



EDUCATION AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mrs RN Menkens MP (Chair)
Mr SA Bennett MP
Mr MA Boothman MP
Mr RG Hopper MP
Mr MR Latter MP
Dr AJ Lynham MP
Mr NA Symes MP

Staff present:

Ms B Watson (Research Director)
Ms M Salisbury (Principal Research Officer)

PUBLIC BRIEFING—REVIEW OF STATE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 2014

Brisbane

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Committee met at 9.40 am

CHAIR: Welcome. Before we begin this morning I ask everybody present to turn off their mobile phones or set them to silent. Any media recording this morning's proceedings are asked to adhere to the committee's endorsed media guidelines. Secretariat staff can provide a copy of the guidelines should they be needed. I remind everyone that this briefing is a formal process of the parliament and parliamentary privilege applies to all evidence presented. Any person intentionally misleading the committee is committing a serious offence. I also advise that this briefing is being broadcast live via the Queensland parliament website. It will also be recorded and transcribed by Hansard and, once available, that transcript will be published on the committee's web page.

This morning's briefing from representatives of the Stronger Smarter Institute forms part of the committee's review of state school attendance rates. Following this briefing the committee will take a 15-minute break, returning at 10.45 am with a briefing from Ms Cathy O'Toole from Supported Options in Lifestyle and Access Services. I will now introduce the members of the Education and Innovation Committee. I am Rosemary Menkens, the member for Burdekin and the chair of this committee. With me are Mr Steve Bennett MP, the member for Burnett; Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Albert; Mr Neil Symes, the member for Lytton; and Dr Anthony Lynham, the member for Stafford. We do have two apologies this morning: Mr Ray Hopper and Mr Michael Latter.

ADAMSON, Ms Teresa, Stronger Smarter Institute

SARRA, Dr Chris, Chairman, Stronger Smarter Institute

CHAIR: I now welcome from the Stronger Smarter Institute Dr Chris Sarra, chairman and founder, and his colleague Ms Teresa Adamson. Dr Sarra is here today to discuss the institute's work creating positive education outcomes for Indigenous children with a focus on school attendance. While this briefing is taking place in a public forum, you are able to request through me as chair that any material or information you provide to the committee be kept private. You may also object to particular questions. Additionally, you may wish to take questions on notice if you do not have that information at hand. The committee may also have questions. Would you prefer that we save those until the end of your briefing?

Dr Sarra: No. In fact, I am very happy for us to have a kind of ongoing dialogue. That works fine for me.

CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Sarra. I will now hand over to you.

Dr Sarra: I am delighted at this opportunity to present to all of you this morning. With a particular focus on attendance, some years ago I was principal of Cherbourg school, an Aboriginal community school, where attendance went from 62 per cent in 1998 to 94 per cent in 2004. In achieving that outcome we did not cut anybody's welfare payments; we just made a school that children wanted to come to. I will elaborate on how we did this and reflect on some of the challenges and some insights in and around existing approaches because I think there are some questions that need to be asked. I will say that again: 62 per cent to 94 per cent. We did not cut anybody's welfare payments in order to make that happen.

As I reflect on the quantum in terms of dollars to make that happen, I reflect on things like we employed an additional staff member to perform the role of what we called a family support worker in order to work and do things with families, not do things to families. I suspect that cost the school around \$25,000. We executed a strategy—what we would call our Stronger Smarter strategy—over a period of four years, so \$100,000 for that kind of position over four years. As part of the process we offered extrinsic rewards, and I will talk about the intrinsic rewards later on, but basically it was a cost of a bus to run children at the end of the term to a fancy restaurant in Kingaroy called 'McSomething-or-Other' and that probably cost us \$1,000 a term; over a year, \$4,000; over four years, \$16,000. On top of that we offered some extrinsic rewards for parents who were doing the Brisbane

right thing and we offered extrinsic rewards every week to children who were attending. I think over four years the overall cost of that was probably \$8,000 to \$12,000 by the time we bought things like pushbikes for kids, small rewards, flowers for parents whose children had zero days away.

The quantum of that, in my estimation, is roughly \$128,000 over four years to get a shift in attendance from 62 to 94 per cent without touching people's welfare payments. I compare that with earlier transcripts from Mr David Glasgow where the investment was not \$128,000, but \$12 million. I will say that again: over four years for that return we invested probably \$128,000 compared to \$12 million talked about in the FRC processes. I think that is substantial and it is worth reflecting on. I also note from earlier transcripts that Mr Glasgow talked about some improvements. With an investment of \$12 million you would expect to see some improvements. He noted that Coen was achieving school attendance well into 90 per cent. That is a good thing. It is also worth noting that Coen was a school that was achieving above 90 per cent even before this strategy came along. So there is room to question the merits of those sorts of approaches.

Let me shift and talk about how we set about improving attendance at Cherbourg school. At this point let me invite you to jump in at any stage and ask questions. I started there in August 1998. Cherbourg was a community that had challenges. When I listen to the sorts of reasons and excuses when people talk about the community complexities that make improving attendance in an Aboriginal community difficult—all of the kinds of excuses that people talk about and mention about communities and households today are all of the kinds of complexities that existed in Cherbourg. As I said earlier, we just had to set about making a school that kids wanted to turn up to.

I do not accept for any moment that the level of community complexity in Aboriginal communities makes it impossible to improve attendance at schools. In fact, in a strange kind of way I think it creates an opportunity for schools to capitalise on. Of course, it would be nice if every household in every Aboriginal community had a circumstance where the only choice the child had to make was whether to have muesli or cornflakes or porridge for breakfast and they did not have the noise that exists in some communities, but that is not the case. My frustration in my conversations with educators from right around the country is when I listen to people describe the complexity of community I hear people say to me there is a lot of drinking and violence and sexual abuse and gambling in the community so that makes it difficult to get kids to engage with schooling. Now, there is some merit in that, but when we look at things like school attendance I think the real question is this: if children are making the choice to locate themselves in communities amongst sexual abuse, domestic violence and alcoholism and those sorts of things, then I think what the hell does that say about our school environments if children choose to locate themselves amongst that rather than this? If these dramatic complexities in communities are as true as we can so easily describe them, then I think it does not take much to provide an environment that is better than that, where there is a sense of functionality for at least six hours in their lives, where there is a positive sense of love, where their environment is predictable, where they know that if they do the right thing or do positive things they will get rewarded for that, where they know that if they do the wrong thing there will be consequences. It is this kind of thinking that really formed the basis of how we went from 62 to 94 per cent without cutting anybody's welfare payments at Cherbourg.

We do talk about the Stronger Smarter approach, and I will explain that in an overarching philosophical sense and then I will get down to the specifics of what that actually looks like and what that actually means on a day-to-day and a week-to-week basis. When we talk about the Stronger Smarter approach, we talk about nurturing and embracing a positive sense of Aboriginal student identity as opposed to a school environment that is designed to nurture the victim status of Aboriginal children or a school environment that is designed to collude with a negative stereotype of Aboriginal children as underachievers or underperforming. So it is a school environment with classrooms and people around who are continually asking children and challenging them to be the best that they can be rather than colluding with a negative stereotype. It is about embracing positive community leadership as opposed to embracing that kind of Aboriginal community leadership that is about booting the victims with limited understanding of what is really going on in terms of the complexity of those families and as opposed to embracing a kind of leadership that is about nurturing victim status and trying to get school leadership to feel sorry for Aboriginal children and lower the bar for them. This is about embracing positive community leadership that is prepared to challenge children and to challenge families to enable children to be the best that they can be.

The other pillar of the Stronger Smarter approach is about high expectations and relationships in which teachers, school principals and parents all have the courage within the confines of our relationship to be firm and fair, where we understand very well the need for

compassion when that is required but we also understand the need for courage to challenge and maybe wheel out the stick when that is required as well. That is the kind of overarching philosophical basis.

When I started at Cherbourg school, all of the things I saw were all of the things that you probably know about in terms of complexity of community and levels of disengagement from school. My frustration when I would talk to people about why kids were not engaging was getting responses where people were saying, 'Well, the parents don't value education, the community doesn't value education and the kids don't value education,' when in reality, if we were honest and reflected on what our school looked like, we actually had nothing that was particularly worth valuing. The question to me was: why would kids turn up to this school when all they are doing is photocopied worksheets or colouring in or getting into an environment where kids are swearing at teachers and nobody is ever challenging that kind of behaviour? Why would kids turn up to that sort of environment? So we had to grapple with these sorts of hard questions.

It meant having hard conversations with teachers and it meant having hard conversations with parents, because I had come to this challenge with a very personal kind of view and I wanted people to share this view, and that is to understand a couple of things that were really important: obviously the Stronger Smarter approach, but also to understand that we were the ones who were being paid to be in this relationship. As an Aboriginal man it bothers me how easily lots of people could say we are seeing taxpayers' money being wasted in Aboriginal communities. But the truth is we were being paid taxpayers dollars to be teachers in this community and so it was incumbent upon us to ask ourselves the questions about what we needed to do to effect change and that if a child is disengaging from school and if a parent is disengaging from school then that is a reflection on us because we are in that relationship—we are paid to be in that relationship—and it is incumbent upon us to reflect honestly and robustly on the things that we need to change.

So with that approach I think we did have some hard conversations with teachers. We assembled a new staff team, effectively. Many of you are familiar with the story so I will not indulge on the front end of it. Rather, I will come to talking specifically about attendance. In conversations with teachers I made it very clear to them: 'As the principal I will be having conversations with you about students disengaging from school and if attendance is low for particular children or particular family groups I am going to ask you what it is that you are doing that might be contributing to their disengagement or their underperformance and asking you what are the things that you think you can change. I will be asking you as the teacher what it is about the learning experiences that make a child decide whether or not they want to turn up the next day or whether or not they couldn't be bothered coming to school, and asking you whether, if you were a 10-year-old child, you would turn up to do photocopied worksheets or colouring in or those sorts of things or you would turn up to an environment that was intellectually stimulating.'

I say this to give you an insight into the sorts of conversations that occurred. It is worth making the point that, even in the confines of these sorts of conversations, these conversations cost nothing. The way I looked at this was this was just me doing my job and expecting teachers to do their job. At no point had we invested or come in over the top to tell teachers what they should be saying or those things. At Cherbourg, like in any community school—like in any school, for that matter—I watched probably three groups of children. There was quite a hard-core group that was disengaged. Some would describe them in communities as hard-headed, with really hard-core sorts of behaviour. There was a big chunk of children in the middle that were kind of drawn to behaving in that sort of way because it appeared that that is where the rewards were, that there were more incentives to behave in that kind of hard-core way because if you did that you might find yourself on a trip to the Gold Coast or something like that. There was limited consequence. In fact, the consequences—well, there weren't consequences; there were rewards. The behaviour was so impressive that it kind of made things look hopeless and if you didn't come to the circumstance with a strength based approach and a belief that something good exists in Aboriginal communities then you might have not seen this other group of children who actually were turning up more than 90 per cent of the time, who actually were being respectful of the teachers and were being respectful of their parents and so we thought that is the kind of strong and smart behaviour that we talk about so why not set about rewarding that and reinforcing that and so that is what we did.

When I talk about the extrinsic rewards, we got children to measure their own attendance at school. At the end of the week I would have a big board at the front of the school assembly and each class would say the number of unexplained absences and I would write them down so that everybody in the school could see. The challenge for each class was to get their number the lowest. We started just with unexplained absences. The class that had the lowest score would get a reward.

There would be some class party or they would all get a free ice block or packet of chips, but they would have to come at three o'clock on Friday to collect it. It was a very simple strategy that cost very little. With that strategy alone, targeting initially unexplained absences, we said, 'There are rewards for the classes with the lowest number of unexplained absences so let us be the best, but the way that you bring your unexplained absences down is by turning up to school in the first place and by bringing your notes back to explain why you were away.' With that strategy, which we started in term 3 of 2000, the number of unexplained absences for that term was, I think, 1,185. That is a lot. By term 4 of 2001 we reduced that number of unexplained absences from 1,185 down to 68.5. That is a 94 per cent reduction within 18 months.

Having done that, we kept raising the bar and said, 'Okay, we will still talk about unexplained absences, because we are required to do so, but let us talk about real attendance and let us offer rewards for kids who are turning up.' So, if you have got less than five days away for the term then you are on the bus at the end of the term. I would have the bus waiting out the front of the school so that everybody could see in front of everybody else these kids going on to collect their reward. There was this kind of obvious connection between the kids who were turning up every day and that reward of driving off on the bus at the end of the term but also picking up the week-to-week rewards.

It is one thing to get kids to turn up to school, but it is another thing to keep kids at school. In my conversations with teachers I said, 'I am happy to get out and chase families and talk to the council about working in partnership with us to get kids to school, but you have to guarantee me that your classrooms are worth turning up to and worth staying in for the whole day.' We had lots of conversations and lots of honest reflections about the quality of our classrooms and whether or not the schools were worth turning up to.

Again, I just reflect momentarily on some of the challenges that kids face and some of their complex home lives. I watch kids from homes that you do not like to reflect on. Kids from those households, dramatically complex households, turned up to school at 7.30 in the morning because they liked what was happening at school. They knew that they would get breakfast there. They knew that it was a positive place in their lives. It is against that background that I reject absolutely this notion that we somehow have to smash parents around or make their lives even more difficult in terms of getting kids to turn up to school.

I understand, however, that that is politically interesting or a politically sexy kind of initiative. To the broader public it looks like we are engaging in action. But the reality is, as you can see, that that is \$12 million to effect changes and we are still wondering what is actually happening versus \$128,000 and there has been a seismic shift.

I want to make the point that there is a lot of talk about extrinsic rewards, but every day, at every moment possible, we were reminding kids of the intrinsic rewards of turning up to school and engaging in school. Teachers, Aboriginal teacher aides, the groundsman, the tuckshop lady were talking to kids about why it is so important that they turn up to school and how great it is that are getting stronger and smarter. On small assemblies I would say to the better kids, 'Remember what it was like when I first came here? We had grade 7 kids standing out the front trying to read this book, but the teacher was standing behind telling them the words on the page and then they would say them. Have a look today, two years later. Here we are with grade 1 kids with the same book. They are standing there and the teacher is up the back. They are reading it by themselves. Can you not feel that we are getting stronger and smarter? Isn't that fantastic?'

It is important to note that we took every opportunity to remind kids of the intrinsic rewards of turning up to school—day in, day out. We had certainly stimulated that intrinsic motivator within kids. It is that which makes this kind of approach more sustainable.

Let me reflect, then, on the cutting welfare payments approach or the FRC approach that cost \$12 million compared to \$128,000. I have mentioned this publicly on many occasions. Even if that big-stick, FRC approach fails, it fails. But if it succeeds it still fails because this approach can never be extrapolated. We can never sustain investment to that level. I guess my point is that we do not actually need to.

I will pull up there. I imagine that you will have some questions for me. If I can guide you in terms of the sorts of questions that all of us should be asking as policymakers, as politicians, as taxpayers, they should be: are these approaches honourable or do they actually undermine the humanity of fellow Queenslanders or fellow Australians; are they effective—I think I have made my view clear on whether or not I think these are effective; are these approaches sustainable; and can they be extrapolated? With the Stronger Smarter approach I take very seriously the notion of a

strength based approach. That is not only a strength based approach in terms of Aboriginal people in Aboriginal communities but also a strength based approach in terms of the existing structures that are in place.

I am not an advocate of creating quasi-bureaucracies to sit on top and to do the job that the existing bureaucracy is supposed to do in the first place. I would never have a big, fat quasi-bureaucracy sitting in Cairns to fly in and out of the cape to do the job that the existing bureaucracy is doing because it is not sustainable. It is grossly ineffective, grossly expensive and is proving not to work particularly well. I would rather look at the existing structures and ask what is good and what needs to be changed and what needs to be challenged around those measures? I welcome any questions from you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Sarra. That was fascinating. I commend you for the effort and the achievement that you made. I am particularly interested in the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. It is the strength of that intrinsic development that is most important. It is wonderful to get the gifts, as it were, but once life moves away from that, what is left? Is there anything more you would like to say to that end, because I suppose once we have got them to school—that deals with absenteeism—there is a carrot? Is that going to develop them in terms of going into the broader world?

Dr Sarra: I think it is right that you would hone in on that to underline the power of that kind of intrinsic shift in individuals and that intrinsic shift in communities. Throughout my career I have been determined to stick up for my people and also stick up for my profession and do my best to ensure both are honoured.

My belief is that the teaching workforce right across Australia has the capacity to make the shift that is required, but I am not convinced that we actually understand that we have that capacity. If I could just come back to the notion of the extrinsic reward, it is so fundamentally important to the notion of sustainability. As you rightly point out, when you take the extrinsic rewards away people are left to question what incentives exist. I think this is something that would raise the interest of white Queenslanders who are taxpayers because they, as much as Aboriginal taxpayers, want to see value for money. We have to find mechanisms that are sustainable.

CHAIR: The problems that you have outlined in the communities occur right across the broader community. We are looking at a specific community there. Those issues are right across the broader community. It would probably be fair to say that that is growing. It definitely is a social issue. I think there are lots of questions.

Mr BENNETT: Good morning, good to see you again, Dr Sarra. Interestingly, I actually built some facilities in your old community. I built the hospital and a couple of homes there so I understand Cherbourg. Do we have some statistics on how Cherbourg is performing now since your exit from there? Are there any other examples of where Stronger Smarter has been successful in other school environments in Queensland?

Dr Sarra: Sure. In the interests of complete honesty, there was some slippage when I left Cherbourg school. I can tell you with great conviction that it is never going back to where it was before I left there. Cherbourg school is going quite well today under the leadership of Peter Sansby, who went to Kepnock State High School with me. For all intents and purposes, it looks like a normal school these days. We cannot say that that was the case in the past. The second part of your question was—

Mr BENNETT: Are there any other schools having success with this current model? I see you are doing some remote area engagement now as well. I am curious about other schools that are seeing some success.

Dr Sarra: When I left Cherbourg school we set up the Stronger Smarter Institute. Since then we have been able to work with more than 400 schools across Australia to get them to understand the Stronger Smarter approach. There are lots of examples within those schools that have picked up the Stronger Smarter approach and executed it with great success.

Today I am working with federal Minister Nigel Scullion on the remote school attendance strategy. That will involve me working more directly with 10 schools. I can say to each of you with confidence that if those principals and community leaders engage the Stronger Smarter approach and they execute the things that we tell them to do then they will achieve success. I say that with confidence. The Stronger Smarter approach has been demonstrated to be sustainable beyond Cherbourg school into other communities and extrapolatable, if that is a word.

Mr BENNETT: You can use that.

Dr Sarra: Applied in other places.

Dr LYNHAM: That is extremely inspirational and congratulations on what you have achieved. I would just like to comment that with our committee meetings we have discovered that there have been other schools that have made the same journey as you, using you as inspiration. Other people have accidentally found that same pathway themselves. I think your approach is getting some momentum through you and through accident as well. After Madam Chair's observation, is there a direct correlation with your approach and job or tertiary educational outcomes?

Dr Sarra: Off the top of my head, Dr Lynham, I cannot give you an explicit answer in relation to that. I know when Ian Mackie was running the Western Cape College, for instance—again, with what he would describe and what I would describe as the Stronger Smarter approach—he devised a kind of strategy that was known as guaranteed service outcomes. That is, if an Indigenous child finished year 12 then the school's commitment was to guarantee them a job. I think this was a bold yet effective initiative, because I think he was successful in achieving that sort of outcome. It was a kind of rhetoric that was espoused among the school, but that rhetoric prompted people to have to convert that to a reality. People in the schools had to have conversations with the local community and industry people to ensure that those kids would go on a trajectory that saw them at the end of year 12 into a job, a training opportunity or a tertiary opportunity. In the broader context, it is difficult to give you figures off the top of my head.

Mr BOOTHMAN: Thank you for coming in today. It is very interesting hearing from you. You briefly touched on positive community leadership. Could you elaborate on that? Obviously, the school did take up a certain role in the leadership of the community? Could you elaborate on what you guys actually did?

Dr Sarra: Absolutely. Again it was necessary to reflect on the existing structure and the existing mechanisms that were in the school. I was in pretty robust conversations with teachers about their role in either contributing to underachievement and disengagement from school or not. They were hard conversations. Let me let you in on some of those conversations. Teachers were saying to me, 'Yes, you are pushing us and you want these improved results, but kids are sitting there starving in the classroom. So it is hard to get these learning outcomes that you are after.' I had always been philosophically opposed to the notion of breakfast programs, but against that background I was persuaded that having a breakfast program in the school would be a good thing. We need to get the community involved in the delivery of that. Kids could be sitting in the morning sessions with at least some toast and vegemite or milo in their belly. They would be better ready for learning. The other reason it was good was that kids had a reason to turn up to school: so that they could get a feed. So while they were there, then you could easily get them to transition into classrooms.

The other part of the conversation with teachers was that kids who are re-engaging with schooling come with issues that are too complex to list. Through good partnerships with the Cherbourg council I had a circumstance in which in each classroom I had one teacher and two Aboriginal teacher aids, so that made inside the walls of the classroom quite functional with three adults in the classroom. If I can just reflect for a moment: imagine how many people I could employ in a school with \$12 million. But I digress.

So there were three adults in the classroom and in addition to that—this is where we brought in extra help—I employed a local community person to be what we called the family support worker, who probably cost us \$25,000 a year. The purpose of that was so that the three adults in the classroom could get on with the business of teaching and learning. There was one elder in the community, Mrs Long, so I had a very strong Aboriginal woman who was a female on staff and we just changed her role to family support worker. I recruited an Aboriginal man, and those two worked in partnership with me to mop up any of those kinds of family complexities that might find their way into the classroom and create problems there. The idea was that we would work as a team to mop up any of the outside stuff so that it did not get in and interfere with the teaching and learning processes.

More generally—and I have written about this in a Griffith REVIEW Annual Lecture, if you would care to check it out—there is a kind of Aboriginal leadership that is intent on wallowing in victim status. I have seen lots of examples of this where, if kids are challenged or kids are not turning up to school, the school leader in partnership with that kind of leadership has actually said, 'All right, if the kids cannot turn up at nine o'clock in the morning, let's just make the start time 10 o'clock.' Now, one might argue that that is being culturally sensitive, but I would argue to you very strongly that that is collusion with victim status and low expectations.

There is another kind of Aboriginal leadership that I typecast as 'booting the victim' type leadership, and that is a kind of leadership that sinks the boot into fellow community members and highlights or amplifies the things that are wrong with the community and the problems that exist

without reflecting on the strengths of community. There are rewards for doing that or engaging in that kind of leadership, and we have seen that. If I wanted to attract tens of millions of dollars in government funding, then I would just sink the boot into my own community and I would attract handsome rewards for that kind of approach. But ultimately it does not work because it is a circumstance in which I might be telling you as a politician the things that you might like to hear, rather than the things that you actually need to hear.

I will not pretend for a moment that it is not hard to make the changes that we talked about to get from 62 to 94 per cent. In my conversations with educators right across Australia, the one thing that does not change in this is that it is hard work. It is really hard work to do that. The formula in terms of approaching success is very, very simple. It is around those things that I talked about: positive community culture, positive identity, embracing positive community leadership and high-expectations relationships. The formula is very simple but the work is very, very hard.

CHAIR: Dr Sarra, I realise this is more anecdotal but it was an issue that was brought up at a previous visit. Those children who you manage to engage back into school, amongst those in between the 60 and 90 per cent would be older students who may not have been to school before and their behaviour was probably on that higher scale that you mentioned earlier. Would you say that there were successes with those children? If they are 10 or 11 years old with no literacy skills, it must be very difficult to try to engage them from the beginning. Did you have specific strategies that you were able to put in place to make successes of those children that you did bring in with the improved attendance rate? Once you got them there, how did you go from there?

Dr Sarra: That is an excellent question and one that I think is often overlooked. We had very deliberate strategies around how to manage behaviour and manage processes for kids who had been chronically disengaged. In my time, the school enrolment in 1998 when I arrived there from grade 1 to grade 7 was 89 children; when I left in 2005 the school enrolment from grade 1 to grade 7 was 165. We went close to doubling the enrolments but, as you rightly point out, this creates challenges.

The more explicit strategy we devised for that was—and this is a crude kind of way to explain it—we basically streamed kids. When you re-engage kids in the lower end—1, 2, 3—it is often easy to re-engage them because they are smaller kids and they are more controllable. That is not in every case, though; I am getting some terrible flashbacks right now. But for kids from grades 4, 5, 6 and 7 we created a kind of stream of kids to the side so that their behaviour did not contaminate the classrooms of the existing classes. I tried as much as possible to have straight year levels so I would have 4, 5, 6, 7, but to the side of that I had a 5, 6, 7 composite that probably consisted of about 15 kids. You could never let that class number get too high, and it always needed a special kind of teacher with lots of patience to be able to work with a modified curriculum for those kids. Sometimes the numbers would be 15 to 20 kids, and so with that type of arrangement we had to be honest with parents and say, 'Look, I don't know that I can promise you that we can deliver a strong and smart kind of student outcome while they are in this kind of arrangement because it is high needs. We have kids at all different levels and we have a person who is doing their best, but we will do the best. The goal for this class is to get these kids to understand and get reskilled, if you like, in school skills and basic literacy and numeracy skills so that they can transition from this class into what you would call a mainstream kind of class. That should be the aspiration, but we cannot promise you that. When your kids are in this class, we will work very hard with them to enable their capacity to jump across into one of the regular schools, because this is where the Stronger Smarter future is delivered. When they demonstrate to me and to us, and we agree that they are confident enough and competent enough at sitting at a desk and engaging in group activities with other kids without distracting them or whatever, then we will transition them out of there into there.' So that is how we dealt with that circumstance.

Some schools will say, 'We do not have the resources.' Neither did we. We just had to have a look at the existing resources, and if that was a priority then we had to reallocate resources so that a teacher and two teacher aides could work with that class.

CHAIR: Are you aware of successes? Were there successes? Not everything is a success.

Dr Sarra: Yes, we had lots of kids transitioning out of that class into there. But when I reflect, I watched the curriculum change for these guys. There were kids who were in this class who were performing at the same level as kids from this class but with a more individualised kind of approach. Whilst they might be performing academically at the same level, socially they were not suited to that kind of mainstream environment.

CHAIR: Your school was a primary school. Did they mainstream beyond the community for—

Dr Sarra: When they left Cherbourg school they went to Murgon high school.

CHAIR: During the time you were there, did you notice better engagement when those children went to the high school? That is where the big challenge would have been for them.

Dr Sarra: Look, it was a frustrating thing to observe. Lots of people ask me about the extent to which the strong and smart philosophy or Stronger Smarter approach was sustained for those individual kids into high school, but there was a different mindset in the high school about Aboriginal kids from Cherbourg. I was confident that when we sent kids from Cherbourg into Murgon to start grade 8 they were ready to start grade 8. There were questions about whether that school environment was ready to believe or embrace them as kids who were ready to start grade 8, and so I reflect on circumstances. The way I watched kids get accused of cheating on their history test because they were not expected to do so well and those kinds of things is not so nice, but I know that they were ready and they were literate.

There were some questions about that. Of course there are questions about the Stronger Smarter approach, as there should be, but more questions about the school environment that they were going into. Let me give you an example which is a useful insight. When I would talk to people in the high school, what I suggested is that they should create a strong and smart strand for kids that was a kind of an excellence program for Aboriginal kids coming out of Cherbourg or Aboriginal kids from Murgon to go into that excellence stream. The argument I got in response to that was, 'That would be apartheid if you create a separate thing.' Yet at the same time what was happening was they had set up an annexe program that was basically streaming kids to the side—they were all Aboriginal kids in that class—but you had the situation where, the moment it got difficult or behaviour was different, they took them out of the mainstream classes and put them in this annexe program, which effectively is an apartheid kind of circumstance. So we can run a separate stream of schooling or school programming for the purposes of colluding with the stereotype, but we cannot get in our heads or in our psyche the notion of streaming or running a separate program for the pursuit of excellence for Aboriginal children. I think that is a great shame, because we would be better off if we could understand this. To effect that kind of psychological shift costs nothing, yet the returns are tremendous.

Dr LYNHAM: Has there been any suggestion of putting your program into secondary schools?

Dr Sarra: Yes, we have worked with a lot of secondary schools right across Australia and we have seen positive results. I always have a sense of reluctance about claiming the glory for a shift in school outcomes, whether it is attendance or retention. In some schools that we have worked with they have gone from zero per cent retention of Aboriginal children to year 12 to 100 per cent within two years. That is pretty significant. But I know how hard it is to achieve that, so I am reluctant to come in and claim the glory for somebody else's hard work. I can say to you with confidence that we have worked with those schools to get them to understand the philosophical approach, but there are the people on the ground who work their guts out to deliver those outcomes. I am not suggesting for a moment that they get those outcomes because they do the Stronger Smarter program. There are any numbers of variables that create that cultural shift.

Dr LYNHAM: We understand that the groundwork is done in the primary school area, but to translate that into secondary schools, how does your program work? A simple rewards based system does not work in secondary schools as it does in primary schools, so what sort of programs do you implement in secondary schools?

Dr Sarra: Basically, we run leadership programs with schools right across Australia. The idea of that is we get school leaders and community leaders in the room at the same time and we get them to reflect on their role and to own it. Then they make the decisions about whether their rhetoric about high expectations or high-expectations relationships matches their day-to-day reality as educators in schools and whether or not their school culture or their classroom culture is designed to nurture or collude with victim status or a negative stereotype, or whether it is about the pursuit of what I would call a Stronger Smarter student identity. That is the overarching philosophical approach.

For people in high schools it is up to them to make the decision, and I would encourage principals in those circumstances to have a look at things like retention rates and scrutinise the data. If the retention of Aboriginal children from year 8 to year 12 is less than 20 per cent, then that would signal to me that you might talk about high expectations but it is not actually being delivered. You might talk about nurturing a positive sense of identity, but the data is telling me that your school is designed to see kids drop out by the middle of year 9 and it does not seem that anybody is asking serious questions about that. It is only when you ask serious questions about that that you become committed to doing some things differently.

Dr LYNHAM: So one of the outcome factors you are using is retention rates. Are there any other outcome factors you are measuring—

Dr Sarra: It could be any, and again it is not so straightforward. It could be literacy, numeracy outcomes, it could be levels of parenting engagement—it could be any range of mechanisms.

CHAIR: I am sure we could stay chatting for a lot longer because your presentation has been really impressive; however, our time has come to an end. I am sorry; it does bring the briefing to a close. Dr Sarra and Ms Adamson, thank you so much for your time. It certainly has been extremely worthwhile.

Anyone who is interested in receiving updates about our work, including, in due course, our review of student attendance rates, should subscribe to the committee's email subscription list via the Queensland parliament's website.

Proceedings suspended from 10.31 am to 10.48 am

O'TOOLE, Ms Cathy, Chief Executive Officer, Supported Options in Lifestyle and Access Services Inc.

CHAIR: We are now joined via teleconference by Ms Cathy O'Toole, Chief Executive Officer, Supported Options in Lifestyle and Access Services. For those who were not at the earlier briefing, I remind everyone present to turn off their mobile phones or set them to silent. Also, any media recording these proceedings are to adhere to the committee's endorsed media guidelines. Copies of the guidelines can be provided by secretariat staff.

This briefing is being broadcast live via the Queensland parliament website. Additionally, it is being recorded and transcribed by Hansard. Once available, the transcript will be published on the committee's webpage. I also remind everyone that this briefing is a formal process of the parliament and parliamentary privilege applies to all evidence presented. Any person intentionally misleading the committee is committing a serious offence.

I will now introduce the members of the Education and Innovation Committee. I am Rosemary Menkens, the member for Burdekin and the chair of this committee. With me are Mr Steve Bennett MP, the member for Burnett; Dr Anthony Lynham MP, the member for Stafford; Mr Mark Boothman MP, member for Albert; and Mr Neil Symes MP, member for Lytton. We do have two apologies from the committee this morning: Mr Ray Hopper, the deputy chair; and Mr Michael Latter, the member for Waterford.

Ms O'Toole, the committee is keen to learn from your experience about what the community can do to help re-engage students with school, particularly those young people with a mental illness. As you would appreciate, the focus of our inquiry is student attendance. Although this briefing is taking place in a public forum, you are able to request through me as chair that any material or information that you provide to the committee may be kept private and you may also object to particular questions. Additionally, you may wish to take questions on notice if you do not have the information at hand. The committee may also have questions. Perhaps you would like us to save those until the end of your briefing?

Ms O'Toole: However it falls is fine with me, thank you.

CHAIR: That is wonderful. Cathy, over to you and thank you for your attendance this morning.

Ms O'Toole: Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk with you about these critical issues that we are facing around Australia. For every young child that does not attend school, that creates a problem into their youth and then into their adulthood. It is certainly something that from a community perspective we should all be very concerned about. Just a little bit about SOLAS, I have prepared a paper and sent it down to the committee—you may not have it yet—

CHAIR: Yes, we do have it, thank you. We appreciate that. It certainly is most informative. Thank you, Cathy.

Ms O'Toole: I guess I could directly say that SOLAS works specifically in the area of mental health across a wide range of the community sector and a wide range of individuals in the community. I guess what we have noticed also is that, when working with adults, primarily we work between 18 and 64 and in some of our Commonwealth programs we work with them from 16 to 64 and older. What we are noticing obviously in those families with those adults is that there are children involved in those families and some of those children, as a result of what is happening in their family, are not attending school as regularly as they probably should be and certainly would benefit from.

I guess our experience shows us that fixing a problem of this nature really is about a whole-of-life approach and a whole-of-community approach. Whilst I note and have noted at various times we have introduced truancy officers and positions of similar names, they have not always been as successful as we might have hoped they would be. SOLAS works across the whole of—and I will use the Townsville Health and Hospital Service area for a geographical space. We have partner organisations in Ingham, Ayr, Charters Towers, Richmond and Hughenden. In Richmond and Hughenden we work specifically with the shire council because, as you can appreciate, once you start to move into remote Queensland and North Queensland there are not a lot of NGOs on the ground. We also have a service that we operate on Palm Island, which is teaching us lots of lessons about a holistic approach to life in Indigenous communities.

I guess from our perspective and what we observe, we would like to see probably a slightly different approach in how we could manage to get these young people to school. It probably starts at conception and looks to working with the people that we work with who are pregnant and working

around building some real intrinsic value into their family values in relation to education. That is something that I think we need to do to get education to be valued by the family. Children by and large do not have the capacity themselves in general, particularly in primary school and in the very early years, to get themselves up, get dressed and get to school. I am sure there are probably a few who do, but in the main that is not generally the case.

The programs that we work in cater, as I said, across quite a span of the community. So we are looking at people in housing support programs, which is funded through Queensland Health, which is a network program that assists people to live in the community independently. We also work in the area of transition from corrections. So we are working with people who are coming out of prison. Those people also have families and children. That is about giving them the opportunity to transition smoothly back into the community, to work with them to access job services to get into work and whatever other community organisations they may need to connect with. We also work in a program that helps us work with people who are in social housing to ensure that they do not become homeless at any cost. That is a really good program. That is funded by Queensland Health as well. That program enables us to work not just with individuals but with families because when a family lives in a home and if the tenant is going to lose tenancy as a result of some issues with their mental health, then the family will become homeless.

We have just recently moved into working with the culturally and linguistically diverse area. As you would be aware, Townsville is a refugee and migrant settlement city now so we have a lot of migrants and refugees coming into the community. We are able to work with a few people to provide personalised support and group support to assist them to integrate into the community and to find their way to living fulfilling and purposeful lives in our community. Of course, most of those people—great numbers of them—have families, and education is a key issue in that space. So with the Department of Communities and Child Safety and Disability Services we work with specific people who have actually acquired a disability as a result of their mental health situation. That is also focused on keeping people living in the community.

Then the federal money that we have for personal help with the mentors, we work in the towns of Charters Towers, Hughenden, Burdekin and Richmond areas. That is an excellent program because it is soft entry; it is the people in mental distress. So it is very easy for people to access a program like that. A number of those people have families as well and children. We have that program on Palm Island now. In real terms on Palm Island the vast majority of people would be eligible to access our service and many of those have children.

CHAIR: In terms of what you are outlining there, you would see families that are moving a lot, too. Palm Island would be different because the families are there. But in relation to those other families, there is probably movement in amongst housing and so forth. What barriers would you have seen there with the students re-engaging with school, particularly when families are moving?

Ms O'Toole: I think some of the barriers that people face initially in students not attending school—I am not so sure that it is completely geographically based. I think the primary issue is: what is the value of education for that family? Have the parents themselves been educated? We have a situation now in our country where we have young people who have never seen their fathers and mothers go to work.

CHAIR: That is right. That is exactly right.

Ms O'Toole: So that says to me that education is a critical issue there. I guess what we are seeing or what we would like to focus on is that the model we have put forward is actually based on the model that we use in recovery oriented practice in mental health, which puts the person at the centre of the issue. In that space what we are looking at with the person is a very—in terms of education, I will speak to that now—holistic approach. In order for children to go to school we need to understand what the barriers are for the family, the parents, their friends, relatives and extended family, because often that plays a massive role in what happens in family life. Then we have families who are completely isolated. So it depends on their environment.

Then we need to have some different connection with the school. I believe we need to work with people in a way that they can see there is real meaning and benefit for them engaging and collaborating with the school environment. They need to have some input that makes them feel valued as well. Then we also need to look at what people's social, emotional, spiritual or cultural wellbeing actually encapsulates for them. That is probably very relevant in the space of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and particularly people from CALD background.

We also have some of these issues popping up with our broader community, our other citizens that do not fall into that space because families in and of themselves have developed some cultural norms. Unfortunately, in some of these instances education does not figure very highly in

that space. Also if we have families where either the parents and/or the children have mental distress and physical poor health—and poverty plays a role in this as well—schooling becomes probably not high on the agenda when the family is trying to survive. How do we deal with that? I guess at the core of what we would like to see happen—and we believe we could contribute to in terms of the community sector in SOLAS’s perspective—is working with the family relationship so that we can incorporate the real value of education into the family’s value base.

CHAIR: Are you seeing any initiatives at the moment that may be starting to contribute towards that?

Ms O’Toole: In our sector I am not aware of any immediately. We have recognised this ourselves and we have really recognised that if we could get into this space working with families and children there would be great opportunities in doing this. I do know that the principal at Heatley primary school has done a wonderful job with her Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and other CALD families in creating family groups for Aboriginal people to come together and contribute in the same way that parents and citizens do. So she has done some really quite remarkable work in that space. I am also aware that Kirwan State High School does some very good work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership programs as well as for their other students. So I think there are some pockets of really good-quality work that is happening in schools where a partnership or a co-design of some service with a community organisation as I am suggesting could be really useful—that is, learning what the school is doing really well, having our input in supporting families to connect with schools and then looking at what is working and how we put that into other school education environments. I guess that that is what I would be saying there.

CHAIR: Because certainly it is the community support to assist in getting those children to school—family and community—isn’t it?

Ms O’Toole: It absolutely is, and the same thing applies. If a number of these families have some form of mental distress or post-traumatic stress—we are also a very high garrison city as you are aware—there are some issues in that space as well where families are struggling and it is really important. So everyone in the community has a responsibility for the mental health of the community. That is the theme that we work with. It is not just down to one or two people; it is the responsibility of the community. If we were to bring in some of these types of activities or models of being into education, we create a space also where we can start to reduce stigma around some of the barriers.

Mr SYMES: Ms O’Toole, in your experience what are the barriers to students re-engaging with schooling? When we were over on Palm Island I heard of an example of a student who had not been to school for many a year and at about the age of 15 or 16 was re-engaging with that schooling community. Do you have any research around why that might have occurred?

Ms O’Toole: I do not have any exact research that I could direct you to, but I think the issue is really around the capacity of the family to understand—in terms of Palm Island—the importance of why that child needs to go to school. One of the major issues on Palm Island is there are no jobs. It is really hard to live a life of choice, meaning, purpose and citizenship when you do not have an education, you are poor and you have no chance of a job. It is really difficult, so I think the link between education and work and employment is very strong, as you would all be very aware. But really we have to start in preschool and in kindergarten and in child-care centres. The movement nationally known as the Big Steps campaign talks about early childhood educators as opposed to day care. That language is so important because that is at a very vulnerable time. We need to build a love of learning with children and at the same time, paralleling with that, we need to get families to understand why education is so important.

I think some of the barriers are around really some simple notions of people not understanding why going to school is really important. Some of the barriers are there is no routine or organisation in the home that gets people up at the appropriate time. In a lot of families many schoolkids are hungry—these are really simple things—and they are going to school without breakfast. They cannot get to school. What is the transport? Then when they do get there, how do they meet the same demands as any other student in terms of how do they get their homework done? How do they get their projects done because then they are ostracised or they are different because they are not doing what is needed? How do we get the parents to parent-teacher interviews to learn about what is happening in the classroom and why their child needs someone to read with him or her? I do not think they are massively huge scientific areas; I think they are quite basic things that we as privileged citizens take for granted. They are the really simple barriers. That is what I would observe, particularly on Palm.

For new migrants coming to town, it is difficult when you look different and you speak a different language and you are not familiar with how the school works. I will give you an example. At Christmastime we had parcels here for the people that we work with and we had some left over, so we went to the Townsville Multicultural Support Group, which is now one of our consortia members, and said, 'We have these parcels of food. Would you like them for your people who are coming in to assist them?' They obviously welcomed them, and one of the very simple things was when they gave the parcel of food to one of the families they had no idea what Weet-Bix were or how to eat them. It is little things that we take for granted that are so important when you are in a new or different environment.

Dr LYNHAM: I have an interest specifically focusing on mental health issues. What is the main mental health issue you see, firstly, in the adults of these communities and, secondly, in the children of these communities? What is the main disorder they have or mental condition they have?

Ms O'Toole: What we are seeing across the sector that we work in is that probably the majority would be depression of varying degrees and anxiety. In children anxiety is very high. We do not work, as I said, specifically in the child and youth area, although we are very lucky and have welcomed a child and youth expert into our team recently. But depression seems very high. Drug and alcohol issues are massive issues.

Dr LYNHAM: Some of the Aboriginal communities in Western Australia have data showing that 50 per cent of births have foetal alcohol syndrome and obviously there are adults carrying this disorder into adult life and it is very difficult for them and children. Are there any specific interventions or any specific clues to deal with this problem both in children and adulthood with your organisation?

Ms O'Toole: In our organisation in the adult space we are probably what is termed non-clinical service delivery, so we work in very practical ways with people. We have a very strong peer support workforce here, so we have people working in peer support who have recovered from drug and alcohol addiction. They have been through the mill and rehabilitated and they are now educated members of our workforce. They contribute at every level in the organisation and they work really well one on one with people.

We deliver a training program called PeerZone that is delivered by our peer workforce, and that is really a process of getting people to understand who they are, what their barriers are and how they are going to work through those barriers. It is really very strength based. It is very deeply steeped in that the person is the expert in their life but that they need support from different aspects of the community and the health professions to get on with their life, so it is a much more empowering model.

We have done some training with staff on Palm Island with a program that has been developed by a clinical psychologist in Victoria called the Doug Dragster Program. It is an excellent program for young children, and the Heatley primary school has had a number of their teachers trained in using this. I can send you a copy of this material so you can have a look at it. It is a really excellent program to get kids engaged and to understand themselves and how they behave and how they can choose more useful behaviours than negative behaviours, so it is about education. It works with adults as well, particularly in the CALD and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, because it is extremely interactive and it is very graphical in that there are lots of pictorial tools.

Mr BENNETT: Thank you very much for your time, Ms O'Toole. Over the last couple of weeks we have been hearing about some different strategies in Indigenous communities and I suspect you may have or may not have seen some activities about income garnishing or some activities to try to help with the parents. Have you seen any evidence of that in particular communities you are working in and the success of that or otherwise?

Ms O'Toole: I have not seen any evidence here, although Palm Island has an alcohol management plan and it depends who you talk to as to how well that is working. My general view and our position here would be that we work with people in a way that does not punish but supports. If we never take a step and take a risk to give people some power over their own life to actually learn why it is important that they choose to buy food for their children and they put education as a priority and they get up early and they get their children ready, they feed them, they make them lunch and they take them to school—if we do not focus on building those skills and we continue to go down a punitive road where we take it off them until they learn how to do it, I do not really see any change occurring.

We work very strongly in that space of respecting the expertise that lies within the person and working with them to dig it out, to bring it to the surface so we can work with it and build on it, and that requires us to take a very 'person first' paradigm approach in the way we deliver services. So it is not about us plugging and paying our staff to go out and meet with people; we genuinely fit with people and we have that conversation—that is, what does your life look like, what would you like it to look like, where are the barriers, what can you do, what can we do? So we build those sorts of plans with people. That would work very well with family and children around an education space.

We engender hope and learning. If you have no hope and you have no capacity to learn anything, I just do not know how you get on with your life. So we look at what are the person's strengths. For example, I have worked in mental health for about 13 years in the non-clinical space and I have worked with people who are up all night on the computer and sleep all day but they manage to live their life quite well. They manage to pay their rent, buy their food and pay their bills between two and five o'clock, five days a week. That is an extraordinary feat. I cannot get my whole life organised in three hours. So what we do is we talk to people and ask, 'How do you manage to do that?' Instead of saying, 'You can't sleep all day,' we then work from there and say, 'How do we put those strategies that you're using that are working into your life more broadly?' I think that sort of approach will work. It is a hard slog and it is not going to happen overnight, but we have to start somewhere.

CHAIR: Cathy, are there any instances over the years that you would be aware of where you have worked with those families where students have been disengaged and by working with the families and giving them that community support those kids have actually started going back to school?

Ms O'Toole: We have had some people in our personal health and mentors program where the effort has been to support families and single parents by and large to make sure that their children go to school, but success comes about by the parent getting their life together first.

CHAIR: Yes, that would be it.

Ms O'Toole: That is the key.

CHAIR: For sure. Cathy, you have given us some great insight and I certainly commend you for the work that you are doing in your organisation. I know that you have another commitment shortly too, but is there anything else that you wanted to share with us?

Ms O'Toole: No. In terms of the model that I proposed on the last page of the documentation that I sent you, that is a very brief overview obviously.

CHAIR: Yes, we have a copy of that in front of us actually.

Ms O'Toole: I would really like to see the committee give some consideration around how we might be able to get the community working that does not normally work in the education space but plays a big role in people's lives—and this would be a little bit different—to bring community in with education. We would have some opportunities to talk about how we might be able to provide support. We also work very closely with Headspace, by the way. We go out there and work where we can to attract young people who may want our services who are 16 and over. So there is a lot of good clinical work going on, but I think there is a bit of a gap—I know there is a gap—in that youth practical support in terms of getting kids to school, getting them home, getting homework done, making sure parents are attending parent interviews—being the connector between the family and the school and providing that practical support to get that to happen. I guess that is what the last page is about, as well as working with the families to break down the barriers so that they can get education as a valued part of their family life.

CHAIR: For sure. There is a lot of strength in that. Cathy, thank you so much for your time. We really do appreciate it because I know that it has taken time out of your morning. This brings this briefing to a close. I particularly thank you, Ms O'Toole, for your time this morning. Anybody interested in receiving updates about our work, including in due course our review of student attendance rates, should subscribe to the committee's email subscription list via the Queensland parliament's website. I now declare the official part of this briefing closed.

Ms O'Toole: Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned at 11.15 am