 10 years and prior to that I was principal of Oatlands District High. I guess it was when I was at Oatlands that I became acutely aware of the problem of isolated rural students in Tasmania. So my submission is really now as a private citizen because I've retired.

I do want to make it very clear that in fact my position was discontinued and there were two reasons why I wanted to do that. One was to remind myself that while I would want to pride myself on being dispassionate and very objective, the fact is that I'm passionate about all of this and there's probably still a fair amount of tension in the background for me. So what I'm trying to do is to retain that objectivity, to remind myself that there is a risk of becoming fairly emotional about it, and trying to make sure any observations I make I can indicate to you some lines of verification or comparisons that might provide support to the perspective that I'm putting.

The second reason for mentioning that I'm now retired is that I do intend to make some fairly strong criticisms of the Education Department and the government and it's obviously open to them to attempt to dismiss what I have to say on the basis of rank and prejudice. So I'm trying to make that up-front to be quite clear that I am conscious of that and I'm trying to avoid it and no doubt you will try to keep me on the straight and narrow too. I don't really think I am temperamentally like that but, given that I am quite critical of what has happened, I'd prefer to be rebutted on the basis of good argument rather than irrelevance.

[Student retention]

Anyway, a couple of points in relation to my background. At Oatlands I became conscious that the kids from Oatlands did not tend to go on to post-Year 10. It is very much the exception for the kids to go

on. I really came to the view that the appropriate way of responding to that was not to attempt to cure the problem; that is, don't go out there and say to the families they're doing something wrong or the kids are doing something wrong "and we've got to push them so that they will go". The best approach is to say, "Okay, I'm prepared to accept the student's own situation." I'm prepared to accept the validity and propriety of their attachment to their family and their friends and their community. The kid who lives at Tunnack and who plays football with the Tunnack Football Club and gives that as the reason why he doesn't want to go and live in Hobart and go to college in Hobart is making a perfectly reasonable judgment, I think, because there are many other aspects to life apart from pursuing his education.

Therefore, our duty as educationists is to find ways of bringing education to the child and that's what led me down the track of going into distance education. So when you pose the question of why it is Tasmania has such very low retention, one significant factor is the highly centralised college system - highly centralised. Tasmania is a very decentralised state. The colleges are all located in major centres so any kid who lives outside one of those major centres - Bicheno, for example, by any measure that's used, is an isolated community. It rates similarly to Tennant Creek in terms of its isolation - using measures that were developed in the Northern Territory.

THE COMMISSIONER: This is the Griffiths scale?

MR HOLMES: Yes. For those kids to go to college it's a huge barrier for them, so my belief is that we should be prepared to take education to those children.

[Open IT]

The second point - because I got onto the preamble about myself - I'd want to make is you've raised a couple of times so far this afternoon questions about cooperation between education systems. The Open IT Project which I had a fairly significant role in working on - and Meg is still on the steering committee, are you, Meg? Yes, Meg's on the steering committee. She and I worked over a couple of years on this project.

It does involve very active cooperation between the government system, the non-government schools, the Catholic education system and TAFE. It did have the university involved for quite a considerable amount of time but the university section of the proposal was not funded by the Commonwealth but the balance of it was funded, and the Open IT Project is substantially to do with the development of online courses. So the development of those courses, while they're being developed by the state system, will be for the use of all schools and we would expect their trialling and their implementation

on their teaching will be carried out just as likely through a Catholic school as through a state school. I know it's only a glimmer of hope but yes, there is something there.

My submission really addresses two sides to this. One is those students who are not able to attend regular school. That really comes from my background with distance education. The second part of the submission deals with providing for the needs of children in isolated schools, and there the expertise, I guess, or the perspective I can bring relates very much to technology because in the concluding part of - before I separated from the Education Department, I did have responsibility for development of the scheme for the providing of computers for schools across the state.

I was also responsible for attempting to implement open learning methodology that could have been of significant use to those schools. So I'm not going to attempt to canvass all the issues in relation to rural and isolated schools; I just tried to look at where technology may have something important to offer in relation to some of the issues that this inquiry is addressing.

[Distance education]

I do want to make some general points in relation to the nature of the education that can be provided for students in those situations. I think that it's important to remember that the key and significant elements of a good education can be provided regardless of the circumstances of the child. It is only a matter of will. It's only a matter of determining that we choose to do it. Those best practices in education I think are to do with things that are not particularly content driven.

So I'm not particularly concerned that a student in such-and-such school may not be able to study Mandarin Chinese but I am concerned that the program that the child follows does develop the key competencies that we are pretty well agreed on right across the whole education system as the things we're aiming for. That education provided for the child will take account of their needs and the differences between students, that the students must develop the capacity to be responsible for their own learning - and in fact this is one of the things that I think distance education is particularly strong in - and that effective education depends on effective communication and effective interaction.

I come from the position that I believe that all those things can be achieved for isolated students; can be achieved for students in isolated schools. As I said, isolation is certainly a significant factor in Tasmania. There are isolated communities - it may be a little unfortunate that you went to the north-west coast and the west coast

because there are more actually isolated individuals on the east coast of Tasmania than there are in those areas.

On the west coast you either live in a town or you don't live there at all because there are very few opportunities to live anywhere else, apart from Trial Harbour, Granville Harbour and Temma - Couta Rocks. But by and large people live in communities on the west coast and generally along the north-west, although in the hinterland in the north-west there are some isolated students. But on the east coast there probably tends to be more people who live up mountains, on islands or whatever. But yes, there are students of those sorts in Tasmania.

I don't really want to say a great deal about the primary provision that the Open Learning Service school provides. I know that they've presented a submission to you today and I'd imagine that they have presented their own case very effectively. I would say that their parent body strongly endorses the program that they provide. It is a program that is based upon a high level of cooperation between the school and the parent. It's rather different from distance education in other states in the degree to which it places that emphasis on working with the parents, but it is indeed very effective.

In its secondary section its emphasis tends to be towards dual enrolment, to developing cooperative relationships with regular schools, although in some cases students do tend to - yes, it is the exception but some students do the whole of their secondary education with the Open Learning School. I would commend the initiative that they're showing at the moment in developing integrated studies units based on - well, this is something they've newly started on - the key competencies which aim to address the needs of those students.

So the comment that I'd quickly want to jump to in relation to that - because I don't think it's the most central thing that I want to say - is that I don't believe that our education system has recognised sufficiently the sheer complexity of providing a distance education service. The numbers are very small and therefore it doesn't loom very large across 75,000 students when you only have say 150 isolated kids. There's not a great tendency to say, "Okay, we really need to put the money into course development," and so on. I'm not arguing for what they have on the mainland, you know, the big course development units they have in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia - \$3 million a year units - but there is a need to provide for that.

[Distance education – IT infrastructure]

Secondly, the Open Learning Service has been very active in its adoption of new technology but the special telecommunication

needs of distance education is proving rather difficult for our education system to provide adequate telecommunication. It's probably illustrated best on a whiteboard but we've got a thing called Network in Tasmania which is a contract between the Tasmanian government and Telstra. The idea is to provide a uniform telecommunication structure with access to the Internet and so on. This was negotiated by people who knew nothing about education and did not take into account the needs of education. So what has been provided is a 64K band with connection to the Internet in a whole lot of locations around the state, including a whole lot of schools.

That doesn't take into account - what happens for a school where its kids are spread far and wide? There is no particular system by which they can be provided for. In fact I've been told if the Open Learning Service school provided say dial-in access to its students into its Intranet and thus via that into the Internet, it would be actually contrary to the Network in Tasmania contract. That seems to me absolute craziness, and I think it is a matter that needs to be addressed.

So the general issue would be that there are specialist needs for providing telecommunication for distance education that should be addressed. The other problem about the Network in Tasmania thing is that it was based on an assumption that people were all like public servants, who spend a lot of time emailing one another. So every location just has a lot of email going in and out of it. Schools don't operate like that at all. Schools have an asymmetrical use of communication; a small amount going out - emails going out, inquiries going out, requests going out - large amounts coming in, probably a ratio nine to one. Large amounts coming in in bursts, not in a nice steady state. You know, like a public servant will be working from quarter to 9 until 6 minutes past 5 and there'll be a fairly steady stream of communication going on all day.

Schools do not require that sort of communication. So again to be locked into a telecommunications sort of provision that was made in a negotiation by people who knew nothing about education and were not attempting to provide for education I think has left us with considerable problems. Anyway, I have used up almost all of my time. I'm really only coming now to the bit that I reckon is the key and central thing.

[Distance education – senior secondary]

Senior secondary distance education was part of the role of the School of Distance Education which became the Open Learning Service. A review was held in 1995 which led to that senior secondary provision being transferred across to the colleges, and I know you heard something about this this morning. The Isolated Children's

Parents' Association - and I know that they'll be speaking to you shortly - nationally they have been for some time now raising the issue of the danger of the pursuit of open learning running over the top of the needs of the isolated student and eventually being to the disadvantage of the isolated student.

It will be my submission that that is what has happened in Tasmania. But they transferred open learning to the colleges and the colleges operate by a completely different set of rules; they have completely open enrolment. They trebled the size of the enrolment of open learning students in the senior secondary area - something like 600, 700 full-time equivalent enrolments. So probably in all 1200, 1400 individual students enrolled in open learning across the state. But there's no separate provision for or no recognition of the special needs of the isolated student.

The typical kind of isolated student is a girl say on King Island who goes to Hellyer College in Burnie, and after three or four weeks finds she can't bear living away from home and returns home to King Island. There is no particular process in place in the college system to provide for that student. She has to take pot luck. Because they've adopted a mixed -mode approach, similar to the approach adopted in New South Wales - Port Macquarie High School is a good example of that; it has all the limitations of mixed mode. Mixed mode is where teachers are mixing - partly teaching face to face, partly working at a distance - which means of course that teachers are only available at certain timetable times which may not match the needs of their students at all. It's completely random.

They are working inside the context of all the administrative requirements of a face-to-face school. So a very typical result of that is in every case in the colleges in Tasmania enrolments for the face-to-face students are carried out before the enrolments, and they take priority over the enrolments of the open learning students. And the formation of classes in open learning can sometimes occur two, three, four weeks into first term and quite often will be with teachers who are temporary, part-time, and who have no background in open learning distance education.

So you have exactly the thing that the Isolated Children's Parents' Association predicted, that in the pursuit - and I believe it was a laudable pursuit - of open learning across the colleges, the fact that these isolated students, the young mum who lives in Rossarden who decides she wants to continue her education, the fact that she needs lots of personal support and lots of encouragement to keep going with her schoolwork is extremely difficult for the colleges to provide that. So inherently the move to open learning places at jeopardy the needs of the isolated students.

The implementation of open learning in the colleges was done, I would say, with inadequate concern for, or inadequate understanding for the specialist needs of the situation; that is, there was no allocation for course development initially. I believe there may have been some recently, but for the first couple of years no allocation for course development. Considering that the development of a one-year course on the mainland costs \$100,000, I don't know how they imagined that the courses were going to be developed. So quite often I would get letters from a parent saying, "My kid is enrolled in open learning and having to do work sheets that are the same as has been handed out in class. They just crossed out the dates and it's all shoddy and hopeless."

[Distance education – staff issues]

They have not put in place an adequate process of professional development for the teachers involved. Don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking what the teachers have done; the teachers have worked incredibly hard and have been incredibly successful but it's been in the face of the most extraordinarily difficult circumstances. There is inadequate professional support. For example, early this year I had a contact from the Don College asking me to provide some help for a teacher who had been assigned - the term was under way, the temporary teacher had been given the English class to take. They had contacted a couple of other colleges and said, "Is there any help you can give me?" and people have just said, "No." So there was the spectacle of this teacher being given a class, having to provide in a mode that they had no experience in and no knowledge of, with no existing course.

By that stage I was no longer particularly responsible for this area but what I was able to do was I contacted somebody I knew out at Claremont College and asked them to contact her and provide some help - but no effective system. The teaching loads in the colleges are excessive, they are grotesque. I thought that I was fairly severe in what I demanded of the teachers of distance education. The teaching loads for the open learning teachers in the colleges are about double the loads of what I was asking of the teachers in distance education, and we were asking more than is normal in other states. So I would say in Tasmania the whole thing has been carried out fairly ineptly.

[Students with disabilities]

In relation to students with special needs, I did want to mention that - well, the distance education - isolated kids with special needs really pose a problem and they are dealt with case by case, and I don't know that there's any other way you could deal with it because they're not huge numbers. But I mean, heart-rending ones like we had a Down Syndrome kid living 10 kilometres inland from Beaconsfield and who

had been at primary school at Beaconsfield Primary. He reached the end of his primary years and the alternatives were to travel up to Launceston or to board in Launceston.

He couldn't travel because he wasn't adequately toilet trained - well, his bowel and bladder control was not reliable. His parents were not prepared to board in town and so we had to take him in distance education and in fact we failed completely; we found no way of providing for that kid. So there is a problem there but I believe that probably the best thing that could be done would be to acknowledge there is a problem and make some specific efforts to provide - but there are not so many students that you could make a rule for it.

[Isolated schools]

In relation to isolated schools - and I'm very conscious I've got three minutes to go - I believe very strongly that some of the issues that you were raising with these gentlemen before about providing specialist teaching, providing competent and capable teaching across a wide range, providing an enriched curriculum, that the technology does provide us with the means to do that. As I said in my introduction, that is basically a matter of a will to do it. It is not sufficient to just think of it as being done via the Internet but the Internet provision, which would allow for high levels of bandwidth in two directions, would be absolutely essential for that and could be achieved quite readily. It would be best supplemented by use of specialist communication like what's known as the H320 standard videoconferencing which doesn't operate via the Internet but operates down a dedicated telephone line.

[Auslan]

I would refer you to the - it was my parting gesture before they winkled me out of my job. I put in videoconferencing for the Auslan kids. We have an Auslan kid in Strahan, a small Auslan school in Ulverstone, one in West Launceston and one in Claremont. These kids come together several times a year, socialise together, but when they're back in their own schools it's incredibly difficult for them to communicate because of course they can't telephone one another pretty obviously. So it was a very simple notion that if you put in good quality videoconferencing those kids would be able to communicate, and huge other benefits, like interpreters could give training to parents and interpreters could give training to local teachers and so on.

So while I have no particular knowledge of what's happened since that, since all I did was put it in place, I believe that it was a good idea and something I think is a good illustration of what the technology makes possible. Sorry, it's hopelessly unbalanced and I didn't give you a chance to ask a question.

[Distance education – student support]

THE COMMISSIONER: You haven't. So I'll just ask one. We were told this morning that one of the features of the open learning program here for particularly isolated students is the designation of a person to be - I think they actually used the word pastoral care but I'm not sure, or mentor, for each student and to develop an individualised learning program.

MR HOLMES: This in the colleges? Certainly not in the colleges. In the school, TOLS school, yes. That would be exactly how it operates in the TOLS school. In the colleges if you took that example of the girl from King Island, she could quite well - Hellyer College doesn't offer very many subjects. It offers two or three subjects, so she could quite well find herself being taught by a teacher located at Hellyer, another one located in Launceston and another one located at Newstead College and another one located at Hobart College.

Those teachers would not know one another and would have no communication with one another, and if there was a pastoral care teacher - sorry, if they have put in place by which that student would have a pastoral care teacher that would allow some effective communication, I would applaud them for having done so. I can't see how they would have put in place such a system, I can't see how they could have made it work because in fact it's inherently contrary to the nature of the whole structure that they have. However, if they say that they have, I don't - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Well, I need to go back and look at my notes. It may be that they were just talking about TOLS which would be what, up to Year 10?

MR HOLMES: Yes. It would be my strongest criticism of what the colleges do, that they are not able to provide the sort of pastoral care and personal support for the isolated students who are after all the ones most likely to be extremely cautious and reticent about what they're doing. I give you an example. A girl I had taught when she was about Year 10 enrolled in distance education when she was about 18. So she had a gap. She'd had a fairly unfortunate intervening period, she'd got involved with drugs and goodness knows what, so she was fairly shattered.

The teachers told me that she'd started up but she hadn't sent any work in. So I was travelling that way at the time and I called in. After we'd had a cup of coffee and a chat for a while, I forced her to show me inside her cupboard in the room where she did her schoolwork, and sure enough there was the whole set of all the work that she had done for her teachers but she just hadn't had the nerve to send it in. That's the kind of thing that is very real for somebody who's - I mean, the teachers are not face to face, they're a long way away and

they need a lot of personal support. To the degree that the colleges have been able to provide that personal support I'd applaud them, but I think the structure that they have set up really encourages competition between the colleges and does not adequately provide for the needs of the most vulnerable.

THE COMMISSIONER: Certainly it was Lyn Dunn.

MR HOLMES: Yes, that's TOLS.

THE COMMISSIONER: Which would be TOLS in that case.

MR HOLMES: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Yes, I'll look back at my notes and I'll just check. If that system operated in the colleges, presumably that would make quite a difference there too if there was somebody looking after the coordination of all the activity.

MR HOLMES: Absolutely. I guess the gist of my submission is not to say, "They shouldn't have taken distance ed, open learning away from me and they shouldn't have put it in the colleges," what I'm saying is in putting it into the colleges they should have put in place the kinds of processes that provided the proper and adequate support for the most vulnerable students. I don't know, the numbers are probably not available to us, but very likely 90% of the students enrolled in open learning are jointly attending class for some subjects and doing open learning with others.

So it's probably that the great majority of them are not the isolated students at all. There is no provision for any extra resources, they are funded per capita exactly as they're funded for any other student. There is absolutely no question - sorry I'm using all your time. It is more costly to provide education for isolated students. There's no way of avoiding that, and I believe they should seek to resolve that.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right. Thanks, Alistair very much.

MR HOLMES: Sorry, I bashed your ear.

THE COMMISSIONER: No, that's good.

[3.36 pm]

THE COMMISSIONER: Welcome. Could you introduce yourself, then you can make your statements, and you already know all my questions so you needn't give me the answers. I won't have to do anything.

[ICPA membership]

MS NICHOLS: I'm Meg Nichols and I'm the president of the Tasmanian state council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association. I know that you, commissioner, know all about ICPA, but I probably should just say that here in Tasmania ICPA is not a huge organisation at all. We probably have about 70 family members, and they're scattered all over the state - King Island, Flinders Island, Cape Barren Island. We have three branches located one on the east coast of Tasmania, one in Oatlands and one in the central highlands of Tasmania. We have members on the west coast and the north-west coast, and we even have a family from the Solomon Islands. So that's a bit of a picture.

THE COMMISSIONER: That's about as un-Tasmania like as you could imagine.

MS NICHOLS: Yes, but they're great supporters, aren't they, Leanne? I should probably state that our member families, the people who join ICPA in Tasmania - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Before you go on, Leanne did you want to come up here, too?

MS DAVIE: I'm here purely in a support role.

THE COMMISSIONER: You're a support person. It's like in a court case. Sorry. Okay, Meg.

MS NICHOLS: The people who join ICPA, it seems, are invariably people whose children attend schools, country schools in Tasmania, and then they may well study through distance education up to Year 10 or they may attend the local school up to Year 10, but I must say our member families, the majority of their children move away from their country area for their secondary and certainly their senior secondary education. We have attempted to attract more member families whose children live in hostels or attend the local district high school, but we only have a few families who are in that situation.

ICPA is seen to be an association that only reflects the interests of children who live away from home, but that is not the case. For example, ICPA has been represented on various state education committees that are solely involved with education in country schools, district high schools and country primary schools. So our interest is certainly more widespread than our membership may reflect.

The Tasmanian state council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to the national inquiry into rural and remote education. Bearing in mind the fact that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has received a detailed submission from the federal council of ICPA, Tasmania's state council will briefly highlight the Tasmanian perspective, discussing only one of the terms of reference, and that is the availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling.

[Travel]

Tasmania has a dispersed rural population - I'm sorry I'm reading this - with only some areas considered to be remote; those areas on the west coast, far north-west and the Bass Strait islands to the north of the state. However, the distances involved in Tasmania are deceiving. Because of the topography of the island, access to urban centres often means travelling on windy, sometimes mountainous roads. Travel for schoolchildren in mid-winter in some of the central highlands regions of the state is often difficult. Travel time is therefore greater than the same distance travelled by our mainland counterparts. We do not have the vast distances of the mainland, but we have our own type of isolation. That's something that you have alluded to and you've found out as you've been here.

[Access to primary education]

Education in rural Tasmanian towns: for their primary education, children in rural and remote Tasmania attend country schools, many of these being district high schools that offer education from kindergarten to grade 10, or they study through the Tasmanian Open Learning Service. Some families send their children to the primary section of a district high school and then send them on to an urban high school, independent boarding school or a school-term hostel for Years 7 to 12. Primary aged children in rural Tasmania usually have access to a quality education in small country schools. There are a few townships that have a larger population, but generally most country schools have small enrolments and primary classes in rural towns are often a composite of two grades, sometimes more.

[Access to secondary education]

Secondary education, Years 7 to 10, is offered at district high schools, but the opportunity for students to receive a large range of subjects and extracurricular activities is of course dependent upon the size of the school. Large district high schools are in a good position to be able to offer a wide range of academic, sporting, social and cultural opportunities. Many small district high schools struggle to offer an education that is comparable to that which is available in the city. Some district high schools have a very small Year 7 to 10 enrolment and this must limit the opportunities for some but not all students.

[Access to senior secondary education]

Because of the fact that all Tasmanian colleges - that is, schools that offer Years 11 and 12 only - are in urban centres only, rural and remote children must either travel or live away from home for Years 11 and 12. Because of the placement of colleges, the number of Year 11 and 12 students in Tasmania who are eligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance, or AIC, is greater than those in receipt of AIC in Victoria and South Australia.

[Student retention]

Problems arise when rural and remote students attending small district high schools complete the compulsory years of schooling - that is Years 7 to 10 - and then approach senior secondary education - Years 11 and 12. The retention rate for rural students, or the number of students who complete Years 11 and 12 is low in Tasmania. The tertiary participation rate for these students is even lower. ICPA cannot presently provide figures for the rural retention rate, although I do have the national report into schooling from 1996-97 figures. But ICPA is aware that a few years ago the figures were extremely worrying. The Education Department would have those figures.

Small district high schools' retention rates are consistently lower than urban high schools' retention rates. Larger district high schools have a higher retention rate. To continue their education on to Years 11 and 12, students from a small country town where they've lived all their lives have to make a move to a large college in the city. These country students have probably attended the same school from kindergarten to Year 10. Class sizes are small and the children have maintained a close circle of friends all their lives. They know all the children at the school, they've travelled with them on the bus daily, and they're used to mixed-aged groupings.

Children in high schools often show great care and consideration towards those in primary school years, and the security of the situation is obvious. The expectation that all of these students will move on to attend large colleges in the city to partake in education that is not compulsory is often just not achievable. To move from a small school with a K to 10 enrolment of about 120 to a college with over 1,000 students is a frightening prospect for many country children.

A few years ago the federal government provided Commonwealth funds through a national Country Areas Program initiative that employed home-school liaison officers to work with grade 9 and 10 students to encourage them to go to the city for Years 11 and 12. Retention rates increased considerably over the period of this funding - two and a half years - but problems arose if the students enrolled at the city colleges received no support once they

were there. Country students support officers were employed by some but not all colleges under the same scheme, but as this project was just a pilot project the Commonwealth expected the state to follow up on that initiative.

Some of the larger district high schools were able to fund a home-school liaison officer after the completion of the pilot project. Smaller schools were often not able to do so, and at present ICPA is not aware of any specific funding provided to any state country schools to encourage retention. I know this morning the Education Department alluded to the three officers for country schools who are involved in making sure that - they would see that as involved in a retention program. But their sole task is to talk about the retention of students within district high schools undertaking some VET courses - some vocational educational training courses.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's not to go on to Years 11 and 12?

MS NICHOLS: No. Well, it is, but at the local school, not to do that in town necessarily. Many rural students who enrol at colleges for Year 11 drop out after a short time. Having worked as the home-school liaison officer at the small district high school in our town, I was certainly aware of the enormous challenge that faced these students. The opportunity for frequent trips to the nearest college, discussions with former students at the college, subject-taster days, orientation days, visits by college teachers, all of these activities make bridging the gap easier.

Many people in urban areas do not realise the enormous culture shock that exists for these rural students. For example, country children have usually never actually used public transport. The challenge of knowing the outlay of the city, what bus to catch to go where, the cost involved, the act of purchasing a ticket, all of these things are taken for granted in an urban area and they are totally new procedures for country children. Sometimes the changes are just too hard to come to terms with.

Initiatives that will overcome this situation have to be funded. Country schools in Tasmania receive a total of approximately \$460,000 in Country Areas Program funds - CAP funds - but this money cannot only be directed towards Year 10 to 11 retention programs. CAP funds are currently distributed to 35 country schools across the state. It is essential that primary age children in country schools have access to sporting, social, cultural experiences as an adjunct to their education. CAP funds are used for these purposes.

ICPA Tasmania therefore believes that specific funds should be made available to encourage Year 10 students from rural and remote

areas to continue on to Years 11 and 12. Whether this funding is provided by the state or the Commonwealth it's not for ICPA to suggest. ICPA is aware of a current trend to encourage students at some district high schools to pursue their Year 11 at the local school. Schools have realised that if students do not continue on to Year 11 then they are often setting themselves up for a lifetime of unemployment. Some of the larger district high schools have small enrolments of Year 11 students. Some people are of the opinion that this is a good compromise for these students. They would not otherwise do a Year 11, so something is better than nothing. The courses offered for these students are often vocational education training courses or VET courses.

[VET]

If an appropriately structured VET program is available at a school, then students may well be pursuing a worthwhile course. However, unless that course is adequately resourced and taught by appropriately trained teachers, the VET course may well be lost to the school when a staff change takes place or student numbers decline. I was involved with the Tasmanian Education Council for three and a half years, and the council at that time undertook a study into vocational education training and were made very much aware that in certain country schools where VET programs were offered, one year they may have six students enrolled in a certain course and the next year they may only have two. So all of a sudden the viability of the course is threatened, a teacher may be moved because of a transfer policy or something like that, and that expertise is lost.

The viability of these courses may well be uncertain from year to year. It's indeed fortunate if the community around the school can provide vocational training opportunities, but many rural communities cannot do so. For some students pursuing an inadequately resourced VET course in a small country town instead of gaining experience in a large well-resourced city college, could well be a poor alternative. The training opportunities available in larger centres will give students the skills that can then be brought back to their town. If they never leave their small and insular community, then their horizons will remain unexpanded.

I know this seems to fly in the face of what Alistair says about leaving country towns, but from our experience if a rural community is to thrive it needs input, it needs enthusiasm, it needs the opportunities for training that can then be used to set up new businesses, new agricultural enterprises. Why are we having problems getting teachers to rural communities? It's because the people who are expected to go into rural communities are urban teachers who have probably never experienced life in a rural community and they don't want to go there.

But if a rural child is educated at a district high school to Year 10, goes to do Year 11 and 12 at an urban college, then moves on to tertiary education, gains a qualification, they'd be quite happy to go to a rural community to teach because that's where their heart may well lie. A doctor trained in town but who lived originally in a rural area may well be very happy to return to that rural area. So we believe in the vitality of rural communities, we believe in education for these families.

[Recommendation]

An alternative that ICPA has discussed - and this has been discussed just a couple of years ago and it really may well be criticised, so I'll just throw it in - is a suggestion that if students attend a district high school that has a very small Year 7 to 10 enrolment - and these are the sorts of schools that have the retention problems - then the compulsory Year 10 should be made available at city colleges and only there. This suggestion may well attract criticism, but it would be a way of making young students aware of the educational opportunities in cities. It's well known that schools that educate children from Years 7 to 12 have a good retention rate from Years 10 to 11. If a Year 10 student attended a Year 10 to 12 college, then the move from Year 10 to 11 would not seem so scary.

[Distance education]

I'll move on to distance education now. ICPA Tasmania does not propose to speak at any length about distance education in Tasmania. This has been done by the Tasmanian Open Learning Service and Alistair has just spoken. What we would like to say here is that ICPA has been impressed by the teaching service and curriculum offerings through TOLS in primary and secondary education and is aware of the developments that will be able to take place using funding from the regional telecommunications infrastructure fund. However, we believe that it is appropriate to add here that distance education, while being an essential component of rural and remote education for some students, must not be seen as the only answer to a rural retention problem.

ICPA Tasmania has consistently stated to various ministers for education, both state and federal, that distance education within schools - and there is certainly a tendency to attempt to offer Year 11 and 12 subjects in district high schools - cannot replace face-to-face teaching within a classroom. ICPA Tasmania believes that opportunities for rural and remote students to choose to either study through distance education or to receive adequate state and Commonwealth allowances to assist with the costs involved in boarding away from home in order to have access to education must be maintained.

[Boarding]

Boarding away from home: the state government does not fund school-term hostels in Tasmania. It is the intention that these hostels are self-funding, and over the last 18 months five school-term hostels have closed in Tasmania. There are presently five school-term hostels in Tasmania - two in Launceston and three in Hobart. Only two hostels take Years 7 to 10 students and both of these are in Hobart. Some Year 11 and 12 students live in a TAFE hostel in Burnie in order to attend school, and there are also five boarding schools in Tasmania - two in Launceston and three in Hobart.

Just referring back to hostels, I noted Susan's comments this morning from State P and F when she spoke with parents on the east coast and the north-west and west coast. The real problem with hostels is that the accommodation that is provided - and was provided and now some of these hostels have closed - the accommodation must be suitable. It must have appropriate pastoral care, it must have supervision of the students, the atmosphere must be conducive to study and general wellbeing for the students. The reason these hostels closed down was because the parents and the students didn't find this situation to exist for them.

Rural and remote Tasmanian students who do not attend the local district high school do not have many alternatives. The only accommodation provided for students from Years 7 to 10 in the north of the state is at two independent boarding schools. There are no school-term hostels for high school students in the north, therefore families from King and Flinders Islands and towns all across the north must pay tuition and boarding fees if they do not wish to send their children to the local district high school and they cannot find private board in the city. This is an expensive alternative as very few families in Tasmania are eligible to receive AIC when their children are in high school. This situation is different when children are in Years 11 and 12, as AIC is available for these students. Island students are eligible for flight allowances across Bass Strait.

[Travel subsidies]

Allowances for rural and remote students for travel: Tasmanian rural and remote primary and secondary families may be eligible for the private vehicle conveyance allowance. If a family lives more than five kilometres from a bus stop or from a school, if there is no bus service, then they can apply for this allowance. It is paid at the very low rate of eight cents a kilometre. Children travelling to country schools travel at no charge on contract bus services and pay only 30 cents for travel from a country town into a city. Students who live on the Bass Strait islands are able to claim nine return flights a year, but seating is only available if it's available - and I know that that was discussed this morning.

[Boarding subsidy]

Boarding: there is no state government boarding allowance for primary and secondary geographically isolated students. If a student boards away from home because they live more than 40 kilometres from their nearest college - that is Years 11 and 12 school - then they are eligible for the state allowance known as the senior secondary accommodation allowance, or SSAA, and that is paid at the rate of \$828 a year. ICPA Tasmania has recently approached both the minister for transport and the minister for education to have the conveyance allowance and the SSAA increased. In 1998 the Education Department contemplated the abolition of the senior secondary accommodation allowance, but lobbying by ICPA Tasmania appeared to ensure its continuation.

[Other subsidies]

AIC is available for eligible students but as we have mentioned not many secondary students fulfil the geographically isolated criteria. When students are in Years 11 and 12 Tasmanian families experience exactly the same problems with eligibility for the Youth Allowance as was highlighted in the ICPA federal council submission to this commission. Many families try, but they cannot complete the required family actual means test form, because of its complexity.

I've just got a couple of little anecdotes here, just to finish up with, and I'll just read the first one out. Each year ICPA Tasmania advertises in a statewide rural newspaper for Tasmanian country. We do this to attract new members and to alert rural and remote families to the fact that they could receive financial assistance in the form of allowances that they may be unaware of. I had an inquiry from a mother and after lengthy discussion I informed her that her Year 11 daughter, even though ineligible for the Youth Allowance because of their business structure, was eligible for AIC and the state senior secondary accommodation allowance.

This family needed financial support and the mother was delighted to hear the good news. I add here that she had actually missed out on applying for AIC and senior secondary accommodation allowance for her older son because she wasn't aware of the existence of these allowances. When I asked her if she would then join ICPA, as we worked not only to maintain these allowances but also to have them increased, she informed me that no, she wouldn't, because she thought that it was inappropriate that ICPA had kept this information to itself and not publicised it widely so that families in real need could get help.

I also make the comment that we had to - ICPA recently provided information about allowances available for rural and remote students to the peak parent body in Tasmania. They were unaware of what was available for rural students. These two instances remind us of

the fact that many families in Tasmania are not aware of the financial assistance available to them and a small, volunteer parent association like ICPA is ill-equipped to do the publicity. It is sad to think that there may well be rural and remote families missing out on badly needed financial assistance to which they are entitled or, indeed, not sending their children on to further education because of a lack of information. Thank you.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thank you. That last point is a very important point I must say, but it doesn't surprise me in the least, here or anywhere else. The complexity of the various allowances that are provided means that I'm sure people don't appreciate or understand them and probably understand even less how they can so organise their affairs as to be entitled to them. One example is the Youth Allowance, that if a child earns a certain amount - or a young person earns a certain amount over 18 months - I think it's \$13,000 over 18 months - there is no parental means test and full independent provision. I'm sure that there are many young people in country areas who would be earning that much if they were being paid for what is essentially farm work, but of course the organisation of the family businesses is such that they're not getting any money for it, they're losing out on entitlement to the allowance.

MS NICHOLS: Yes, it is, it's a real problem.

THE COMMISSIONER: So it's become extremely complex. Do you get any comments about the assets and means test for youth allowance here in Tassie, or is the general state of the economy so bad that everybody who comes within the tests anyway - - -

MS NICHOLS: No, we certainly do. No, it prevents many families from getting Youth Allowance. Yes, many families.

THE COMMISSIONER: Mainly because of the assets test or - - -

MS NICHOLS: The assets test is certainly the first - - -

THE COMMISSIONER: Hurdle.

MS NICHOLS: -First barrier and if they've got past that barrier and actually - yes, the rural decline - yes, there are many families now that a few years ago would not have been eligible for the Youth Allowance because of the assets test, and now may well be. The actual means test seems to be the one that really prevents them, and I don't know how many people in this room have actually looked at the actual means test, but it's a really involved and complex form and it scares so many people. There is a response that, "Oh, well, you know, you can get your

accountant to do this," but many people will not do that sort of thing. They will not go to an accountant to get them to fill out an application form for an allowance that they really feel they should be able to have access to straightaway. But it certainly is an extremely complex form, the actual means test.

[Post-education options]

THE COMMISSIONER: You no doubt heard one of the comments made earlier about reasons or various reasons that have been advanced, I guess, over the day as to why the retention rate is so low, and one reason advanced a couple of times was country families being frightened that their children are not going to come back.

MS NICHOLS: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: You're arguing very strongly for going away to get the broadening of experience, the greater skills and then the kids will come back and make those skills available to the community, but in your experience, do they come back? Is the fear well placed from what we've heard, or is this something that is really just a fear that doesn't have a basis in fact?

MS NICHOLS: A percentage come back, but of course the actual health of the rural township to which they return is integral in the decision-making. So as we see a sort of decline amongst Tasmanian rural communities, we do see a lack of opportunity. We don't want to sort of pull down the shutters and say, "Well, that's it then. We now have decided that children should not be educated because there's no point in returning anyhow."

THE COMMISSIONER: That's right.

MS NICHOLS: But, yes, certainly a percentage come back. A percentage just love living in those rural towns. That's where they feel most comfortable. With the provision for further education through telecommunications - you know, once people may well have received some form of education in the city and then - to return to their community and then to be able to continue on to gain further qualifications or to undertake further training with the advancements in telecommunications, you know, the opportunities could be quite limitless. But certainly a percentage return - and it is a small percentage, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Whereabouts do you live?

[Bothwell example]

MS NICHOLS: Just out of Bothwell.

THE COMMISSIONER: Where's that? I don't know that one.

MS NICHOLS: Bothwell is off the Midlands Highway to the left, just underneath the Great Lake if you're looking at a map.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, okay. What's the general economic situation like in that part of Tassie?

MS NICHOLS: There are a few large farms that are rural - grazing properties that are probably certainly holding the community together, the larger farms probably do hold the rural community together. Certainly the smaller ones are really struggling. These people are struggling to educate their children; they're struggling to maintain a lifestyle where it was certainly expected that they would be able to educate their children. The support for rural businesses in our community is quite - it's minimal, I suppose. The businesses are finding it hard to expand because the opportunities are limited.

Our community has actually suffered a couple of years of drought, too, so the ongoing effects of a drought within a rural community are really extensive. People don't spend money in the rural merchandise shops. The cartage contractor who has to cart the wool doesn't have as many bales to cart because people's wool cuts are down. They've sold their stock because the sheep didn't grow as many. A lot of people have put workmen off their properties and so therefore you see a decline in school enrolments because if people are put off from their jobs they have to go and seek work elsewhere.

It isn't a very exciting time in rural Tasmania, but certainly there are opportunities that may well be down the track. I would think in rural Tasmania the most up-beat situation exists in aquaculture and in many of the stone fruit industries and things like that. I think there will be a turnaround though. You have to be positive.

THE COMMISSIONER: Absolutely.

MS NICHOLS: Through gritted teeth, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: With your own kids, did they go to school locally to Year 10?

MS NICHOLS: They attended the local school until Year 6 and then they went to boarding school.

THE COMMISSIONER: Right, okay. In Hobart or Launceston?

MS NICHOLS: In Hobart, yes. We had three of them at boarding school for two years and this year our eldest boy has left - he's at university - and our two younger boys are living with my mother in Hobart because it all became a bit expensive.

THE COMMISSIONER: What is the local high school to your place?

MS NICHOLS: The local school is about 24 kilometres away from where I live.

THE COMMISSIONER: Where is that?

MS NICHOLS: At Bothwell, Bothwell District High School.

THE COMMISSIONER: That's at Bothwell itself.

MS NICHOLS: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: And that goes to Year 10.

MS NICHOLS: Yes, it goes to Year 10.

THE COMMISSIONER: Then it's Launceston or Hobart after that, or is there - - -

MS NICHOLS: What happens after that is the students usually go down to Hobart to the college down there and a few students will go to Elizabeth College, but there are quite a few who don't go on, who unfortunately - I mean, they did when there was that position of a home-school liaison officer who encouraged those students to go to town, but I'm not actually sure of the actual retention rates. Leanne, would you have any idea of what happens at the local school?

MS DAVIE: Because of the school numbers, it would appear to be quite high at the moment.

MS NICHOLS: Yes, I think there are only seven children in Year 10. Yes, seven children in Year 10, so probably that opportunity there to sort of help the kids to actually move on - if they've got caring staff members then they can probably assist them, yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: Do you know of any of them doing distance education, either up to Year 10 or subsequently in the area?

MS NICHOLS: There have been a couple of families, yes, who live close to the lakes. There was one family in Bothwell with a child who was not actually geographically isolated but he undertook distance

education; he lived within the town. But there was a family who lives up at Arthur's Lake and I think there are a couple of families that - there was a family at Liawenee up in the lake country - enrolled at the School of Distance Education.

THE COMMISSIONER: But do you know how they found it or anything anecdotal about that?

MS NICHOLS: The feedback has been sort of minimal. I think they've been very happy with certainly their primary and secondary education, but senior secondary education is not something actually - I don't think the elder child has actually reached senior secondary education.

THE COMMISSIONER: They're still doing - - -

MS NICHOLS: Yes, secondary.

THE COMMISSIONER: Lower secondary.

MS NICHOLS: Yes.

THE COMMISSIONER: All right, thank you. Thank you for being around for the day, too.

MS NICHOLS: Yes, it was very interesting.

THE COMMISSIONER: Thanks very much.

AT 4.10 PM THE MATTER WAS ADJOURNED ACCORDINGLY