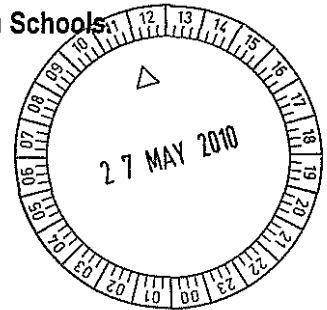


## STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS

### Inquiry into the Removal of Yr 11 and 12 Courses at District High Schools

Rod Baker  
Principal  
Carnamah District High School  
48 McPherson St  
Carnamah  
WA 6517



[Rodney.Baker@det.wa.edu.au](mailto:Rodney.Baker@det.wa.edu.au)  
Phone 9951 1266  
Fax 9951 1328

Dear Committee Members

I would like to have my opinions on the place for year 11 and 12 students at District High Schools considered by you as you look into the aspects of this issue.

#### **My Background**

Until the end of 2007 I was a District Director, a role I held in the Mid West Education District for five years and, before that, three years in the Albany District. At the end of 2007 I accepted the role of principal at Kalumburu Remote Community School and, after two years there, moved back to the Mid West where I have now won the permanent appointment as the principal at Carnamah District High School.

In my role as the Director for the Mid West I participated in the two "Roadshows" held in the district where the then Minister for Education, Alan Carpenter, introduced the plan for the School Leaving Age Change (SLAC). I then supervised the introduction of the SLAC across the district, assisting schools to manage the issue and forming a district team able to provide targeted support to areas of need. I became very familiar with the issues that schools faced.

My comments are generally in support of district high schools having the opportunity, with some additional systemic support, to run VET programs for year 11 and 12. While I am aware that there are some that are happy to be able to do away with the responsibility, and there are a few others that can't run the program due to local factors, there are many district high schools that have now demonstrated the value of having such a program. I am not supportive of TEE programs in district high schools (with some exceptions linked to large student enrolments) and agree with the published comment that cohorts of less than ten students are not viable. The resources needed to support a TEE program are extensive and cannot be reproduced across many small schools. VET, on the other hand, can be managed with a minimum of school based resources, making use of the range of community expertise available.

While I had no argument with the proposed SLAC, and it was particularly evident in our district that many young people were leaving school at 15 with no real future ahead of them, it also became evident that the strategies being developed were very much focused on the metropolitan area and schools in large towns, and little had been put in place to support rural schools. This was not surprising as most of the affected students were in the city or large centres. In my observation, the SLAC had less of an impact on the senior

high schools than it did on smaller schools. After all, they were already set up to cater for students of 16 and 17 years of age and the SLAC did not require major changes of school structures and procedures to accommodate them. I do acknowledge they had to cater for more students in VET programs, a significant challenge that I don't wish to down play.

The smaller rural schools, and for me in the Mid West these included District High Schools like Carnamah and Jurien Bay as well as places such as Cue, Yalgoo and Burringurrah, faced a significant challenge. Unfortunately, the system didn't clarify the expectations placed on small schools and parents seemed to assume that the SLAC meant that they could continue to send their children to the local school in years 11 and 12 where they would be catered for. As a result, many schools felt obliged to put a program in place. The result was the gradual development of a variety of programs in District High Schools, both TEE and VET, that were poorly resourced in the early stages and which put principals and their staffs under great pressure.

Clearly, at this time, we should have made it clear that no District High School or small school would run a TEE or VET program unless it could meet particular criteria (eg: the extent of local government support, the number of businesses available for placement, school readiness and teacher expertise...). We didn't take this line but actually supported schools in their endeavours, gradually increasing the support that was made available (eg Senior School Allocation) and contributing to the local perception that the programs were here to stay.

In the period since, many schools have developed very worthwhile programs that they feel meet local needs and which have become well embedded, leading parents to form the expectation that they will continue. In the case of Carnamah DHS several major local operations (Waltons, Rio Tinto) have put considerable effort into the development of the program leading to employment and feel they have some ownership of it. The fact that these programs, a number of which have been running successfully for some years, are to be terminated without any attempt at community consultation, something the system expects schools to do constantly, has been particularly galling.

#### **The Situation at Carnamah DHS**

This year we have 15 students enrolled in year 11 and 12 in the VET program. We do not offer TEE. All of our students have placements in Carnamah and Three Springs in either a School Based Traineeship or Work Placement. The businesses where we have students placed include the Shire Councils of Carnamah and Three Springs, the Midlands Hospital, the IGA Supermarket, Waltons Machinery, Elders, Rio Tinto Talc Mine, and the school. Some of these students have already been offered permanent employment when they leave school.

The work placements are all carried out on Thursday and Friday each week with the students having the first three days of each week doing lessons in classrooms at school. Comments have been made publicly, as part of the justification for ending the program, that cohorts of students less than ten are not viable. While I agree with this in relation to TEE classes, I don't think that it applies to VET programs in all instances and this distinction needs to be made when the merits of the two are being considered. We are able to have our year 11 and 12 students in the one class group, forming a cohort of around 15 – 20 students with the one teacher, working together at times and individually at other times. This has worked well and the school has a history of success. For example all year 12s graduated in 2009, and a number of Mid West Education District Awards have been won.

The program has slowly gathered support within our school community and is now very well regarded. We rarely have problems finding places for around 20 students per year, with most carrying their placement

over from year 11 into year 12. Employees are quite willing to give the additional time to ensure that they, their personnel and their premises meet the standards required to have students work there.

At the "height" of the program Carnamah DHS had approximately 1 FTE (Senior School Allocation) provided to ensure that the VET program could be managed. This year the allocation has dropped to 0.48 FTE and, if the intention to do away with the program is carried out at the end of the year, we would receive no additional allocation for 2011 and beyond.

This year we have coped adequately with the additional 0.48 FTE. This has ensured that we are able to dedicate some teacher time to the management of the work placements, as well as meet the administrative needs of the program. When issues arise, and they do even with a small and well supported program such as that at Carnamah, we are able to have an experienced teacher, familiar with the program and student and known to the employer, deal with it. This is very important, particularly as the students are off site, and some additional effort is required to ensure we retain the support of the employer and that a positive relationship continues to exist. However, the school would find it difficult to run any program for year 11 and 12 if there was no additional allocation at all.

### **The Effect of the Decision on the Students and Community**

The local community is concerned about losing the VET program. The students who participate are seen as the future workforce for the towns, going on from the school-based activities to complete apprenticeships or further training and then filling the gaps that occur in the trades. There is a strong feeling, based on past events here that, once young people move away, they usually don't return (unless it is to take over a family farm and that is not the case with these students).

I am also concerned about the broader impact that this decision may have on the whole school. The imminent demise of the VET program has led to talk from some parents about moving their children away before they reach the end of year 10 so that they are well placed to continue in year 11 and 12. When I first visited Carnamah in the role of director the school had over 200 students. It is now down to 140 with just half of them in primary classes. Any further decline in enrolments affects the viability, not only of the secondary program in year 8, 9 and 10, but also the junior grades as well.

### **The Options Available to Carnamah DHS Students**

The options for our students, should the program not run here, cannot be found locally if all students are to continue to live at home. It has been suggested that Carnamah students would travel by bus to Morawa DHS (a school where the year 11 and 12 program is not under threat). This is a silly suggestion, made by the ill-informed. Many students attending Carnamah DHS already travel a significant distance by bus each day to get here and to then add a further 50 minutes of travel on to Morawa does not make sense. Furthermore, and I believe this to be extremely relevant, I doubt that the Morawa community has the capacity to absorb an additional 15 – 20 students and provide them with relevant work placements. It needs to be acknowledged that small towns like these have a limited number of businesses and work-site opportunities and Morawa is a town that has been heavily impacted on by the rural recession. While I am aware that the town has significant potential that is now developing, linked to iron-ore mining, Morawa DHS would struggle to ensure all students in year 11 and 12 had worthwhile work placements if all of our year 11 and 12 students were added to their present enrolment.

Another possible option for our students is to live at home and enrol at the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) and join the VET program that is available through them. I know little about it, and only heard of it recently, but I have some doubts that our students have the necessary support and self discipline required to complete a program that does not have regular, face-to-face contact with teachers.

Other options require students to live away from home and include attending either Geraldton Senior College or Midlands Senior High School, boarding at the residential colleges that support those schools. Our families also have the option of sending their children further away to Perth or other major centres.

I am concerned about the impact that having to live away from home will have on these students and their families. These are, in the main, families who have assumed that their child's education would be completed locally and that they would continue to live at home. No plans have been made by them to have their child live away from home, an option that is seen by parents as very expensive. The SLAC was introduced to cater for young people who were not suited to mainstream education and were already dropping out. It seems likely that, faced with the expectation of living away from home, a number will again quietly slip through the net and prove extremely difficult to track and get back into some form of education.

### **The Potential Savings to the System**

Responses to queries about why the Year 11 and 12 program is being brought to an end have stressed that it is not about a financial saving to the system. I find this hard to believe when considering the VET program and can't see any other reason why it might be done.

At face value the saving would seem to be insignificant, if in fact there is a saving when all factors are considered. Carnamah DHS has received up to 1 FTE (Senior School Allocation) to assist in running the program which might amount to \$80 000 per year. If each of the 20 schools involved received around this the savings to the system would be approximately \$1 600 000. Others might try to argue that it is more but I doubt that it would be much more and shouldn't top \$2 000 000. This would seem to be an insignificant amount when considered as part of the overall Department of Education budget. There are certainly other areas that should be closely scrutinised within the system before settling on this!

However, are the savings really there? At present we have 15 of our students taught by people with expertise within our community, virtually for free. We are proposing to scrap the program and put them somewhere else where the system may need to provide additional resources and personnel. In the case of many schools, including Carnamah, the only alternative for students will be to live away from home and this will be an additional cost to families and the broader community. Despite the financial assistance provided families still need to contribute, more I would argue than if their child lives at home. And we should not lose sight of the social impact as well. I firmly believe that some of the students who might participate in a VET program in a district high school will not continue in any form of education or training. They will slip through the gap with the system unable to provide the resources to track them all and keep them linked up, possibly needing community support at a later time.

### **Conclusion**

In my opinion this is a matter that has been poorly handled, lacking sensitivity in the way it has been communicated to rural communities. In a letter to principals from the Deputy Director General, informing them that the Senior School Allocation would cease, the comment was made that *"research shows that education provision for year 11 and 12 is strengthened by attending schools with higher populations."*

As one who has had 43 years in education, all in the country working in, and supervising, schools of a range of types and sizes, this seems a very selective statement to me and attempts to make a generalisation to suit the circumstance. If true, why would it only apply to year 11 and 12? The fact is that different students, from different backgrounds with varying abilities and expectations, will progress well in different educational settings and not all are suited to the big school scene. The statement is a poor attempt to influence rural communities. We should never lose sight of the contribution that small schools, including district high schools, continue to make in the provision of education across this vast state. I believe that it is possible for

district high schools, when the right set of circumstances exist, to run a VET program for year 11 and 12 students. I hope that the Parliamentary Committee can, at the very least, recommend that the Department of Education review the decision and implement an appropriate evaluation of the existing programs.

*Rod Baker 24/5/10*

Rod Baker