

ADJOURNMENT OF THE HOUSE

HON NORMAN MOORE (Mining and Pastoral — Leader of the House) [4.56 pm]: I move —

That the house do now adjourn.

Before we begin the adjournment debate, I remind members that the temporary order begins next week and therefore the sitting times will be different. I also remind members to make themselves aware of those new arrangements so that we have a smooth introduction to the temporary orders.

District High Schools — Years 11 and 12 Students — Adjournment Debate

HON MATT BENSON-LIDHOLM (Agricultural) [4.57 pm]: I rise to speak on an issue of significant concern to people living in regional, rural and remote parts of Western Australia. The removal of the opportunity for years 11 and 12 students to study at 21 district high schools across the state puts into question this government's so-called commitment to the regions. Social infrastructure provision must sit alongside physical infrastructure initiatives if the bush is to benefit from royalties allocations and the state's wealth. I put it to the house that hospitals, schools and police stations are of little or no value without appropriate staffing; that is, quality human resources. The question for education is: why make the already uneven playing field in the bush worse? I am informed by a number of school groups in the Agricultural Region that have contacted my office that they are devastated by the Minister for Education's decision, and they want their concerns made known, particularly given the enormous amount of time, money and effort that they have put into building their communities over many years.

For the record, I will list the 21 district high schools affected. The schools that lost years 11 and 12 classes this year are Wyndham District High School, Dalwallinu District High School, Mukinbudin District High School, Narembeen District High School, Quairading District High School, Brookton District High School, Corrigin District High School and Wagin District High School. The schools that have lost year 11 but are offering year 12 classes this year for the final year are Kojonup District High School; Gnowangerup District High School; Southern Cross District High School; Wyalkatchem District High School; Carnamah District High School, which will retain its vocational education and training program; Dongara District High School; Boddington District High School, which is continuing to negotiate with Narrogin Senior High School about the provision of VET; Gingin District High School; Wongan Hills District High School; Jurien Bay District High School; Lake Grace District High School; and Mullewa District High School. I am also informed that Roebourne District High School's years 11 and 12 classes will be phased out over 2010, 2011 and 2012.

This decision is a poor one for many reasons. Firstly, it is most inappropriate, poorly thought out and poses further unnecessary challenges to the continued viability of many smaller country communities. It moves educational service provision in the affected communities back to the level that existed in the early 1980s, prior to my time even as a tutor and course writer with the defunct isolated students matriculation scheme.

The decision ignores the practical realities of getting these students to alternative schools and the high costs, both in time and resources, that parents will have to bear when many of them are already facing very challenging economic circumstances. These were certainly outlined last Friday, I believe, at a large crisis meeting in Kulin. It is a decision that lacks transparency and the most basic courtesies for those directly affected, and this concerns me a lot.

This decision has been made without consultation with affected communities and it has been introduced by stealth, with no announcement by the minister to the general public. Most parents were made aware of the decision having learnt about it through their local newspaper. They were then told the decision is not about money. If that is the case, I put the question: then what is it all about? One thing is for sure and certain; it is not about choice.

I need to make a number of comments about the impacts of the Barnett government's decision. Firstly, I believe that the Gallop government's decision to raise the school leaving age to 17 years was an excellent one and in the best interests of our youth in the state's workforce capacity. However, this government's decision adds further difficulties to students who already are at a great disadvantage. Secondly, there has never been a level playing field when it comes to rural and remote educational opportunities. My parents recognised that some 50 or more years ago. However, one would expect the minister to make this situation in the year 2010 better, not worse. I believe the mums and dads of affected students should be able to expect equitable treatment in education, health, and law and order and that access, particularly to a quality education system, is not dictated by one's proximity to Perth or to some of our largest regional centres.

The issues of finances, online learning and isolation are involved. Some parents simply do not have the finances to send their children to boarding school, while other students often experience enormous difficulties coping with online learning or isolation from their families. This can be particularly so for Aboriginal and migrant

students. I will make a point about long travel times as an outcome of the minister's proposed changes. Many children from farming families already face long travel times on school buses, and the minister's decision will only add to that burden by forcing some parents to drive their children considerable distances to connect with bus routes going on to larger regional centres. Has the minister got a plan to address these issues? Well, she should have, particularly given that she said it has nothing to do with money.

Issues associated with community capacity and resilience also arise. Many affected communities have long held an expectation that their educational services capacity will be maintained, if not improved, and have made long-term plans on that basis. Many families who have moved to the affected communities for a tree change lifestyle, possibly buying farms or small businesses, have done so on the expectation of better or appropriate educational services. Removing years 11 and 12 classes will affect the ability of many of the most vulnerable communities to attract new families to them and to build further community capacity and resilience.

One has to ask: what is this question about when a number of affected schools have reached a capacity cap or are experiencing strong growth in their numbers? I particularly refer to three schools here—Gingin District High School, Kojonup District High School and Jurien Bay District High School.

This is a poor decision by the government. I do not believe it has anything to do with improving educational service provision in the bush, and, indeed, it could put back the cause of rural community growth by decades. The 21 affected rural communities deserve better; in fact, they deserve much better. We need more teachers and non-human resources in regional, rural and remote WA; not less. I believe the decision should be reversed, or at least revisited urgently, for a more considered and balanced approach to secondary education in the bush.