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REPORT TO PARENTS ON THE STUDY OF THE ABORIGINAL SECONDARY GRANTS SCHEME

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In Volume 4 No. 4, we published extracts from "Access to Education: An Evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme". In this issue I have included the report on the evaluation which I wrote for the Aboriginal and Islander parents who participated in the evaluation program; all participating parents were posted a copy. I believe it is important for them to know the results of the research to which they contributed and which, indeed, would not have been possible without their willing co-operation. In this report to parents I have indicated the extent to which the recommendations have been implemented by the Australian Government ...B.H.W.

In 1974, the Government asked me if I would find out how well the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme was working, how the children were getting on, and how the parents felt about it. They also asked me to make any recommendations about the Scheme that I thought would make it better.

I worked with a group of people on this because we needed to talk to Aboriginal and Islander secondary students and their parents all round Australia. The map on the back page shows the towns that we visited. In our group, there were Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who talked to the students and their parents. The Aboriginal people were Mrs Mary King, Mrs Alice Stephan, Mrs Rita Huggins, Mrs Belle McLeod, Miss Marie Callope, Miss Edwina Merrypor and Miss Sue Chilly. The non-Aboriginal people were Mrs Pat Garcia, Mr Bob Lingard, Mr Richard Guy, Mrs Alice Fry, Mrs Marilyn Redlich, Mrs Jan Lord and myself.

You and your family were good enough to help us in this work. I want to tell you now some of the things we found out after talking to nearly 1,000 families, and some of the recommendations we made.

Are the Aboriginal and Islander students staying on longer at school?

More Aboriginal and Islander children are staying on longer

at secondary school now than there were before the Grant started. In 1970, there were only 1,351 Aboriginal and Islander students 15 years or older on the Grant - by 1974 there were 3,154. These figures are for the whole of Australia. The Grant has helped a lot of families to keep their children on at school, especially the older children.

More children now are finishing secondary school and getting good marks and going on to higher studies at University or College. More children, too, are going on to do courses like Business Studies. However, the number of Aboriginal and Islander students staying on to the top secondary grades is still very small, although it is getting bigger - there were 166 in the top secondary grades in 1970 but in 1974 there were 597. There is still a long way to go before Aboriginal and Islander students are reaching the top grades in the same numbers as non-Aboriginal students. Unless students reach the top grades of the secondary school and pass their exams well, they cannot go on to Universities or Colleges.

Are the students doing better at school?

Some Aboriginal and Islander students are doing very well with their school work but a lot are not doing as well as non-Aboriginal students.

School is a place for school work but it is also a place for sports and games and learning all sorts of things as well. Most schools have sports teams and many have lots of clubs - for photography, for debating, for acting, for music, for bush-walking, for stamp collecting and so on. We found that some Aboriginal and Islander students join in sports and games, but hardly any of them belong to any of the other special clubs. This means they do not give themselves the chance to learn a lot of new interests. This seems a pity. More should take part in other things as well as sports.

Some of the students seem very happy with school and teachers, but a few are unhappy. Most are in between - they do not seem either very happy or unhappy about school.

About a third of the students go to school every day or nearly every day. A lot of them miss about a day or so a month. There are some who miss a lot of school - about one out of every eight students. That is a worry, because schooling is something you have to keep at to do well.

How do the students feel about themselves?

In school, most of the students feel fairly happy about themselves.

Only about a quarter of them know any of their own Aboriginal or Islander language. The ones who do are generally, but not always, those who live away from the big cities.

About half the students like to describe themselves both as Aboriginal or Islander *and* as Australian. About a quarter of them like to think of themselves as Aboriginal or Islander. And about one out of every five like to describe themselves just as Australians.

The students like their own people's way of life and a very large number also like white people's way of life. There is a growing understanding of both cultures.

What do the parents and the students want?

About two out of every three parents think it would be a good idea for Aboriginal and Islander languages to be taught at secondary school, and even more would like to see the schools teach about the Aboriginal and Islander ways. The students are very like their parents in their feelings about this.

Most of the parents do want their children to do well at school. Over half of the parents we talked to want their children to do well at school. Over half of the parents we talked to want their children to do well at school so that they will get better jobs, or get somewhere, or have a better life than they themselves had. Three out of four parents think children should stay on at school after they are 15, and nearly half would like to see their children go right through to the top of the secondary school. But a lot of the parents don't really understand about the different courses in the secondary school, so it is hard for them to talk to the children. Often their children are in special classes that do not go right to the top of the secondary school, but the parents do not know this. So sometimes parents hope their children will go right to the top, without understanding they cannot, because of the classes they are in, or the marks they are getting.

The parents would like to see their children get good jobs - better jobs than they themselves have. Over half of them would like to see their children get jobs like being a skilled tradesman or a white collar worker or a job in one of the professions. Very, very few want their children to get labouring jobs. Some *will* be able to

get the good jobs their parents want for them, but some *will not*. It often happens that parents would like these good jobs for their children but the children are not doing well enough at school to be able to get those jobs. But unfortunately the parents do not know this.

It is true that jobs are harder to get in small towns, especially in some small towns. Some parents told us that it is much harder for young Aboriginal people to get jobs in those towns than white people. If the children are going to get the jobs that some of the parents want, they will need to move away from home. About half the parents would really like the children to get jobs in their own towns, but nearly a third of them would like to see their children go somewhere else to get jobs. The same is pretty much true for the children themselves when we asked them where they would like to get jobs.

What can be done to help the students?

The Secondary Grants are helping Aboriginal and Islander children to stay on at school but a lot of things will need to be done if most of them are going to do *well* at school. There are things parents must do. There are things the school must do. And change must also take place in the things that affect the whole family - housing and health and also the attitudes of some white people.

Changes that affect the whole family

Many families are very poor, their health is not good, and houses are small and overcrowded. It is harder for children in these conditions to do their homework and to learn well when they are at school. Also in some towns the white people and the Aboriginal people do not get on very well and there is trouble between the students. This also makes it very hard for the Aboriginal and Islander students to do as well as they can at school. If there are a lot of Aboriginal and Islander students in these towns, they sometimes spend all their time together. This is only natural, but sometimes these groups of students decide that school is not important. Then they do not try. They get bad marks and they leave school.

Unless all these changes that I have talked about that affect the whole family happen, a lot of Aboriginal and Islander children will not do well at school.

Changes in the schools

Teachers and their attitudes are very important to all children, and especially to Aboriginal and Islander children. The Departments

need to make sure that all the teachers in the school understand these children and appreciate them not only as children, but also as Aboriginal and Islander children. The teachers need to understand and appreciate the Aboriginal and Islander way of life.

The schools where there are a lot of Aboriginal and Islander children are generally a long way from the big towns, and teachers usually do not stay there very long. We have told the Education Departments that it is important for them to find a way to change this, so that teachers will stay in the schools longer and get to know the Aboriginal and Islander students and their families better. Students learn better from teachers they know well. Also, teachers must be trained to teach in Aboriginal and Islander schools. It is very important, too, for Aboriginal and Islander people to be trained as teachers. I think every secondary school where there are a lot of Aboriginal or Islander students should have an extra, special, teacher to help the students, and to talk with you. I have *recommended* that the Government think about this.

A lot of white teachers never see Aboriginal and Islander students or their families outside school hours. This makes it hard for them to help the children learn well.

These schools need, also, to have teachers who believe that Aboriginal and Islander children can learn well. If a teacher believes a child can learn, then he will try all sorts of ways of teaching him until he does learn. If a teacher thinks it will be hard for a child to learn, then he will not try so hard to see that the child learns well.

More Aboriginal and Islander people are needed to help in running the school - as teachers, as teacher-aides and as parents and other people who come in from the community to help with the school program. In many secondary schools, the Aboriginal and Islander students see only white teachers. It would help them to understand, to try hard and to learn, and to feel proud, if they had some of their own people there.

We need to look very hard at the school work - the subjects that are taught and the way that they are taught. Earlier I said that we found that many of you would like to see Aboriginal and Islander languages and ways taught at school. I agree with this - it would help your children to feel that it was their school as well as the white students' school. When history and music and art and all the other subjects are taught, teachers should remember that Aboriginal and Islander people are part of the Australian people and that their history, their art and music, their ways should be part of what is taught.

It is very important that schools help Aboriginal and Islander children to do well in their school subjects. The children and their parents want good education and good jobs, and for this to happen, children must go to school regularly and must learn their school work well. This must start right down in the primary school.

Things for Parents to do

Many parents want their children to do well at school, but they leave it all to the school. The school cannot do this job by itself, whether the students are Aboriginal or white. This is because parents are very important to children - more important than teachers - and children copy their parents. Parents need to talk to their children about school and to *listen* to them - then the children will know that their parents think school is important and more will try harder than they do now.

Also, a child cannot learn well at school if he does not have the right books, if he does not have enough sleep and good food. If he is sick a lot or has bad hearing, he will not be able to learn. If he does not go to school every day, it will be hard for him to learn. This is because teachers build lessons like a brick house - one brick on top of the other. If the child is away he misses out on some of the bricks and then the next lessons are too hard because he does not understand. Also, when teachers plan their lessons they work out what the children should know from being at school and from doing their homework. If the children don't do their homework properly they only half understand the work and then they cannot learn the new work. So it is important for parents to make sure that the children have a quiet place where they can do their homework, and can really think and study and learn. This is very hard to manage sometimes, but it is very necessary.

Parents need to understand about the school so that they can help their children, by showing interest in their school work and so that they can make sure the school helps their children. Parents need to go to the school and get to know the teachers. They need to talk to the teachers and find out what work the children are doing, how they are getting on with their school work, what homework they are supposed to do and so on. The teachers need to get to know and understand the parents and the students. I have *recommended* that certain Aboriginal or Islander people be specially selected and trained to be *community education advisers*. I think people like this could help you and your children. They would be able to help you work out ways you could do all these things - help you to get to know the school, and help you to find ways to help your children do well.

I have also *recommended* that the Government should appoint Aboriginal Student Officers. These people would help with the Secondary Grants Scheme itself.

The Secondary Grant

I *recommended* a number of changes to the Grant :

- .. that the money be increased;
- .. that the older students receive more than the younger ones;
- .. that the Textbook and Uniform allowance be called the Book and Clothing Allowance so that it can be used for school books and reference books and for sport clothes as well as school uniforms;
- .. that students changing schools be given special help.

The Government has done all these things.

I also *recommended* that the Education Officers who look after the Grant Scheme and work with you and your children should have special training. This is going to start to happen in January, 1977.

Some of your children who are on the Grant get special help from tutors. I *recommended* that we try to make this even better. The Government is now thinking about this.

When we talked with you, some of you believed that there ought to be a Means Test. This needs a lot of careful thought and I have *recommended* that the Government, in consultation with the Aboriginal and Islander people, think about this.

I have made a copy of all the recommendations and included them for you.

Once again, I would like to thank you all very much for the way you talked with us. I hope that, as a result, your children will get from school all those things that you would like.

Betty H. Watts

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If you know of any Aboriginal family who would like a copy of the above "Report to Parents", we have extra copies available.

The full Report, entitled "Access to Education - an Evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme" is available from the Australian Government Publishing Service.