



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY**

**12th Assembly**

**'Ice' Select Committee**

**Public Hearing Transcript**

11.45 am – 12.15 pm, Friday, 19 June 2015

Litchfield Room, Level 3, Parliament House

**Members:**

Mr Nathan Barrett, MLA, Chair, Member for Blain  
Ms Lauren Moss, MLA, Deputy Chair, Member for Casuarina  
Mr Francis Kurrupuwu, MLA, Member for Arafura  
Mr Gerry Wood, MLA, Member for Nelson

**Department of Education**

**Witnesses:**

Ken Davies: Chief Executive Officer  
Vicki Baylis: Executive Director School Support Services

**Mr CHAIR:** On behalf of the committee, I welcome to the table to give evidence to the committee from the Department of Education, Mr Ken Davies CEO, and Vicki Baylis, Executive Director School Support Services.

Thank you for coming before the committee. We appreciate you taking the time to speak to the committee and look forward to hearing from you today. This is a formal proceeding of the committee and the protection of parliamentary privilege and the obligation not to mislead the committee apply. This is a public hearing and is being webcast through the Assembly's website. A transcript will be made for use of the committee and may be put on the committee's website. If at any time during the hearing you are concerned that what you will say should not be made public, you may ask that the committee go into a closed session and take your evidence in private.

I will ask each witness to state their name for the record and the capacity in which they appear. I will then ask you to make a brief opening statement before proceeding to the committee's questions. Could you please each state your name and the capacity in which you are appearing.

**Mr DAVIES:** Ken Davies, Chief Executive, Department of Education.

**Ms BAYLIS:** Vicki Baylis, Executive Director School Support Services.

**Mr CHAIR:** Mr Davies, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr DAVIES:** Thanks, Chair. I welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee and explore in more detail the information provided in the Department of Education's submission, particularly the impact the abuse of substances such as methamphetamine has on students.

The Department of Education is responsible for the delivery of high-quality education programs from early childhood through to senior years in the Northern Territory, and our strategic vision is to support young Territorians to become confident and capable global citizens. A range of issues external to the department present challenges to the department's fulfilment of this vision in the Northern Territory. The impact of substance abuse on students and their families is one of these issues. International research on secondary impacts of methamphetamine abuse finds a devastating effect on individuals and communities through crime, unemployment and child neglect or abuse. Many of the children who are affected are exposed to a level of trauma that results in their reduced ability to regulate their emotions and impulses, and additionally, student exposure to substance abuse by parents and family members often results in low school readiness and engagement.

Research into the primary impacts of methamphetamine abuse shows impaired verbal learning, reduced motor speed and changes to areas of the brain associated with emotion and memory. This has clear consequences for learning capacity, and research suggests that student abuse of substances such as methamphetamine often leads to increased behavioural and learning needs and more frequent access to external professional support.

There are also implications for methamphetamine during pregnancy and breast feeding, with increased rates of premature delivery, placental abruption, small birth size, lethargy and heart and brain abnormalities. The impact of this within the classroom is likely to be similar to that of students presenting with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

In the context of the Territory, drug education is delivered in Northern Territory schools as part of the health and physical education learning area of the Northern Territory curriculum framework. For primary years through Year 8 the curriculum focuses on drug education is building resilience and minimising harm. From Year 9, while this focus continues, the curriculum additionally enables more specific education related to illicit and licit drugs with schools ensuring that drug information is relevant to the local school community.

Teachers are currently beginning to familiarise themselves with the draft Australian Curriculum Health and Physical Education learning area and the drug education components it provides. Further education programs delivered by external service providers in schools support the development of student knowledge and the skills to enhance health, safety and wellbeing.

The department delivers a variety of programs and initiatives that support students impacted by licit and illicit substances, including ice. Engagement programs support disengaged students and, in locations where the resource is available, schools engage strongly with youth engagement police officers. Referrals for students impacted by ice abuse are made through the case management of attendance officers and

other school based wellbeing officers and, where appropriate, mandatory reporting is actioned to the Department of Children and Families and the Northern Territory police.

Mandatory reporting training is delivered to school teaching staff twice a year, and we have also delivered a National Safe Schools Framework which provides counselling services to students, including responding to critical incidents which may relate to the use of ice by a student or a parent.

The use of drugs in school is not tolerated and any student caught with drugs in schools is suspended. Quantity of data from the system records shows that 57 students were involved in 71 amphetamine-related incidents in government schools that resulted in suspensions during 2014. These incidents occurred predominantly in urban locations. Importantly in this data, the term 'amphetamine' refers to a broad group of stimulants including ice, speed and base, ecstasy, synthetic amphetamines and prescription drugs. The department does not have identified the data that relates specifically to ice use in schools.

Since 2013, of 26 critical drug-related incidents that have occurred in our schools, cannabis was a major factor in 11 incidents and alcohol accounted for five drug-related incidents. In six instances the drug type was not specified, and the remaining four involved the use of other drugs. No critical incidents were specifically linked to the specific use of ice.

School council data reflects that since 21 July 2014, 74 cases in 14 schools were recorded where students presented with substance abuse issues from unspecified substances, either their own use or use by a family member. These schools were again predominantly in urban locations. These are students who presented to school counsellors for support.

To inform the department's submission, a survey of frontline officers, including principals, was conducted to determine whether ice has been an issue in their work. Resultant anecdotal evidence predominantly featured reports from third parties to teachers. Few staff had direct firsthand knowledge or evidence, although trauma was evident in some students. Key feedback from the consultation with schools showed school staff hearing of incidents related to methamphetamine abuse amongst students and families connected with their schools and an increase in aggressive and violent behaviour at school from students and parents from those families.

NT students' needs are best served through positive teachings related to building resilience and harm minimisation. The department has and will continue to develop policies and programs that help build resilience and reduce risk factors and augment protective behaviours.

Several jurisdictions, including Victoria and New Zealand, have held inquiries to determine the impacts of methamphetamine. Advice from these inquiries was that schools should provide general information about substance abuse with no specific reference to ice until middle to upper secondary years. The opinions of NT school-based staff, as expressed in the department's frontline officers' survey, indicate that many Northern Territory students need support and guidance in understanding what is happening when others around them are using ice, how to deal with the situation, including assistance in where to go for help, and understanding how to minimise harm in their home environments. This support should address the contrast between messages relayed in school drug education and those students receive outside school with continued exposure to adult substance misuse.

The department recognises that cooperative work between government and non-government agencies is critical to our response to issues related to the use of ice. Accurate across departmental data about families impacted by ice use would assist the department to gauge the prevalence and impact of ice in schools. This would enable opportunities to mitigate the risk increased by ice use and create stronger partnerships with the Northern Territory police, Department of Health and non-government organisations to deliver effective drug education programs including, wherever possible, developing strategies to improve access to youth engagement police officers. The collaboration would enhance referral options and better support students impacted by substance abuse. It would also increase information sharing and assist in informing and prioritising departmental efforts.

In summary, the department welcomes the inquiry and anticipates findings into the scale of the issue and the impact of methamphetamine abuse on our ability to provide quality education services to all Northern Territory students. We welcome further exploration into how we might respond to our submission today.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Davies. You made two points in your key findings of a need for better referral options and systems to community support groups and other government departments. Secondly, the

contrast between messages relayed in school drug education and those students receive outside school to continue exposure to adult substance misuse.

Hearing your summary, you are doing a lot of these things already. You have programs in place to address these things. We do not need to make a recommendation because you are doing it. Is there anything we can do to help you?

**Mr DAVIES:** I think one of the things - this cross-government coordination, I just heard the previous Chief Executive talking about that. The information sharing issue around families impacted by methamphetamine use would be really useful for us, Chair. At the moment it is anecdotal, it is school to school and it could be counsellor to counsellor. It is not being done in an organised and orderly way. There are issues around privacy and how we share data, but if specific families are impacted we only find out about that after issues arise. We are not necessarily forewarned.

**Ms BAYLIS:** I think Chair, the opportunity to understand more where students are impacted by the ongoing trauma and what they are witnessing is where we have a really critical role to play. The presenting behaviours at schools will be tiredness, absenteeism, lacking engagement, behavioural issues and violence. They can be presented behaviours not because of methamphetamine use at the home; they could be just naughty things happening. If we understand the context we are able to provide the appropriate and relevant counselling and support and information sharing is vital.

**Mr CHAIR:** In regard to the programs you are delivering, any assistance there regarding the reach scope effectiveness of those programs?

**Ms BAYLIS:** In our opinion, what we have to do is provide a deeper focus and more content-specific knowledge, in partnership with the Department of Health and the Northern Territory police, particularly for middle and senior secondary students around the contemporary and current issues to do with methamphetamine use. It is a quickly moving substance area and we need to maintain currency of information.

**Mr DAVIES:** Mr Chair, we cannot underestimate the importance of school nurses, school counsellors and the police youth engagement officers. Ensuring those positions are in situ and operating within our middle and senior schools is really imperative. There is a huge amount of value add that goes on there, and the youth engagement police officers also have operational responsibilities. If there was a strengthening in that area it would assist us.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Davies.

**Ms MOSS:** There was some work being done, probably a couple of years ago, around policy development for best practice drug education in schools given a number of services deliver such education. How is that work coming along? Do you find that has an impact on a more consistent evidence-based approach to drug and alcohol education delivery in schools or does more work need to be done?

**Ms BAYLIS:** The quality of the evidence base where we have external providers providing education is solid and sound because the framework around what we are asking them to bring to schools is there. Maintaining currency and contemporary knowledge of issues is always the critical part.

**Mr WOOD:** Thank you, Mr Davies, for your report. This might relate to some of the things you are dealing with, and I will quote from a letter. This letter is partially confidential so I will not name the school and will not deal with the confidential matters, but there are some basic issues that need looking at. The author talks about themes of under-resourcing and lack of information sharing between government agencies:

*While schools have mandatory reporting obligations for at risk students there is frustration, anger and despair for staff when these reports to DCF are not investigated and staff observe their students returning to dangerous and violent homes each day.*

Further down she says:

*Apart from these serious shortfalls in the child protection system, there are similar shortfalls in provision of mental health for those children who, despite reporting, are left in dangerous environments with regular abusive behaviour. Our extremely limited school-based counsellor resources do what they can to support students and implement and deliver comprehensive wellbeing*

*for students. However, there is a lack of other supporting health services in the rural area compared to those that are able to be utilised in urban areas.*

She goes on to mention severely limited services from headspace, a lack of public transport for young people who need to get help elsewhere, and she also mentions the constable attached to this school has responsibility for nine other schools and has also recently assisted in service provision to Palmerston schools due to the resignation of an officer.

There is a whole range of issues and I do not know if the department needs to be the lead in making sure those issues are taken up with relevant departments. Could you give me a response to that? They are saying there are some seriously under-resourced areas we need to look at if we are to make a difference and reduce the risk to students.

**Mr DAVIES:** It is a good question, member for Nelson, a good statement. There is no doubt it is easier to service a whole lot of issues when you are talking about a provincial context, so we are talking Darwin and Palmerston. The remoter it gets the less scale there is and so resources become more distributed.

I made the point about the school-based police officers and the youth engagement police program. There is no doubt that once you throw in operational duties, sometimes their attention in schools can be spread so widely that the impact you would have in getting information about what was going on in the community and dealing with particular families is not as good as it could be at the school level. It is also fair to say that when it comes to counselling services the focus around what goes on outside the school fence to support the school operation is a big challenge for schools. It is the same with attendance.

**Mr WOOD:** Does your department take up this issue that staff have reported, that one of the major dangers for students is they go home to an environment where drugs are being used. If it is being reported by the staff to DCF and not being investigated, do you see your department having a role to make sure there is information sharing between – not only information sharing, but there is action taken to make sure these students are safe?

**Mr DAVIES:** Absolutely. If there is mandatory reporting - I am going to a school in Alice Springs where there is not – sometimes it is a subjective assessment about whether or not it is an immediate need or - a teacher can be making a call around it and there might be other priorities, but certainly if schools are experiencing difficulties in getting the support they need they have regional offices which can interact and network with local authorities. I certainly interact with the Police Commissioner and Anne Bradford from the Department of Children and Families.

Have we had a broad discussion as a group of agencies about this issue? No, we have not, but we have had discussions recently around improving attendance, and we have certainly had discussions around how we work together on other issues not specifically related to ice. There are avenues for doing it, member for Nelson, but right now we have not had a specific discussion about information sharing on ice.

**Mr WOOD:** I am sure this information could be given to you. I know some years ago a school had a drug problem. It was not ice because it was not around then. The police took the dogs down and warned the kids. I am not sure why you always have to warn them, but I think they were basically trying to scare people.

You gave some fairly alarming statistics about how many times ice was used at schools. That would be concerning for me because obviously it is teaching other kids about it as well. Has the department looked at the possibility of bringing sniffer dogs into a school where they feel there is a need to do so? I believe the risk is higher than the issue of privacy when it comes to dealing with ice in schools.

**Mr DAVIES:** The answer right now is no, we have not organised that in a coordinated way. I am aware of a school that had sniffer dogs run through it a few years ago, member for Nelson. No, we have not specifically organised for drug searches in our schools.

**Mr WOOD:** Do you think it should be – if we regard ice as a very serious thing we need to tackle – I am not saying the one thing we should focus on is whether we have it at schools. It is a huge issue for the whole community, but should the department look at if it thinks it could be a risk to other students?

**Mr DAVIES:** Member for Nelson, absolutely. If we were aware there was a problem in a specific location that we needed to sort out not only would we have the police engaged, we would be working with our counsellors and home liaison officers to identify the sources as quickly as possible and nip it in the bud.

Most of the circumstances we have articulated are one-off incidents. They are not serial incidents where you have repeat offenders doing it again and again. Usually, once the police intervene young people get one hell of a fright and it does not reoccur in the school context. I cannot say it is not happening outside the school gate and that is the issue.

**Ms MOSS:** You talked a lot about the number of amphetamine-related suspensions. We know about incidences where families have – schools are aware of families where this is an issue. Are those particular families or students provided with referrals to external services, and in your view is there scope to improve and strengthen that process?

**Ms BAYLIS:** Certainly in the Darwin, Palmerston and rural areas we are aware that our counsellors are providing direct advice to different counselling services and support beyond. Some of that is being able to access help groups, access headspace and access different areas within Health that might be relevant and appropriate.

The range of service students need depends on where it is impacting on their life and it is about finding the appropriate service. If we are talking about young people whose parents are incarcerated, the type of support the family, the carer and the students need is often more complex than, 'I'm just going to talk about an ice issue or the trauma as a result'. We need to be mindful that the spread of services we are talking about is there.

As Mr Davies explained, as we get into our more regionalised and remote areas having the services to provide access to is thinner and less able to be accessed, and that presents us with a challenge. How we compensate for that in the Territory with particular issue - it is universal, and in our schools we also know we have the same issues around alcohol and other substance misuse that impact just as largely. However, providing service and access it just as complex.

**Mr DAVIES:** It is fair to say too, Mr Chair, in a remote context we do not suspend as many students. A lot of children will self-suspend and simply not front up. In regard to our data in a very remote context, it is probably not as robust as in an urban and regional sense. The children literally would not be there if they were in a family where this sort of experience was happening.

**Mr KURRUPUWU:** As a local member I get information quickly and hear a lot of young people, especially 14 or 15, are already talking about ice. I have never heard this before, but they are starting to talk about ice. How do we combat this issue?

**Mr DAVIES:** Member for Arafura, young people will catch on to this. We have the technology available now with mobile phones infrastructure, the Internet, where they can see this is starting to happen. We are saying a different approach needs to happen in our schools with younger children as against older children. For older children we need to have some explicit programs about the impact of ice, but we need to make sure it is focused around the age group you are talking about and not doing in an age frame where it encourages alarm and also encourages experimentation. We need a much more front-on addressing of the issues with the youth in our schools because of the harm it can cause, but we have to time it properly and it has to be done when the students are adolescents not when they are in the primary school. That is the advice we have.

**Mr WOOD:** Can I come back to the youth engagement police officers. I know the previous Police Commissioner had a different view on how these police officers who worked – they are headquartered at the local police station rather than at the school, but I think there is a different focus now. Have you had discussions with the new Police Commissioner about a new focus for youth engagement police officers?

**Mr DAVIES:** I have not had a direct discussion with the new Police Commissioner about the situation with police youth engagement officers. I was very aware and had discussions with the previous Commissioner about this issue. You will recall the old school-based police program and the drug and alcohol resistance education program. It is with some regret in our schools that the program has, over the years, become watered down. I understand there is a need for the police to have an operational role, but that program played a big role in drug education in schools and in resistance to the issues that were in the broader community. I am prepared as an outcome of this inquiry if that was one of the recommendations, to work with the Police Commissioner on how we could better support schools, what schools see in the context of drug education, and how to deal with drug issues that arise. Right now it is a different program to the old school-based policing program.

**Mr WOOD:** I remember the debate when it was all changed, but I would be happy to take that issue up with the committee.

**Ms MOSS:** I have another question, but I think we probably agree there will be a discussion on youth engagement police officers at some stage soon.

In regard to school counsellors, is there a requirement for school counsellors to refresh their knowledge and qualifications given there are new and emerging drugs and different trends at times?

**Ms BAYLIS:** Absolutely. The school counsellors have line management supervision by their school principals, but they have professional supervision by a senior counsellor who works in my area. The senior counsellor has a responsibility to look at trends in the data of the types of services being sought. They then bring the counsellors together on a term basis to undertake professional learning. They are in right now doing some of those things so they maintain their currency and knowledge. They are also expected, as school counsellors, to debrief professionally with the senior counsellor. That is the opportunity for them to access further knowledge and information, or additional support is sought and provided directly to help deal with cases that might be beyond the immediate experience or knowledge of the school counsellor in any given school.

**Ms MOSS:** Do they do any particular work with the broader wellbeing teams in schools?

**Ms BAYLISS:** They are interactive as part of the whole school wellbeing team. They are a member of that team and will work with the team around the information. Depending on who has that accountability, they will contribute, lead, or provide input through the team. It could be the counsellor, it might be one of the deputies, or it might be the year level coordinator depending on who is taking responsibility for which aspect of the program.

**Mr DAVIES:** Member for Casuarina, further to that, their role is counselling and working with families and students, but one of the other important roles is growing capacity in schools. Working with staff to assist them to deal with issues they see is part of their role. In regard to the counselling program itself and going to the registration, many of them are registered psychologists. There are specific criteria around their professional development. It is a fantastic program, and we could not do without it in our schools there is no doubt about it.

**Ms MOSS:** Thank you very much, I appreciate that.

**Mr CHAIR:** Thank you for sharing with us today. Thank you for your views. They will help us to form some great recommendations.