

**GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO REPORT 27:
STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS**

**THE REMOVAL OF SENIOR SCHOOL ALLOCATION FUNDING FOR
YEAR 11 AND 12 COURSES AT 21 DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOLS**

The Government submits to the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations its response to the above Report regarding the Government's decision to remove the Senior School Allocation (SSA) funding from 21 district high schools.

Prior to the release of the Report, the decision to remove the SSA from two of the 21 district high schools (being Lake Grace District High School and Roebourne District High School) was reconsidered and, therefore, the following response refers to 19 schools for which the SSA will be phased out by the end of 2010.

District high schools are designed to provide education for students from Kindergarten to Year 10, and receive above-formula staffing (some in the vicinity of 5 FTE) in order to provide a broad curriculum to typically smaller cohorts. Students in Years 11 and 12 have typically travelled by bus or boarded to complete their senior schooling at a senior high school. In 2006, changes to the *School Education Act 1999* were introduced, requiring students in Years 11 and 12 to be engaged in an approved educational program until the end of their 17th year. The then Government introduced the SSA as a transitional arrangement to support district high schools to provide senior schooling to small populations of students in Years 11 and 12 who chose to remain at their district high schools following the raising of the leaving age.

In 2009, the Department re-examined the provision of this funding to review whether the Department's objectives – to ensure students were gaining maximum educational benefit, and that resources were provided where they are needed most – were being met. Findings from the examination indicated that senior school students receive the maximum benefit when they attend a full secondary school. The Department also found that a number of alternative transport arrangements, as well as the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE), are available to students wishing to access increased breadth in educational programs and pathways. As with all decisions regarding the allocation of limited resources, the Department allocates funding to ensure educational objectives are being met. On this basis, it was decided that the best allocation of funding was to direct the SSA to those schools where a large distance to the nearest secondary school and lack of suitable transport arrangements limited access to senior schooling.

This decision was based on the understanding that students are best served where there is access to a broad curriculum and appropriately qualified teachers; and where they can have increased social interaction with peers in facilities designed to cater for their educational needs.

In certain circumstances, parents may choose to keep their children in the local district high school to complete Year 11 and 12. Consideration of individual circumstances or adverse local conditions may mean that it is in the interests of some students to continue their education within the district high school community.

The Minister for Education has listened to community concerns through correspondence, visits to affected schools, attending the Western Australian District High School Administrators Association conference and meetings conducted at her office. As a consequence, the Department of Education was requested to investigate examples of innovative partnerships with industry and local communities that, in particular, provide meaningful pathways to employment and further training.

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education immediately reinstate the Senior School Allocation funding to the 21 district high schools from which it was removed.

As previously stated, the SSA is being phased out from 19, not 21, district high schools by the end of 2010. The situation at Lake Grace District High School was re-examined and funding was reinstated due to the distance students need to travel. The situation at Roebourne District High School was also re-examined and it was determined that, for specific cultural reasons, funding will remain beyond 2012.

The Government does not intend to reinstate the SSA funding to the eight district high schools from which it has already been removed, nor does it have plans to reinstate funding to the 11 schools from which it is being phased out by the end of 2010.

The Department's internal examination into the provision of curriculum and education programs for Year 11 and 12 students in district high schools indicated that schools continue to offer similar courses within their current level of resourcing. This included a range of programs including those that contribute to the achievement of the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE), through face to face teaching and SIDE, and approved vocational and workplace learning programs.

Changes in enrolments have been monitored following the removal of the SSA from schools. All students continue to be enrolled in an approved activity, with the majority of students remaining at their district high school. The Government acknowledges that there will always be challenges in ensuring that all students are effectively engaged in meaningful pathways, and will continue to provide, through the Department, a number of strategies and services to facilitate this engagement. There has, so far, been no evidence of an increase in the number of disengaged students as a result of the removal of this funding.

The commitment and dedication of these schools in providing senior schooling to their students is fully acknowledged. However, the Government considers that students gain educational benefits when they attend senior high schools due to the following:

- increased access to teachers with senior schooling and subject specific curriculum expertise;
- an increased range of curriculum programs, in particular a wider breadth of vocational programs, with appropriately qualified teachers;
- improved social interaction with peers; and
- improved facilities, particularly in the specialist areas.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education when considering funding changes to schools in rural and regional areas take into consideration:

- a) whether there is actually any savings to the overall State Budget;
- b) the broader economic and social consequences of the decision; and
- c) whether access to, and equity and excellence in, education for all students will be upheld.

The principles outlined in Recommendation 2 underpin standard operating procedure for the Department.

Changes to funding will not always result in the achievement of savings. The objective in making the decision to remove the SSA from 19 schools was to ensure resource allocation that allows students to access the widest range of educational programs available.

The Department does consider the broader economic and social consequences of its decisions with respect to funding changes to schools in rural and regional areas, and seeks continuously to improve its processes. The Department has always placed, and will continue to place, the highest priority on access to, and equity and excellence in, education for all students.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education review the provision of years 11 and 12 at district high schools to ensure that the education programs provide access to, and equity and excellence in, education for all students.

The Government is committed to providing access to, and equity and excellence in, education for all students and continually reviews policy and programs to ensure the best allocation of resources for the education of our students.

As part of its accountability processes, the Department continuously undertakes examinations of performance at system, school and student levels. Findings from such examinations are used to inform planning for resource allocation and delivery of services, and to ensure that every student has the optimum opportunity to receive a broad educational experience.

The Government reiterates that district high schools are designed to provide education for students from Kindergarten to Year 10, and considers that senior high schools provide Year 11 and 12 students with access to the most educationally beneficial circumstances including specialist teaching and facilities, an increased range of curriculum programs and a larger peer cohort with which to interact.