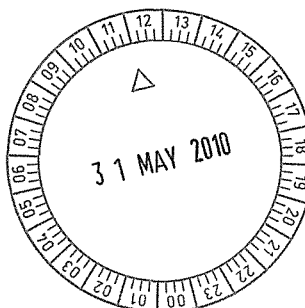




PUBLIC

Wheatbelt
Development
Commission

Hon Giz Watson MLC
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Dear Ms Watson

INQUIRY INTO THE REMOVAL OF SENIOR SCHOOL ALLOCATION FUNDING FOR YEAR 11 AND 12 COURSES AT DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOLS

The Wheatbelt Development Commission welcomes the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations Committee *inquiry into the removal of senior school allocation funding for year 11 and 12 courses at district high schools*.

Please find our response on the matters referred to in the terms of reference. At the conclusion of our response we have indicated that we welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee.

The WDC recognise that education and training is a key element to regional development where access to quality education is a critical factor in an individual's or family's choice to reside in the regions. The removal of senior school allocation funding for year 11 and 12 courses at district high schools is one of a number of education service issues the WDC have been working toward solutions to ensure our Wheatbelt community have access to a quality and affordable education.

If you require further information with regard to our submission please contact Breanne Chrimes, Executive Assistant, Wheatbelt Development Commission P: (08) 9622 7222.

Yours sincerely

WENDY NEWMAN
Chief Executive Officer

31 May 2010

Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations Committee

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Introduction

The Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC) welcome the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations *inquiry into the removal of senior school allocation funding for year 11 and 12 course at district high schools*.

The WDC recognise that education is a key element to regional development where access to quality education is a critical factor in an individual's or family's choice to reside in the regions. Though this inquiry focuses on senior school allocation funding for year 11 and 12 courses at district high schools, this inquiry highlights a plethora of issues and opportunities for rural, regional and remote education service provision that could be explored for the betterment of our regional communities.

Education is one of the most important industries within the Wheatbelt region. Not only is this department one of the largest employers within the Wheatbelt, it also provides access to primary and secondary education services to over 12 000 Wheatbelt students. This equates to a significant investment into this region whereby the individual schools are a highly valued asset by local Wheatbelt communities.

The Wheatbelt has 13 of the States 21 District High Schools that will lose support for their senior school programs. The schools are: Brookton, Corrigin, Dalwallinu, Gingin, Jurien Bay, Lake Grace, Mukinbudin, Narembeen, Quairading, Southern Cross, Wagin, Wongan Hills and Wyalkatchem.

Across other Regional Development Commissions:

- Mid West = 3 (Carnamah, Dongara and Mullewa)
- Great Southern = 2 (Gnowangerup, Kojonup)
- Kimberley = 1 (Wyndham)
- Pilbara = 1 (Roebourne)
- Peel = 1 (Boddington)

The Wheatbelt Development Commission has pressed the Department of Education for many years to engage with community and other organisations (like ourselves) to work towards solutions that best meets individual community education needs. Each community is different and decisions such as closing education and training access to senior school students at district high schools should be made on an individual basis. Such decisions too often only serve to increase, not lessen, the gap in participation and achievement of rural and remote students to their metropolitan counterparts. We find this situation untenable.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

a) The decision-making process and rationale behind the decision;

The Wheatbelt Development Commission (WDC) is disappointed that the Department of Education did not consult the communities or relevant agencies to work toward a better solution than the one proposed. Such decisions result in a widening of the participation and achievement gap between rural, regional and remote students and their metropolitan counterparts.

In relation into the removal of allocation funding for Year 11 and 12 courses in some district high schools, we are concerned, given that these district high schools have embraced the raising of the school leaving age by providing a Year 11 and 12 course structure that suits the individual student. The Vocation Education and Training (VET) and Structure Workplace Learning (SWL) programs are successful structures that allow the individual student and school to determine a localised solution for the student to remain engaged in education, and ultimately access ongoing employment. The WDC understand that Year 11 and 12 students have the option to attend the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) through their district high school, with the support of the school.

b) The effect of the decisions on the State budget, the affected students and communities;

It is argued that the decision to remove the senior school allocation funding for year 11 and 12 courses at district high schools is a cost cutting exercise by the Department of Education where there is not the critical mass of students to provide a quality education (fewer than ten students per year group).

The WDC would argue that this decision would only offer short term savings with the following points, in terms of cost to the State (across all government departments), the individual student and community (especially local government) being of greater consequence in the long term:

- Vulnerability of students at risk (and those put at risk) of disengaging from education. The flow on effects could be limited employment prospects, possible criminal/unsocial behaviour, and increased risk of mental illness.
- No planning for growth areas. The Wheatbelt is experiencing growth along our coastal strip (Shires of Gingin and Dandaragan) and Avon Arc (Shires of Chittering through to Beverley/Brookton). Poor planning decisions are resulting in inadequate capital and social infrastructure and services for these communities.
- Families relocating from the regions to educate their children in larger centres (Perth). For small communities, especially in areas of decline, this has a great impact on the local economy and social fabric of the community.

The above points also highlight that the structure of the education and training system used today needs to be readdressed to promote lifelong learning for all ages in the regions.

The WDC is solutions focused and foresees many opportunities for the Wheatbelt community to access a quality, affordable and sustainable education. These opportunities are not limited to Senior School years.

- The need for a clear strategy for rural and remote education, particularly in response to the planning for growth areas, raising of the school leaving age and introduction of middle school years, to ensure that rural and remote education delivery and student achievements are similar or better than their metropolitan counterparts. The Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (RREAC) to provide guidance to develop, monitor and report on this strategy to the Minister for Education.
- Senior School (Year 11 and 12) students to be linked via video-conference for classes (VET theory and TEE subjects). The Senior High School could be the 'hub' site where video-conference classes take place. Senior School students at district high school to have access to onsite teacher/tutor. This could also be linked to the student's home.
- A solution in a regional context is provided by offering specialist programs in Regional Senior High Schools where there is the opportunity for students to board/reside. Some residential colleges are underutilised and by offering specialist programs to residential college feeder schools students might be attracted to board/reside and increase use of rural residential colleges.
- The Minister for Regional Development to endorse a process to enable the Wheatbelt Development Commission to drive the formation of a Wheatbelt Education Memorandum of Understanding Group (based on the Wheatbelt Health Memorandum of Understanding Group) to provide a framework for interested education parties regarding continual communication, engagement, structures and processes that will enhance education service delivery within the Wheatbelt.
- Recognising that each school is different. The student, parent/guardian and school should be able to determine the course of action for each individual student. This may include the district high school providing the resources required to assist the student through their senior years of schooling. An Independent School could have the flexibility to determine this.
- We understand that Senior School students can access SIDE (Schools of Isolated and Distance Education) to complete senior years education, it would be beneficial to expand this to allow VET student to access TAFE (as an external student) or combination of to allow all students to have access to school resources (teacher/tutor, library, computers etc).
- Additional compensation to parent/guardian and student for travel to a determined meeting point for the student to travel by school bus to the open high school and return.
- Senior School student to attend nearest residential college as a weekly boarder. Student to travel Monday morning from home (designated meeting point) to school and return Friday afternoon. Parent/guardian to be compensated for travel to and

from designated meeting point to contract school bus. Students boarding and tuition fees (school based or TAFE) to be paid for by the Department of Education.

c) The adequacy, cost effectiveness and social impact of the education alternatives proposed; and

The WDC are concerned that the Department of Education does not have the necessary planning in place to work with district high schools in areas of decline and growth or the process to work with key stakeholders to arrive at creative solutions. This lack of planning results in the ad-hoc and incoherent decision making that has become the Departments' trademark.

Continuing on from section b) the WDC foresee the following issues surrounding the removal of Senior School allocation funding for Year 11 and 12 courses at district high schools:

- Affordability (of education, boarding and travel arrangements);
- Migrant families ineligible for boarding allowances (unless they are Australian citizens or permanent residents);
- Students travelling the required long distances on buses to senior high school (distance, cultural differences, medical issues);
- Students disengaging from education;
- Lack of available places in the Private School system, especially for at risk students;
- Quality of care;
- Quality of options; and
- Families moving out of the regions to Perth because there are no perceived alternatives.

The WDC perceive the alternative education options to students and parents as limited with little regard to the social impact and financial cost it would have on each community, the student and parent.

Option one: bus affected students to the closest Senior High School

Below is a table of all Wheatbelt district high schools (plus Boddington) that will be affected by the removal of Senior School allocation funding for Year 11 and 12 courses and the distance to their closest senior high school the closest distance is in bold)

District High School (closure HS)	Senior High School (open HS)	Merredin	Moora (Central Midlands)	Narrogin	Northam	Perth	Other
Brookton		204	272	70	102	141	
Corrigin (Independent)		119	340	116	162	232	
Dalwallinu		294	91	340	169	263	

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Gingin	263	102	273	101	92	Bindoon Catholic College: 28 Bullsbrook: 40 Wanneroo: 63
Jurien Bay	449	122	449	287	276	
Lake Grace (Independent)	220	466	134	288	371	Katanning: 132
Mukinbudin	78	250	310	206	297	
Narembeen	92	371	173	201	289	
Quairading	118	275	157	97	169	
Southern Cross	109	380	341	271	372	
Wagin	285	392	50	222	252	Katanning: 55
Wongan Hills	218	88	265	95	209	
Wyalkatchem	116	190	265	105	196	
Boddington	327	286	83	193	147	Armada: 96 Mandurah: 93 Pinjarra: 75

For district high schools Corrigin, Jurien Bay and Lake Grace it is questionable whether student travel time would be less than the Public Transport Authorities policy that *In-vehicle journey time (including transfers) not to exceed* does not exceed 90 minutes. The time of travel (depending on the distance) would cost the student socially (academically, extra-curricular activities) and physically (tiring). However, if the bus route did not have a critical mass of students (minimum of 4 students) this would leave the student and family with two options:

- Student to reside at a residential college; or
- The family moves to a community where the quality of education can be found (of which is a greater upfront cost to the family)

An example of the latter option has occurred in Darkan as a result of the closure of the district high school at the end of 2009. Here is a list of some of the costs to the community as a result of there not being enough students to travel to Collie Senior High School by bus:

- Three families moved from Darkan to larger centres
- The families between withdrew six children from the now Darkan Primary School
- The Shire of West Arthur lost two employees

The Commission is keen to see a cost benefit study of the use of a bus to transport students v's the provision of resources at their local school to support the education experience of their choice. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the cost of additional bus services might in fact be more expensive than this in school resource provision.

Option two: Students reside at residential colleges

The WDC supports this option as long as this solution offers the specialist programs in regional senior high schools where there is the opportunity for students to board/reside. The boost to the Boarding Away From Home Allowance (as a result of Royalties for Regions \$2,050 in 2010) provides additional assistance to students and parents who choose this option. This option provides the student with greater social opportunities (meet new friends, greater opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities that the

school or residential college can supply because of student critical mass) and academic and training opportunities.

It must be noted that the closure of the Katanning Residential College at the end of 2009, the impending closure of Swan Leigh Residential College and the limited placements to metropolitan boarding schools have limited a parent/students choice.

Option three: Access to the School of Isolated and Distance Education from the district high school

The WDC support this option and would advocate for continued support to the district high schools are supported financially and have access to resources to support the students that choose this option. This would enable students to remain in their community, limit the cost of travel and living away and students receive a quality education.

Other options that could be explored are through video-conference links where the senior high school is the 'hub' for generating course material, class material etc and the district high schools become the 'spokes'. There are many ideas that could be created from this model. For example

- Students could visit the hub on a weekly basis rather than a daily basis allowing for social and academic engagement;
- Students could reside at the residential college for block periods to complete exams or practicum's
- Specialist teachers from the hub could visit the 'spoke' schools, providing spoke schools with an opportunity to provide for more specialist classes.

This option does not need to be limited to the Senior School Years. This could provide an opportunity of engagement for the entire community to have access to all forms of education to promote life-long learning.

d) And other relevant matter

Education is critical in building community capacity, which in turn helps our mission to maximise community well being through self-sustaining regional development. A strong education system underpins quality of life, and we need to work together to better our education system.

It is concerning that while our Federal and State Government advocating for localized decision-making, the community is continually being contradicted by centralised decision-makers and policies that do not reflect a community's needs.

We at the Wheatbelt Development Commission want to partner with the Department of Education to provide the information the department requires to better our education system. We have formed an informal partnership with the Attraction and Retention Unit of the Department of Education and have found this partnership to be extremely beneficial. This partnership provides the avenue for information exchange and explores initiatives both parties can benefit from to improve attraction and retention of teachers to rural, regional and remote WA.

Forming formal partnerships is not new to our organisation having formed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Western Australian Country Health Service Wheatbelt,

Wheatbelt Local Government Country Zones and the Wheatbelt General Practice Network. This partnership has gone from strength to strength, opening communication channels and paving the way for a new direction in Health service delivery within the Wheatbelt.

Other avenues for engaging community exist through the reformed Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (RREAC). It is essential that groups like RREAC exist as an advocate for Rural and Remote education planning and decision-making. We strongly support RREAC and the opportunities and leverage RREAC can create.

We understand that our submission is confidential and cannot be disclosed to others until the Committee authorises its public release. However we have been working on this issue and other education matters of which the information contained in this submission has been drawn from. If other enquiries arise we will be using the information contained within this submission as part of our response.

We would be happy to meet with you to discuss these issues and work together to develop a solution that suits the needs of the Wheatbelt. We would also be happy to appear before the Committee. May we suggest that the following communities be considered for future hearings as part of the inquiries process?

- Corrigin
- Dalwallinu
- Lake Grace
- Wongan Hills

Other

- Boddington

We are pleased to be informed that a hearing will be conducted in Jurien Bay 11 June 2010.

If you require further information please feel free to contact Wendy Newman, CEO Wheatbelt Development Commission P: (08) 9622 7222.