

Schools reject funding

By Joni Scanlon

THE ACT Ethnic Schools Association (ACTESA) has rejected a new funding arrangement by the ACT Department of Education and Training.

The ACTESA Executive Committee rejected the agreement at a special general meeting on September 23, claiming the association is being treated unfairly by the ACT Department of Education and Training.

ACTESA president Mr Javad Mehr spoke to school representatives at the meeting about the new agreement.

"Our budget has been reduced from \$130,000 to \$90,000," he said.

"Since 2008, we've had some communication with the Chief Minister Jon Stanhope, and the Minister for Multicultural Affairs and the Department of Education and Training to find out the reason they cut our budget."

Mr Mehr informed the members that the ACTESA is yet to finalise the CLP funding agreement with the Department of Education and Training. The department had sent a draft agreement to ACTESA to provide \$90,000 per year for the next three years.

Mr Mehr said the schools passed authority to the committee to act.

"They said 'we're very upset' and some of them were very angry about that," he said.

"We're trying to solve the problem politically."

Members at the meeting considered the new funding arrangement offered to ACTESA by the ACT Department of Education, before the ACTESA Executive Committee decided to not sign the agreement because it had no separate provision of funding for the salary of an administrative officer or other administrative expenses.

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community news

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ACTESA won't accept agreement

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THE ACTESA Committee consider that the department has treated ACTESA unfairly in proposing a reduction of annual funding.

"The committee ... rejected the agreement and we don't sign the agreement," Mr Mehr said.

"In the agreement it says if you don't sign the agreement, no money.

"Fortunately, we have some savings from previous years and we've spent the money on the wages to the employees."

Mr Mehr said some of the other failures of the offer, including the lock-in three-year term and no CPI, exacerbated the offence of the offer.

At present, ACTESA has 41 member schools, including the Grace Chinese School in Weetangera and the Tongan Language School in Spence, teaching 34 different languages to 1600 students.

Each school receives a base of \$1000 and then \$40 per student, but Mr Mehr said that for small schools, this was hardly enough money to cover classroom rent costs.

"We are not able to continue with such a budget," he said.

"Some of the schools are going to close very soon because they are not able to pay the rent."

Mr Mehr said the current \$90,000 offer will not be able to cover the wages of administrative staff.

In 1997, the Department of Education and Training (DET) decided to outsource the distribution of the Community Language Schools Program grant to ACTESA and an administration officer position was transferred to ACTESA from DET to facilitate the distribution of the grant.

Up until 2007, the department had provided a separate \$30,000 per year towards this administration expenditure. The ACTESA claims this funding has now been delayed.

ACTESA treasurer Peter Pan believes the department should continue to pay this funding.

"The position of the administration officer is doing work for the department mostly, and that should be funded by the department, and the department recognised that way back in 1997," he said.

At the general meeting, Mr Pan also spoke about the issues that have troubled relations between ACTESA and DET since 2008.

He informed the committee that previous ACTESA president Ms Emiliana Afeaki signed an agreement with the department without the approval and information of the executive committee in 2008.

"She was actually in charge, negotiating with the department. But for some reason she accepted the \$90,000 and signed an agreement," Mr Pan said.

"She officially stopped being the president on May 6 when we had the AGM, but the agreements not dated.

"Later in our negotiations with the department they agreed that the agreement's invalid because first it wasn't approved by the committee ... and second, there's not a date on the agreement."

The special general meeting unanimously expressed full confidence in the ACTESA committee and voted that the committee should continue dealing with DET as appropriate.

Australian Federation of Ethnic Schools Association executive director Stefan Romaniw has written a letter to Mr Andrew Barr seeking an appointment on behalf of ACTESA.

Two ACTESA committee executives are planning on attending the appointment with Mr Romaniw if one is granted.

Mr Mehr said they are "still waiting for his reply".

"It is not quite clear where we can get a result from the Department of Education and Training, but what I do know, the committee member, as school's representatives, they are not

going to sign this agreement," he said. "We are requesting to go back to the original amount."

"We're fighting for just \$30,000," Mr Pan said the ACTESA will put their position to Mr Barr.

"It's really up to the government whether they want a language policy," he said.

"Although they profess that they support multiculturalism and they support bilingual learning, they don't actually put things into effect."

The ACTESA have sent back the agreement unsigned and included a list of the reasons why they were unwilling to sign.

"We put in three demands. One is to restore the funding level to 1997, second is to guarantee to fund the admin position and also ... to look for CPI adjustments in the future," Mr Pan said.

"Without that sort of guarantee we can't accept a lock in for \$90,000 for three years. That's unrealistic."

"At the moment it's really just stalemate. They wouldn't release the money and we wouldn't accept the agreement."

"We are now saying to them 'stop'. We are not going to accept it any more."