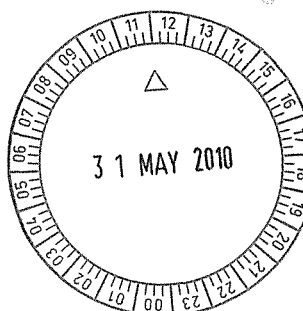


Regional  
Development  
*Australia*  
W H E A T B E L T W A



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Committee Clerk  
Standing Estimates and Financial Operations Committee  
Legislative Council  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Committee Members

Please accept this letter as a submission to the Committee inquiry into the removal of Senior School Allocation Funding for Year 11 and 12 Courses at District High Schools throughout Western Australia. This submission is made on behalf of Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt Inc.

Addressing the terms of reference:

The decision-making process and rationale behind the decision

Two key issues for the Wheatbelt region are a declining or static population in a large number of communities and disparity in the demographic of the population whereby there is concerning lack of residents aged between 15 and 25 and a significant proportion of the population are aged over 45 (i.e. 44% of the population). Improving educational and training opportunities for young people is a strategy that has been identified to reverse the trend and reduce the impact of these issues on the region. The decision to discontinue Year 11 and 12 courses from a large number of District High Schools in the region is counterintuitive to growth and development in the Wheatbelt and will only exacerbate the current issues we are facing in this region.

If early and thorough consultation was sought from the communities being impacted by this decision, it would have been clear that the closure of year 11 and 12 will have a significant social and economic impact on the towns losing this provision as well as the surrounding communities that feed in to them. The specific implications of this decision are outlined under the subsequent terms of reference.

It is apparent that the rationale behind this decision is largely based on cost cutting, with a belief that it is not financially viable to run a course for 10 or less students. While there is merit in this, I think that a more important consideration should be how the impacted areas are going to be able to meet the educational needs of young



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people when there are no realistic or viable options available to them. At the end of the day it comes down to what is more important, a child's education or cutting costs.

The Department of Education's decision to close Year 11 and 12 courses in District High Schools across the state does not appear to take in to consideration the specific circumstances of each region. In the Wheatbelt, isolation, the financial impact of drought, the lack of alternative educational options and the absence of transport systems to cater for travel to large regional centers for schooling make it necessary for the smaller communities to be able to provide year 11 and 12 to young people.

#### The effect of the decision on the State budget, the affected students and communities

Out of the 21 District High Schools that are being impacted by the decision to cut year 11 and 12 over the next two years, 14 of these are in the Wheatbelt region. Specifically:

Year 11 & 12 Cut this Year	Year 11 & 12 Cut as of 2011
Dalwallinu District High School	Gingin District High School
Mukinbudin District High School	Wongan Hills District High School
Narembeen District High School	Jurien Bay District High School
Quairading District High School	Kojonup District High School
Brookton District High School	Southern Cross District High School
Corrigin District High School	Wyalkatchem District High School
Wagin District High School.	Lake Grace District High School

The implications of this for Wheatbelt communities are great. The availability and quality of educational options is a major influence on decisions about where people with families will live. Parents need to consider how they are going to cater for their child's educational needs and if they cannot be met in the town where they live then there is the potential for them to move their family to somewhere with better opportunities. This will have a serious impact on growth and development in the region, as without a certain mass of population industry and employment will decline, service provision and amenities will become less feasible and communities will continue to deteriorate.

As a result of this decision young people in the affected towns will experience extreme difficulties in accessing quality educational options. Essentially they will have the option to study through the School of Isolated and



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Distance Education (SIDE), travel to the nearest Senior High School or move to Perth or a large regional centre to attend boarding school. Each one of these options represents a unique set of challenges for these youth.

The move away from family and friends for those young people who attend boarding school can be extremely traumatic and have a significant negative impact on their emotional, mental and even physical growth. For those young people who do stay in the region and continue their education through SIDE, unless they have the necessary support networks and personal drive/motivation it is likely that they will not complete year 12. Without a proper education employment opportunities will be limited as will all later life outcomes. For those young people who are able to travel to a Senior High School, they could be looking at any where up to 300km a day for a round trip. This excessive travel is not a reasonable burden to place on young people who will already have significant pressures from school work and social commitments. In each of the abovementioned scenarios, it is the young people who are already disadvantaged by their ability, attitude or family situation that will be most impacted by this decision. Appendix A and B provide the perspectives from community members in two affected towns.

For the existing Senior High Schools, Agricultural Colleges and the District High Schools that will continue to offer year 11 and 12 in the Wheatbelt region, significant pressure will be placed on them to handle the increase in student numbers. Significant upgrades will be required for some schools to enable them to accommodate this increase in student numbers and there will be a need for additional staff and other resources. A substantial injection of funds from the State Government will therefore be needed to improve the capacity of these schools.

#### The adequacy, cost effectiveness and social impact of the educational alternatives proposed

Some people do not want to or cannot afford to send their children to boarding school and logistics might prevent them from sending their children to large regional centres. The closure of the boarding house, Swanleigh, which traditionally has housed a large number of young people from the Wheatbelt due to its affordability, is likely to make it even more prohibitive for families to send their children to boarding school. Faced with no viable options it is likely that families in these situations will leave the region and move to the metro area or the youth will not continue in further education and will have to seek employment or identify alternative learning options which are already limited in the region. For those families who can afford to send their children to boarding school, the impact on the region is still substantial as in a lot of cases a move away to high school in the early to mid teens can effectively mean a move away permanently because the opportunities for young people are very limited in the local communities.

The alternatives to boarding school that have been proposed, specifically SIDE (Home based) or travel to a Senior High Schools, are not realistic in the Wheatbelt as there are currently not the services or infrastructure available to support these options. As mentioned above, for some young people travel to Senior High Schools will involve a



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300km round trip each day. Not only is this an excessive amount of travel but there are also currently no transport options available. Furthermore, home SIDE is not an option for all young people in the region given telecommunication issues (i.e. limited broadband and phone reception in a number of areas), which prevent them from accessing the information they need and the lack of support people in local schools or the wider community to facilitate the program.

To ensure that the educational needs of young people in the region can be met now and in the future it is vital that a thorough evaluation of this decision be conducted and realistic and viable solutions identified to limit the disadvantages being faced by youth in the Wheatbelt. If the decision is not reversed then serious thought needs to go in to how we can address the gap in education provision for regional youth. Opportunities exist in providing additional financial support to families who cannot afford to send their children to boarding school; providing funding to the 40 Community Resource Centres in the Wheatbelt to enable them to become alternative learning centres; and improving transport options, whether that be by bus or rail, to allow young people to stay in the region and commute to a regional centre to access a Senior High School.

Please contact myself at your earliest convenience should you require any further information with regards to this submission.

Yours Sincerely



Rebekah Burges

Executive Officer  
Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt Inc.



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## Appendix A. Comments from Wyalkatchem community member

Students at Wyalkatchem District High School will be unfairly disadvantaged with this proposed policy.

Although many farming families send their children away to Perth schools many students from low socio economic families do not have this capacity. They are often from single parent families and they are the families that are willing to live in the Wheatbelt. These students are also the young people willing to stay in the Wheatbelt if they have the skills and education to get traineeships and apprenticeships and this policy severely disadvantages students who live in the smaller towns of the Wheatbelt. Students already travel from Koorda and Trayning and Kununoppin by bus to attend WDHS for their secondary education.

If year 11 and 12 are withdrawn these students will be disadvantaged by studying at home and withdraw into themselves as they will have no daily social contact with their peers. Currently 4 such students are experiencing difficulty staying motivated with their studies and do not join sporting groups or youth events as they experience low self esteem and their parents don't have the parenting skills to create motivational opportunities. These students aren't engaged in work experience and have no structured opportunity to learn life skills.

The Federal Government has spent \$500,000 (estimate as no local accountability) of federal money to build an Art and Music educational building BUT this policy has student numbers decreasing not increasing to make use of this new building which is currently in the progress to being built.

WDHS has been planning a partnership with the shire and a local aviation business to attract year 11 and 12 students with a possible overseas recruitment for students through regional development and this decision puts these future plans in jeopardy. Money has been spent on upgrading the airstrip and this policy is working against regional development strategies.



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## Appendix B. Comments from Dandaragan Community member

Saying a class of 10 is not viable in rural areas shows no knowledge of our regions, once again giving no consideration to rural life and circumstances. Just in my travels at the moment I am coming across students not attending school who are enrolling with SIDE (Distance Education) to do home schooling, but not having the work ethic/literacy /independent working skills, to even open the packages and complete assessments. One parent has been pleading with the school to allow her daughter to study there (Year 11) and after making contact with local political members her daughter is allowed to attend on Mondays & Wednesdays only. This is crazy!

I have just found out that the schools have been telling these students and parents they can't study Yr 11 & 12 on the premises and these kids are falling in to a big hole. Some parents can't afford to send their children away and in many cases the youth don't want to go away either. What happened to choice? Sometimes leaving home at a sensitive age is the worst thing socially and emotionally for our children and in the end its the health system that pays! Has there been any consideration about rural youth suicide rates?

It would be a percentage move for them to put money into Jurien to make it a more attractive Upper School choice and plan for a nearby TAFE. We could offer to be a pilot school delivering on-line from specialist schools etc, while the upper school numbers are growing as well as covering key core learning on-site. In this age of technology and communication anything should be possible!



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