

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS**

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

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT JURIEN BAY
FRIDAY, 11 JUNE 2010**

SESSION SEVEN

Members

**Hon Giz Watson (Chair)
Hon Philip Gardiner (Deputy Chair)
Hon Liz Behjat
Hon Ken Travers
Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich**

Hearing commenced at 2.55 pm

BENNIER, MRS COLLEEN
President, Carnamah P&C Association,
sworn and examined:

TREMLETT, MS KYLIE
Secretary, Carnamah P&C Association,
sworn and examined:

The CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome you both to the meeting this afternoon. The first thing I need to do is to ask you to take either an oath or an affirmation.

[Witnesses took the affirmation.]

The CHAIR: You will have signed a document entitled “Information for Witnesses”. Have you read and understood that document?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIR: These proceedings are being recorded by Hansard. A transcript of your evidence will be provided to you. To assist Hansard, please speak directly into the microphones. I remind you that your transcript will become a matter for the public record. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement during today’s proceedings, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session. If the committee grants your request, any public and media in attendance will be excluded from the hearing. Please note that until such time as the transcript of your public evidence is finalised, it should not be made public. This prohibition, however, does not prevent you from discussing your public evidence generally once you leave the hearing.

Thank you for coming in this afternoon. As you are aware, the committee is inquiring into the government’s decision to cease to provide senior school allocation funding for years 11 and 12 at 21 district high schools in WA, including Carnamah District High School. We welcome your input. Would you like to make an opening statement? I note that you have provided us with some additional written material today. Thank you very much. Maybe you would like to speak to that.

Mrs Bennier: On behalf of the Carnamah P&C and the community of Carnamah, we are here because we have a huge passion for our school and our community. We feel that by coming here we can represent our schools and our communities very well. The Carnamah District High School has 17 students. All of them are in a VET program and are fully employed through the VET program. We feel that it is absolutely detrimental to take this away from our community, knowing that those students may not be academic or they may be academic but they choose to stay with their families within our community. They have employment that is given to them by the businesses in our community. Three of them have already been guaranteed full employment next year. We have businesses that rely on that for their apprentices in the future. It gives the kids a very good understanding of what they are going into for their future and it gives them training. They do cert 1 and cert 2 while they are doing their traineeships and then they go on to do their apprenticeships. The benefit of keeping these students is twofold: it keeps them with their families and it helps our businesses to keep our young people in our communities, which our community relies on for sport and other capacities; otherwise we will end up with a very old society. It is a known fact that once a student goes away to a boarding school in the metropolitan area, very rarely do they come back to reside in their local communities. If that was the case for the students, as I think would happen if we lost our VET program, we would end up with an aged society that, in the end, we would need a C-

class hospital for because we would have no youth coming through to provide us with our sporting teams like hockey, netball, football, tennis, golf and cricket.

If you take that program away from us, we will lose approximately two teachers—that is, two experts we are bringing into our community, which means employment and income. While they are there, they give us, as a closed community, new ideas and they refresh our thoughts. They provoke us to think outside of the square. They also do a huge amount of volunteer work as a scout or guide leader. We would run out of people if we lost them. We need everyone we can get hold of. If the VET program was taken away, we would have families leaving our community because of financial reasons; they could not afford to sustain it. We could also end up with split families where the mother goes off to the metropolitan area with the children and the father stays back to earn the money. In that situation, if they stay away for two or three years, in the end, they do not have a family or a marriage. It is detrimental to our community in every way.

The other thing I would like to say is that it is my observation that, as a student who has been sent away to boarding school, a family can claim \$6 000 per student to get the living away from home allowance. We have 17 students this year, and it is growing every year; it has increased every year since we have had it going. For every student, you add \$6 000, and we have 17 students. That is more than a teacher and a half's wage that the government would have to pay out for the living away from home allowance. We are not asking for such a huge value in monetary terms to sustain this program that we think is second to none. I know that we are one-eyed biased, but it is a very good program that we have going. We have businesses that think it is fabulous. It is a great thing for both businesses and students. I rest my case!

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: You have been dying to say that all day!

The CHAIR: Would you like to add anything?

Ms Tremlett: The workplaces that they are placed in, it is hard enough trying to get people to come to the country with limited facilities. If we can keep this program, we are offering these workpeople an alternative for employment to grasp at and then they will stay.

The CHAIR: What sort of workplaces are they?

Ms Tremlett: There is Walton's, the machinery dealership, the hospital, the primary schools, the talc mine —

Mrs Bennier: There is Cunningham's. We draw from the north midlands. We are Coorow, Carnamah, Three Springs, Eneabba and across towards Perenjori. That is the draw for our school. We have businesses in all those communities that take those students.

Ms Tremlett: There are also Elders and Wesfarmers.

Mrs Bennier: And also the Shire of Three Springs.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: What sort of a business is Walton's?

Mrs Bennier: It is a John Deere and Holden dealership. They take in two apprentices. The first intake of our VET students are now fully qualified mechanics. They were the first intake for the VET program for Carnamah District High School. That is fabulous. We also have another student—an Aboriginal girl at the Three Springs Primary School—who did early childhood studies through the VET program. She is now fully employed by the Three Springs school. We have another student who is working for Elders. He has done his cert 1 and cert 2 and is now doing his cert 3. He went to Elders when he was 15 when he was in year 10. It is not that he is not academic, but he is not interested in academia. He went to Elders at the end of year 10 and said, "Would you take me on?" Elders said, "You're a bit young. You don't have a driver's licence. No. We think you had better go and do year 12. After you have done year 12, come back to us and we will have another look." He then went back to school and got his VET program organised and went back to them with the VET program and said, "I've got this VET program, would you take me on?" Elders said, "Yes, of

course.” Now he has done cert 1, cert 2 and is doing cert 3. They have already told him that he has full-time employment for next year. He wants to be a stockie and he wants to be an auctioneer. They have guaranteed that they will take him on.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: Well done him.

Mrs Bennier: Yes.

Ms Tremlett: And well done Elders.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: That is great.

Mrs Bennier: It is a win-win situation. That family is not the sort of family that would want to lose their child. That family would relocate. They have three boys. They are a fabulous family. They are involved in every sport and in every community organisation that we have. If we lost that sort of family, we would never get them back. They would be gone forever.

Ms Tremlett: And if you times that by 17, the whole district would start to crumble.

Mrs Bennier: Exactly. Lower breadwinning families cannot sustain the price of boarding school, let alone the isolation of separating that child. Need I go on to talk about Aboriginals? Aboriginals just will not be separated. You would have those people slipping through the ranks and being uneducated because they would not relocate. They stay where they are born because they want to stay where they are born. They are part of our community. They get into our community and they are treated equally with everybody else, as they should be.

The CHAIR: What is the population projection of Carnamah?

Mrs Bennier: It stays static.

The CHAIR: Has it been pretty static for a while?

Mrs Bennier: It has been static for a long time. It went down slightly probably 10 years ago and now it is staying static. We are primarily a wheat and sheep farming community. When the farms got bigger, they did not need the same number of staff. That decreased the population a little bit. But since then, it basically has been static.

Ms Tremlett: But then Carnamah shire itself has been progressive and has cleared out areas to bring other businesses in.

Mrs Bennier: Carnamah shire built three factory units with three very nice quality houses to bring businesses into our community to keep our community turning over. It is a known fact that if you do not have the facilities, no-one wants to live there. You have got to keep it at a certain level; otherwise you would lose everybody. Let us face it, if you do not have a doctor, medical services or education, what else do you have? You have to have those two.

[3.05 pm]

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Are those three units or factories filled?

Mrs Bennier: Yes, they are.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Do you have people there?

Mrs Bennier: Yes, we have. We have a steel supplier, a fitter and turner and a panel beater.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: What is the population of Carnamah?

Mrs Bennier: About 300 in the town; 1 200 in our shire.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: On a scale of one to 10, where would you rate this statement: research shows that education provision for years 11 and 12 at district high schools is strengthened by attending schools with higher populations? If one is that does not seem right and 10 is very, very right, where would you rank that statement? Do you want me to read it again?

Mrs Bennier: Yes.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: Research shows that education provision for years 11 and 12 at district high schools is strengthened by attending schools with higher populations.

Mrs Bennier: I am going to make a statement before I answer it. I do not believe that to be true for Carnamah, because we are not doing a TEE program; we are doing VET.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: This is for district high schools. It is relating to only years 11 and 12 at a district high school. Okay, fair enough, your statement is still on the way. It was relating to district high schools.

Mrs Bennier: I think that so long as you have the teaching staff to direct those children, as they do—we have got a very passionate community with passionate teachers—I think our children, no matter what the numbers, are well catered for. If they went to a bigger school with a bigger population, those same students may not have the opportunities that they get from being in a smaller situation. We have small numbers with businesses to take them on. If they move to Geraldton or Perth, there probably are not the businesses to take those students on. I have not given it a number, but I think you get the gist of what I am at.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: That is okay. You have given me the sense of what you are driving at. Really, the education model you have at Carnamah is much more holistic education rather than a narrow perspective.

Mrs Bennier: It is a family.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: I am looking at what is delivered within the boundaries of a school. In that context, if the decision like the one that is being made was reviewed, how would you wish to be involved in a consultative process with the education department?

Mrs Bennier: I would like to be involved full on. It is detrimental to our future.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: With a district officer or with the head of the department?

Ms Tremlett: To do what though?

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: The decision we are looking at is about moving the senior school allocation. Assuming that was not being made but was being reviewed, how would you and your P&C like to be involved in the consultative process, if there was a consultative process to occur prior to the decision being made?

Ms Tremlett: At the highest level.

Mrs Bennier: Yes, at the highest level, because we want to protect our program. We want to protect our students, our children and our community. So we want to be involved at every level.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: Do you want them to come out to Carnamah or would you be happy to go to Perth to talk about it?

Mrs Bennier: I would be prepared to do whatever it takes to make you turn around and change your mind.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: Do you think they would understand if you had to go to Perth to talk about it?

Mrs Bennier: I would do it.

Ms Tremlett: What do you mean by if they would understand?

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: Whether they would understand what the words you were saying meant or would they need to come out to Carnamah?

Mrs Bennier: I would try to talk to them to the best of my ability.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: You are doing pretty well. I am trying to get to whether they would have to come to your community to really understand what is going on.

Ms Tremlett: I think they need to come out to our community.

Mrs Bennier: I think we have shown a passion. We have just driven an hour and a half to come here. I think we are showing our passion by doing that.

Hon LIZ BEHJAT: You exude passion from every pore, and I mean that in the nicest possible way.

Ms Tremlett: I think there is a bit of syndrome where it could be perceived as city versus country. I do not know whether that is right or not. It feels like you are taking this allocation and going to put it back into the city. It just feels that we are the country people who are always —

Mrs Bennier: Disadvantaged.

Ms Tremlett: Not disadvantaged, but stuff is always being taken away from us to go to our city cousins. I know that the population is much larger in the city and you have to do what you have to do in the city, but it just feels as though every now and then we get forgotten about.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: As a point of clarification: we have not done anything. We are just conducting an inquiry.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: Can I help by explaining that it is just a lack of understanding. That is why I was asking you whether you can get it across to the people in the city by going down there or whether you need to get the city people—the city decision makers, because they are—coming to the country to see exactly what you are doing. That is why I asked that. There is an issue of understanding, I believe.

Mrs Bennier: For the city folk to come and have a look at our program, I think they would be quite surprised at how well it works for our community.

Ms Tremlett: They would have to come and see it to understand how it works and how much of an impact it has on our community and surrounding area. If they could not come, we would be more than happy to go down.

Hon PHILIP GARDINER: Sure.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: The only other aspect of it for me is the potential destruction that a decision like this can have not only on the students, but also on the families and, ultimately, the viability of a town. I suspect that it would be very hard to attract new people.

Mrs Bennier: Very detrimental, because at the end of the day if you have not got medical and education—it is hard enough to attract them as it is. If we take that way, we are instantly taking away families. They cannot sustain a life together in our community if they have not got the education. Instantly, people would be looking to move—to relocate—to another area that has the education benefits for their children, because we cannot provide them if you take our program away.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Have you written to the minister about Carnamah's position?

Mrs Bennier: We have.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Who else have you written to?

Mrs Bennier: We sent seven letters to politicians. We have had Phil Gardner come to our school council; we have had Grant Woodhams come to our school council; we have written to Liz Constable; we have then sent letters—we have had the CEO from the shire, who will be representing us in Perth at your next hearing. You have just heard from our principal, Rod Baker. Our school council sent letters to seven politicians. Our P&C sent one letter. Our school and our shire sent out seven as well trying to seek support for this program.

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: What sort of response have you had back?

Mrs Bennier: Very little, to be honest. We are very disappointed at what we got back. We have had two politicians, as in Phil Gardner and Grant Woodhams, visit us, which was fabulous. Liz Constable's response came back and it did not offer us a great deal of faith. It was just saying that it was under review, and that is why we are here trying to get our point across that it is extremely valuable and extremely important to every walk of life in our community and surrounding districts.

The CHAIR: Would you be able to provide us with a copy of that correspondence with the minister? Would it be okay for you to do that? Not now obviously.

Mrs Bennier: Yes. Would you like the one from the school council, would you like the one from the CEO or would you like both?

The CHAIR: Both, please.

Mrs Bennier: Yes. Would you like it sent to you?

The CHAIR: To the committee—that would be great.

[Supplementary Information No CI.]

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: And the response from the minister.

The CHAIR: Yes, and the response from the minister.

Mrs Bennier: Okay, yes. I will get that together and send it on. Will you give me an address to send it to?

The CHAIR: Yes, Renee can give you the address before you go.

Ms Tremlett: Can I make one more point?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Tremlett: If this program does not have enough funding and the program is closed, can we have a think about those people who do have to move? Although there are people who can send their kids away to boarding school, it is extremely expensive to send a child to boarding school. Swanleigh, which used to be very well patronised by the country community, is now closed. There is virtually nowhere that holds kids for government schools from surrounding areas. Can you also think about the amount of money that is required to send kids to private boarding school?

Hon LJILJANNA RAVLICH: Yes.

The CHAIR: Sure.

Mrs Bennier: Seriously, \$6 000 is a tip of the iceberg. The cheapest boarding school would probably be very close to \$20 000, if it is not \$20 000, and it certainly goes up from that to probably \$32 000. The amount of \$6 000 does not equate to very much towards that. Some of the people we are talking about do not even earn in a year the amount of money that it costs to send their child to boarding school.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Mrs Bennier: Thank you. We appreciate you listening to us and taking the time to do that.

The CHAIR: Thank you for taking the time to travel here. We are trying to cover a bit of ground.

Mrs Bennier: We are very appreciative that you gave us this opportunity today.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Hearing concluded at 3.16 pm