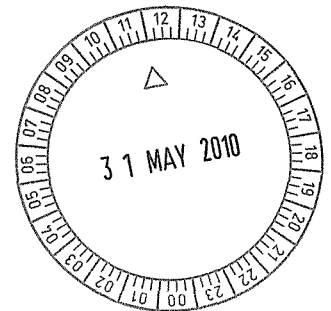


May 31, 2010

Ms Renae Jewell
Committee Clerk
Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations
Legislative Council
Parliament House
PERTH
WA 6002



Members of the Committee

I make the following submission to you in my capacity of President of the Western Australian District High School Administrators' Association (WADHSAA), and make it on behalf of our professional association.

Context

There is much comment about District High Schools and what they were designed for.

District Highs are very diverse in nature extending from Wyndham to Ravensthorpe and from Exmouth to Laverton. They include one school with more than 1000 students in its enrolment compared to schools with around 100 students in total. Some, like Roleystone are located within the metropolitan area while others such as Halls Creek, are classified as Remote Community Schools. Some such as Toodyay and York District High Schools are close to a regional Senior High School and choose not to offer years 11 and 12. Others are long distances from any nearby Senior High School and have established their own year 11 and 12 courses.

Systemic imperatives have driven changes in many primary schools in the remote service to include secondary students in their cohort and others have been able to provide a range of Tertiary Entrance subjects to meet local need. It has been generally accepted that Vocational Training is more suited to provision by District Highs because of the expertise levels of staff.

History of District High Schools

The need for secondary education in rural settings to at least Junior Level (now Year 10) became apparent during the decade following World War II. Albany Senior High School was the first High school to be established outside of the metropolitan area in 1918, closely followed by Bunbury in 1923. Secondary education in rural areas was confined to the larger regional centres as described. Families that sought secondary education for their children were forced into enrolments at boarding school and hostels, often some distance from the family home and their local town or community.

Changes took place to this in the 1950's when a number of District High Schools and Junior High Schools were built in country towns that were smaller than the large regional centres but sufficiently sized to sustain secondary enrolments. By way of example, Bridgetown High School was established in 1953 and many wheatbelt District High Schools came into being during this time as well. In 1953, the Anglican

community at Dalwallinu wrote to the minister for education seeking the establishment of a secondary school in the town. Secondary enrolments were sought and clarified and the secondary section commenced operation in 1954. This scenario was typical of many rural communities where local populations asked for provision of educational services. In the following decades, school populations grew and the role of the District High in providing a 1-10 educational programme for rural communities became standard practice.

Contextual Growth and Development

During the 80's, community kindergartens and pre school programmes were absorbed or amalgamated with local schools and the provision of pre primary education became part of the District High repertoire. Later in that decade and in the early part of the 90's District High Schools began to explore their capacity to provide educational services beyond year 10. This thrust came largely from isolated and distant High Schools such as Derby, Broome (a district high at that time) and Kununurra where distances to boarding schools and associated costs were beyond the capacity of most parents. Vocational Education and Training and alternative senior school programmes were being developed across the state and in all forms of high schools including the District Highs who welcomed the flexibility openly. District High Schools were now firmly K-12 operations for most rural communities. Any doubt of this was removed when the Western Australian government changed the school leaving age from 15 to 17 during the second half of the first decade of the 21st century. There was a domino effect of this decision; policy for District High Schools with regard to curriculum provision, staffing allocations, financial resourcing and physical facilities in the form of additional rooms were all part of the fallout of this decision.

District High Schools held a unique position on the provision of services in WA. With a complete K-12 campus, they were the only government service of its type. They were not primary schools, nor were they secondary schools. They encompassed the entire spectrum of education provision. And while policy makers argued about the concepts of middle schooling and the movement of year 7 students into the high school, District High schools had been dealing with these matters in one way or another for decades. At the same time, agricultural economics have changed drastically. Farms have amalgamated; machinery and technology have improved while town populations have diminished. The drift to urban environments has been dominant with many communities facing population declines as much as 40% or more. In some cases, mining communities have been and gone in the space of a couple of decades.

Current Conditions

Not all parents have the capacity to send their children away for secondary schooling and partnerships between school communities and the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education have been fruitful in providing educational materials for students at Years 11 and 12. Many District Highs have specialist rooms with Communications and Information technologies as well as supervisory staff for those students. Some have completed building upgrades and have commercial quality kitchen facilities to support Hospitality and Food Production courses for senior students, while others have extensive trade facilities for woodwork, metalwork, and automotive trades.

Many District High Schools incorporate year 7 classes into secondary programmes in one form or another. Obvious areas for inclusion are specialist subjects as Technology and Enterprise, but some schools provide internal gifted and talented programmes where year 7 students join secondary classes for science, maths, art and music. It is well accepted that significant periods of transition are particularly well dealt with in District High Schools. Many new schools such as Mount Barker Community College are modelled on the successes of the District High School structure.

HR policy changes over the years and generational change meant that some of the rural schools, including primary and senior high schools, became difficult to staff and initiatives such as the Country Teaching Programme were put in place. More recently, scholarship holders and visa teachers have been placed in these schools.

Issues

Access and Equity

The core values of the Department of Education in Western Australia include *equity* and *access*. In a democratic society with free public education, it is a responsibility of Government to ensure all students have access to quality education. Access must involve both school of choice and equity in funding. It is simply not acceptable that a student who enrolls in a Senior High School attracts additional funding in terms of staffing compared with what the same student would attract in a District High School. At best this situation reflects inequity in a public system that has an overt focus on equity. At worst, it is discrimination against a year 11 or 12 student in a District High School – a discrimination based on geographical location where the impact is greater on our indigenous students.

Given the Minister for Education has confirmed that if a family requests their children be enrolled in a District High School that this can and should happen, it is morally unacceptable to provide less resource for the education of such children. To implement this decision, overtly indicates fiscal constraints override access and equity.

Many families from rural and remote communities access education for their children in schools away from their local community. This is a choice and for many a costly choice. Some families however will not or cannot support their children to access schooling anywhere but at their local school. There are a whole range of social and cultural factors that impact on decisions. There is a strong correlation between socioeconomic level of families and those that are unable or unwilling to send students away. It could be argued that there is disadvantage in student groups in rural and remote communities, especially those in middle and upper secondary levels of education. Research indicates there is already a lower participation and lower educational achievement in rural and remote communities. If we truly believe in providing the best opportunities for all, rural and remote students in District High Schools should attract more rather than less funding in years 11 and 12.

It would be an acceptable compromise for District High Schools to only accept the resourcing that the same students at a Senior High School attract.

Education to go, or education to stay

Currently, the local school plays a very significant role in almost all rural and remote communities. Schools and community leaders work tirelessly to provide opportunities for their local students with many strategies implemented to foster community sustainability. It is well accepted that students who leave a community for education are less likely to return to the community to live and work once they complete their education. Many communities work with their schools to foster and *education to stay* mentality. To limit the resourcing to District High Schools in years 11 and 12 by removing the Senior Schooling Allocation would force a shift to a philosophy of *education to go*. This mentality shift is highly undesirable to rural and remote communities.

Student Performance

WADHSAA has undertaken its own research to investigate the correlation between school size and student achievement. Our data measured student performance for all District High School students at years 5 and 9 in all areas of the NAPLAN testing. Despite rhetoric claiming school size is very important to student performance using terms like critical mass and minimum group size, data very clearly shows that there is no correlation at all between school size and school performance. Whilst this data refers only to District High Schools and is based on performance in years 5 and 9, it strongly indicates issues of school size need to be very carefully examined before claims of small size limiting performance are made. WADHSAA is currently collecting and analysing data to directly compare the performance of District high Schools and Senior High Schools.

A second piece of data with strong relevance is to view the national MySchool performance data and see the degree to which District High Schools so frequently perform above expected levels.

Before any decision is made to limit resourcing to District High Schools for their years 11 and 12 students (when enrolled), there is a need to gather data on student performance in District High Schools compared to performance of similar students who move to a Senior High School.

The Decision making process

Rural schools and their communities expect a decision making process that is consultative, based on improving education outcomes for all and is timely. The lead up to the current decision to remove the Senior Schooling Allocation was based on an initial public announcement that 21 District High Schools were to lose their year 11 and 12 students. This announcement was made late in 2009 after all current year 10 and 11 students had chosen their school for 2010 and also chosen their courses. Schools were well into the staffing procedures for 2010. The announcement was untimely and also impractical for many rural communities. Schools were not consulted to discuss this decision. There was a move in the decision from the removal of year 11 and 12 courses, to the removal of the Senior Schooling Allocation which senior high schools receive when they enrol small groups of students. The decision took no account of distances some students would be expected to travel and made no provision for the students who would not move to a new school for years 11 and 12. The decision counters the principle of inclusivity to become one that promotes exclusivity for those with the social and financial capacity to move schools. Those without this capacity are likely to drop out of education two years before they reach

the compulsory school leaving age. This impact will be hardest felt in communities with larger numbers of indigenous students. Wyndham District High School and the issues that have surrounded the provision of education for post year 10 students highlights this claim. WADHSAA has always argued that decisions should be managed on a case by case with opportunity for input from the community and its school with the capacity for any decision to be reviewed if needs change.

The effect of the decision on students and their communities

Rural decline has impacted on rural communities throughout Australia. For almost all rural communities, the school is the largest employer and is seen as critically important to the future of the town. The provision of local schooling at the year 11 and 12 level is often the factor that determines if a family may come to a town for work, or if they are at the town, whether or not they will stay. Rural communities invest considerable effort into issues of local sustainability. To change the mindset from one of *educating students to stay* to one of *educating students to go* represents a significant and unpalatable shift in thinking for the town and its school.

For those students and their families that cannot or will not move schools for year 11 and 12, the decision is very significant. It actually encourages the complete removal of year 11 and 12 at the local school and therefore further disadvantages the group that are often already significantly disadvantaged.

Adequacy, cost effectiveness and social impact of alternatives proposed

To limit funding to District High Schools with year 11 and 12 students by way of removal of the Senior Schooling Allocation would limit staff available to teach programs in these schools. The impact of this decision is to reduce the adequacy of educational provision in communities that already suffer from a shortage of services. For a student to attract less funding if they remain in a local school will never be a palatable decision for rural communities.

The cost effectiveness of the decision is hard to comprehend. Not only would it cost a considerable amount per student to provide bus travel or subsidise accommodation, the resourcing cost, if a student moves, would be greater as they would attract the Senior Schooling staffing allocation if they enrolled in a rural Senior High School.

Final comment

There is a constitutional right of every Australian child to have access to a free and secular comprehensive education. The issue of access should not be forced by way of reducing funding to smaller regional schools, District High Schools, that offer years 11 and 12. Where a family chooses to enrol their child in a local District High School for years 11 and 12, they should attract at minimum, the same resourcing they would attract in a rural Senior High School. In addition, the savings from reduced travel costs or subsidised boarding costs could be considered as an avenue to provide additional resourcing at the local regional school.

Research into factors impacting on the performance of rural students undertaking years 11 and 12 is needed to influence policy decisions and resourcing in this area.

WADHSAA would welcome any opportunity to further discuss this submission or provide any other requested information.

We commend the establishment of this Parliamentary enquiry as this issue needs careful consideration, taking into account equity and access.

Alan McLaren
WADHSAA President
31 May 2010