



Department of Education and Training
Government of Western Australia

Your ref:

Our ref: DO07/184868

Enquiries:

Dr Jeannine Purdy
Principal Research Officer
Education and Health Standing Committee
Legislative Council
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000



Dear Dr Purdy

Please find attached a submission to the Where From? Where To? Report on Remote Communities from the Department of Education and Training. As requested, eight copies have been provided.

The future of remote and very remote Aboriginal communities and the provision of services to these communities are important issues for the State. I am sure this report will provide the basis of an informed debate on the subject.

Please contact Mr Kevin O'Keefe, Executive Director, Teaching and Learning, South, on 9264 4612 if you require further information. Mr O'Keefe is available to appear before the committee to explain or elaborate the submission, should that be required.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to submit information to the Education and Health Standing Committee.

Yours sincerely

SHARYN O'NEILL
DIRECTOR GENERAL

09 JUL 2007
Att.

K10 0007 0

EDUCATION AND HEALTH STANDING COMMITTEE WHERE FROM? WHERE TO? REPORT ON REMOTE COMMUNITIES

Submission from Ms Sharyn O'Neill, Director General, Department of Education and Training

The *Where From? Where To? Report on Remote Communities* discussion paper provides a useful overview of the background history, descriptions of State and Commonwealth provision of essential services and changes taking place under these arrangements that have already begun to impact on the lives of Aboriginal people in remote communities.

This first report by the Education and Health Standing Committee appears to focus more broadly than the Terms of Reference and contains few specific references to education and training, although the term 'essential services' covers the areas of education and training. The report clearly underlines the challenging environment in which education and training are being delivered in remote areas across Western Australia. There are a vast number of issues affecting the provision of education programs for Aboriginal children living in outstations, mid-sized or large Indigenous communities and those in communities located near mainstream towns. The concerns highlighted on page 61 are major issues for remote communities, many of which impact on education and training staff working in the communities as well as their students.

There is a need for greater clarity in the various responsibilities of the three tiers of government, especially post ATSIC and following the recently announced changes to the CDEP. The potential exists for gaps in services and further negative health and therefore education outcomes as a result of changes to Commonwealth funding for small communities with less than 50 people, particularly if the term 'viability' is linked simply to population size and not to a range of aspects of community life. There is currently limited policy developed by government about the provision of services to remote communities. There is some policy relating to the development of infrastructure, but little relating to other aspects of the services.

Building schools in remote locations- meeting the challenge

Under the *School Education Act 1999*, the Department is obliged to provide an educational program for students across the state of Western Australia. The ongoing pattern since the mid 1970s of Aboriginal people moving as small family units to remote outstations to maintain cultural identity and links with traditional lands, as well as to avoid socially destructive, stressful and overcrowded regional and urban environments, has resulted in an increasing number of requests for schools in very remote locations.

The Department believes that opportunities to access education should not be limited by the tyranny of distance. The Department continues to implement a wide range of supplementary, targeted initiatives to meet the challenges of remote area education. There has been an ongoing commitment to provide facilities, use innovative technology and to develop appropriate curricula and programs. Attracting and retaining staff in these locations is a challenge we continue to address through the *Remote Teaching Service*.

Establishing a school in a remote location is far more costly than in metropolitan locations. This is a particularly important issue for Western Australia (the discussion paper outlines the particularly high number of Aboriginal communities in this State relative to other states and territories). The homeland movement has resulted in increased numbers of schools being built in remote locations.

The Department of Education and Training now has 43 remote Aboriginal community schools, of which 11 are in outstations. It is not possible to establish schools in all communities requesting a school. New schools are very expensive and are only approved if there is an established community with community infrastructure and facilities in addition to other selected criteria.

Where establishment of a school is not considered viable, options include:

- family relocation;
- boarding school (costs can be prohibitive for Aboriginal families in particular and many students feel homesick and/or alienated);
- travelling to other communities or regional centres by bus where the journey is within the required time and distance guidelines;
- creating an annex school, which is a separate school facility with fewer student enrolments linked to a larger facility at an adjoining community or regional centre. Some staff and administrative resources are shared, including the principal and registrar; and
- enrolment in the School of Isolated and Distance Education which delivers of primary and secondary school education in remote and isolated communities where there is no school. Usually an existing building in the community is used as a 'school room' and a suitably qualified person is required to act as the supervisor or mentor. Access to distance education requires fibre optic/satellite network a suitable power source and computer technology.

All of these options have their own inherent difficulties. For example, traveling daily takes a toll on students and distance education can be more difficult for students with limited literacy skills. Aboriginal families from remote locations who relocate may experience poor or limited housing choices and a lack of community support. The children may experience social alienation and homesickness, especially where appropriate measures and support are not included in their placements.

The Department is increasingly involved in collaborative planning with other agencies when establishing new schools in remote communities. This increased collaboration between the government agencies and the communities assists in the construction of facilities that reduce duplication, ensure efficiency and are appropriate in meeting community needs. For example, in Fitzroy Crossing, a new school replacing the existing facility will be built in conjunction with a new health campus. In Wiluna, a replacement school will be built adjacent to the existing community facilities. In the proposed Kurungul Remote Community School, an arrangement has been brokered between agencies which will reduce the potential for competition between communities for resources and infrastructure provided by different government agencies.

Education in remote community schools

Some incremental progress has been achieved in narrowing overall performance gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The ability of the education system to achieve educational parity for Aboriginal students is affected by issues such as health, housing, access to training and employment opportunities and the fact that approximately one third of the Western Australian Aboriginal population lives in very remote regions. Other considerations that impact on the provision of education for remote area students include standard English being an additional language or dialect for many students who speak one or more traditional languages as well as either Kriol or Aboriginal English, transience between communities is accepted as a normal way of life and the many parents who had limited opportunities and/or negative experiences of formal schooling.

Serious shortfalls in health, housing and other essential service infrastructure are described in the report. There is a wide range of health and other issues for children living in remote communities, such as substance abuse, hearing disorders and dietary deficiencies, all of which impact on student attendance, performance and participation in the classroom. Poor health of adults can also have an impact as children may accompany their parents/caregivers on visits to regional centres to obtain medical care, resulting in absences from school. Shortcomings in community services such as housing can have detrimental implications for students' education in terms of concentration and application. For example, overcrowding can result in students having less to eat, staying up later or having their sleep disrupted by noise.

Substantial effort has been made through increased funding for Aboriginal education and the development of many new programs that have demonstrated improved outcomes for Aboriginal students. Key strategies for improvement are focussing on quality leadership, increasing the involvement of Aboriginal parents, developing measures to foster and share best practice in remote area teaching, identifying gaps in effective service delivery and promoting opportunities for training and employment in the local area.

The Department has a range of initiatives in place to support the education of Aboriginal students in remote areas. Three key elements are:

- *Two way education*
English is a second or third language or dialect for many adults and children living in remote communities and this is a significant factor affecting the outcomes achieved by students. Appropriate recognition of a child's home language is a vital starting point in their education. The teaching of Standard Australian English supports student learning in all curriculum areas. There are very few teachers who speak an Aboriginal language or are fully conversant with Aboriginal English. The Department is implementing the *ABC of Two-Way Literacy and Learning* training to enable teachers to understand the particular literacy needs of Aboriginal students who do not speak standard Australian English. The program encourages educators to reflect upon the culture and value systems implicit in mainstream schools. Strategies are discussed to modify all aspects of school life towards two-way processes: the learning and teaching routines; management procedures; selection of resources and collaboration with parents, caregivers and community members.
- *Targeted literacy support*
The ESL/ILSS Program is an initiative that has been developed for Aboriginal students who commence compulsory schooling speaking an Aboriginal language. A once only per capita grant is made for each eligible student. The objective is to facilitate the entry of Aboriginal students into education by providing intensive English language tuition to each eligible student.

The *Aboriginal Literacy Strategy* is a successful structured literacy program designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students attending schools in remote communities. It is a compulsory program for all remote community school teachers who are trained to deliver a consistent and sustained literacy program, regardless of staff turnover or changing school priorities. This program supports transient students by ensuring a consistency of approach in the literacy program when students move to other remote communities. Tracking of students between communities to provide a continuous schooling program can be an issue. This program supports transient students by ensuring a consistency of approach in the literacy program when students move to other remote communities.

Aboriginal Education Specialist Teachers are appointed to schools to provide support in numeracy and literacy for Aboriginal students. These teachers work with Year 3-7 teachers and students in a culturally inclusive and collaborative program.

- *Support for teachers and principals*

Significant improvements have been made to conditions and remuneration provided through the Remote Teaching Service to make it more attractive to principals and teachers to enhance their careers through longer postings with benefits for themselves and the communities they serve. Support for staff has been boosted through the introduction of orientation workshops held annually in January for principals and teachers joining the Remote Teaching Service, prior to the commencement of the school year. These workshops have ensured that vital information is shared by more experienced principals and assists in networking. There has also been strong commitment to providing ongoing professional development opportunities to staff in remote localities, including fostering and sharing best practice in remote area teaching and identifying areas of need.

Opportunities for training and employment

The link between education, training and employment that is evident in urban and regional areas is not as evident in remote communities. For young Aboriginal people in remote areas, there is often very limited or a lack of local employment opportunities, a difficult social and economic context and limited opportunities for engagement with further education, training and employment.

For many in remote communities, there is no clear relationship between formal schooling and employment or other outcomes likely to improve socio-economic circumstances. There is a tendency for young people to move towards regional centres and therefore a strong need to find ways to ensure that they can engage in meaningful training and /or employment either in their communities or in regional centres.

Activities by government and other agencies often lead to opportunities for training and employment. For example, community construction projects can be used to enable community members to develop skills needed in the building trades, vehicle repair and equipment and general maintenance. Depending on local circumstances, there may also be a need for training in business management, community governance and enterprise.

The Department employs local Aboriginal people who work as teachers, administrators, Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), cleaners, gardeners and bus drivers across the State. Increasing the number of Aboriginal people in employment across the education sector ultimately assists in improving outcomes for Aboriginal students by developing career opportunities and pathways for Aboriginal people, providing role models for the students and providing cultural advice and support for other school staff. A partnership has been forged with the Curtin University of Technology, which enables AIEOs to upgrade their qualifications. The course builds on their experience, is delivered in a range of modes and is flexible to the needs of the AIEOs working both full-time and part-time in schools, including those in remote area schools. Successful course completion provides participants with a Bachelor of Education degree (Primary) and qualifies them to teach anywhere in Australia.

The Department reviewed remote school to training links in 2004 and this highlighted the need for a more coordinated delivery of school education and vocational education and training in remote communities. The review recommended the development of training skills centres with suitably qualified lecturing staff, but it recognised that establishment costs are high and that shared facilities need to be explored.

The resources boom in the State has created opportunities which have enabled leverage to be applied for local Aboriginal people to benefit. There are a number of collaborative arrangements with local mining industries and other resource development projects resulting in training and workplace skill development, often tied to employment opportunities.

Decision-making by the Commonwealth and the impact on some remote communities

The decommissioning of ATSIC and proposed changes to CDEP may impact on people in some smaller outstations to the extent that they move into larger communities or regional centres. Should this be the case, there is the potential for more adverse conditions occurring, such as overcrowding or even the creation of ghettos on the edges of towns. For example, staff in the Goldfields Education District have indicated that people are already moving into Warburton from smaller outstations and suffering the effects of housing shortages and overcrowding.

Principals and teachers are often the only service providers living in remote communities and are reliant on the ongoing provision of essential services. Any decisions about reducing or removing the provision of essential services to the communities will impact upon Department of Education and Training staff.

Implications of removing essential services from or closing down small communities for the Department include the need to review facility needs, staff movement, additional staff accommodation requirements in major centres and asset management. Most assets are transportable, though some are permanent, such as some teacher housing. In some larger communities school sites have no room on the school site to expand to accommodate substantial increases in student numbers. In such cases, additional land may need to be acquired for the school (if available) or the school may need to be relocated. The land area designated for schools in remote communities is significantly smaller than for urban areas. Different language groups living together in the same town can become an issue for law and order. The recent difficulties experienced in Hall's Creek provide an example.

CDEP had a strong training component requirement. Many TAFEWA colleges have had close links with CDEP agencies which resulted in ongoing training being provided for people involved in CDEP projects. Recently, some TAFE colleges have experienced a fall off in the number of Aboriginal students continuing their training courses and lower Aboriginal student contact hours overall. The decrease in student contact hours will have future implications in terms of reduced funding for targeted initiatives which will affect the employment of lecturers and support staff for Aboriginal students. Decreases in training provisions for Aboriginal students will ultimately limit their ability to take up employment opportunities.

Recommendation 1: Definition of viability and decisions about viability

While it is recognised that this discussion paper is part of a larger report on current successful initiatives, the recommendations stretch much further than the Terms of Reference of the committee. There will potentially be contentious issues arising from any decision by government to close communities based on viability if the decisions are not supported by communities.

If Recommendation 1 is tabled and accepted as a way forward, the definition of viability would need to be clear. It is recommended that population size alone is not a broad enough definition. The number of people, current infrastructure, employment in and around the community, governance, role of local government in service provision, health and cultural benefits, links with traditional lands and the social context are possible indicators. The potential for opportunities for tourism, enterprise, pastoral leases, mining, local government/community management, local industries and other employment opportunities could also warrant consideration.

The definition of viability and any judgments following this about community viability will be linked to what is considered most important. The notion of being viable based on the economics of providing and maintaining services for these communities should not be considered separately from the priority placed by Aboriginal people on cultural identity and connection with traditional lands. The right of Aboriginal people to live in an area which is culturally significant should not be excluded from any discussions about viability. There may be unintended consequences (social, health, housing, incarceration and crime) which will be detrimental to many families if a narrow view of social policy is taken and economics are considered rather than the whole picture. There is the potential for attendance rates to drop with relocation and therefore for performance gaps for Aboriginal students to increase.

It is critical that there is clarity about what is to be reviewed, whether it is:

- the viability of providing services in the communities;
- the viability of the communities themselves; or
- the viability of providing essential services to support the establishment of new communities in the future.

Recommendation 1 is supported with the above considerations, with changed wording as follows:

"The State should obtain research into the viability or otherwise of the small remote Aboriginal communities, informed by consultation with the residents of those and other Aboriginal communities".

Recommendation 2: New financial arrangements

Recommendation 2 is supported. The changing of responsibilities from Commonwealth to State presents the potential for gaps in funding and services, particularly if costs associated with the delivery of services to remote areas of Western Australia are not factored into financial agreements. The impact of this recommendation for education and training is not clear at this stage.

Working Together: The Way Forward

The opportunity exists to use the proposed review described in Recommendation 1 to consider collaborative partnerships and ways for local authorities to reduce unnecessary duplication and operate more effectively in remote communities. There is room for broad government policy to be developed relating to the provision of services to remote communities, not simply infrastructure provision. Communication and consultation between the community, the service providers and agencies is essential. A hub and spoke type of service delivery is a possible option to reduce duplication and ensure effective service delivery.

It is accepted that there are high costs associated with delivery of essential services to remote communities. There is the opportunity, with adequate training, support and funding commitment, for the delivery of services to be provided to the communities in conjunction with increased local employment of community members.

It is vital that proper consultation occurs with affected community people during processes involving any assessment of community viability. Broader opportunities for planning that enable cross agency collaboration and reduction of duplication of services need to be closely examined as part of the process.