

PUBLIC



WONGAN HILLS DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL

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*Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations Committee
Inquiry into the Removal of Year 11 and 12 Courses at District High Schools*

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

There were a number of issues in regard to this decision:

Change of policy with no consultation after programs had been implemented and deemed successful.

With the introduction of the new leaving age in 2006 District High Schools such as ours had been encouraged to provide for students who would not have attended school in the past. As many had one or more 'risk' factors including those from low socio- economic backgrounds, geographic isolation, social and emotional issues, poor literacy and numeracy, transiency, differing cultural and religious beliefs and the lack of transport to the nearest Senior High School the only alternative for many of these students was to attend Wongan Hills DHS. At the time of the implementation of the new leaving age, Wongan Hills, as a community, was struggling to cope with the amount of disengaged and unemployed youth in the town. The change in policy was actually welcomed as it gave students means to continue their education in a more versatile manner.

Since that time the school has spent considerable time, effort and money in order to cater for the differing needs of these students including- funding of additional resources, upgrading of infrastructure to support a senior school classroom, staff training and planning for a face to face program, consultation with parents, employers and other agencies and gaining the support of District Office and Curriculum Council personnel in the development of the Local School Engagement Program. This program has been so successful that we currently have 24 Year 11 & 12 students enrolled, many who would previously have been disengaged. We have also had visits and feedback from other agencies involved in assisting the program to get up and running, saying how successful, versatile and well organised it is; appreciating the diverse clientele we are catering for.

Obvious community support for the current Year 11 and 12 program is clearly evidenced by the willingness of employers to take on Work Placements and Trainees.

A change in the policy has meant uncertainty for Year 11 and 12 students in District High Schools and their school communities, many who are already disadvantaged. The greatest

disappointment is that the lack of consultation or discussion with the various stakeholders has meant local contexts were not considered when making broad policy decisions.

Communication and Timing

Much of the information has been disseminated via the media creating an environment of panic and distrust. Sourcing the correct information has been difficult with many department personnel such as staffing unable to assist while taking up considerable time from district office and administration staff in attempting to understand the implications of the decisions made.

The timing of the announcement was poor as students wishing to make alternative arrangements which require accessing boarding facilities would have needed to do that well in advance. Many of these 'at risk' students do not have the family support, knowledge, skills or desire needed to access alternative options.

The timing or late announcement and uncertainty about staffing allocations also affected staff; with some making the decision to leave Wongan Hills and one competent secondary teacher deciding to accept a position at a private school where there was surety of tenure, leaving the government school system as a result.

- b) the effect of the decision on the State budget, the affected students and communities:

Added costs

Without access to Year 11 and 12 programs at a District High School the impact on the students is considerable. The assumption is that these students many who are from low socio-economic or from Indigenous backgrounds would board as they are eligible to access the State funded Isolated Children money. Should they wish to take this option there will be significant additional costs for the State and the families themselves in order for these students to access alternative education away from their local community. It is also problematic, as for example, many of these families do not own or have access to transport and would have to rely on public transport which is very limited in a small community town such as ours. Remedying this would be an additional cost for the State to bear. These at risk families live a day to day existence where financially planning for their child to exist as a boarder is not feasible.

Evidence supports that students from these backgrounds, within the Wongan Hills Community, who have had opportunity to board or complete their education elsewhere, have not succeeded. These students have ended up returning to the town and completing their education at our school. Many factors are involved in the failure of boarding for these students and sadly many of those who return; end up needing extra emotional support.

Effects on the school and community

The decision to relocate or remain in a rural community is usually made after consideration of the services provided. This includes access to doctors, hospitals and schooling etc. Now since Year 11 and 12 has become compulsory (unless alternatives are agreed to) access to schooling at the local level has been shown to influence the decision to remain or depart. This is feedback provided by employers when interviewing perspective employees. It has been noted that the entire family may choose to leave if access to a viable secondary program is not available. This has shown to affect not only school numbers but also the

entire community resulting in significant decline in population, business opportunities and employment adding to the decline in rural communities.

Local employers at times struggle to keep employees who do not adjust to working and living in a small community adding to the skill shortage. By up skilling students who already reside in the town through our work-placement program we are able to assist with this skill shortage. The ongoing mentoring and support by our staff in this process has been demonstrated as crucial to a student's success, especially for these at risk students and gives them an advantage in securing future employment.

- c) the adequacy, cost effectiveness and social impact of educational alternatives proposed

Social Implications

Research has shown that the need to belong and be accepted is crucial for young adolescents. While some students can cope and adjust to new environments, others find the social impact of separating from their family and the peers they have come to trust traumatic, leading to mental health issues. We have evidence of this in our own school where students who have left to attend city schools or other institutions have been unable to deal with the boarding situation and have returned after experiencing considerable emotional distress. Services such as Wheatbelt Mental Health have had to be accessed for the young people returning from boarding. With this support the students have readjusted well to the more familiar District High School setting. In many cases in times of financial strain the extra burden a boarding child places on the family can lead to significant guilt that has long term costs on the young person.

A survey conducted by the Participation Team from District Office and Central Office personnel at the end of 2008, showed that 93% of students would be continuing on their education at WHDHS and all had factors indicting risk to becoming disengaged from education, training or employment. These risks covered social, emotional and educational considerations. Parents were questioned about their decisions in where to educate their children and clear outlines were provided as to what education was available elsewhere. Parents were mostly not interested in sending their children away for a whole host of reasons, some including severe factors of teenage depression, family carer roles and individual health issues.

Providing suitable programs, which enable these students to attend a local school and to achieve, is important in order for them to feel they have a future. Lack of hope can result in disengagement and alienation from the broader society. The cost to the State dealing with disengaged students has been documented, with the possibility of many of these students having to be dealt with by the Juvenile Justice System and allied services.

It may be more cost effective to utilise the existing resources of the local school and community to provide for these students. District High schools such as ours already have the staff, program and resources to cater for these students. The program we currently offer works as it able to cater for each individual student and structure the program to best suit their needs. We assist them to reconnect with the community, learning skills in the process and providing them with hope for the future. We have a number of examples

where these at risk students have been offered workplacements, traineeships and subsequently apprenticeships or full time employment as a result of the program offered at this school.

Alternative Programs

Currently my understanding is that Wongan Hills District High School will receive staffing next year for students who are enrolled in the Senior Local Engagement Program as it is a Curriculum Council Endorsed, face to face program delivered by teachers at our school. We will be able to offer this program while we have the numbers to sustain this.

Unfortunately we will gain no additional resources for those students studying via distance education or externally while at our school. Although these students have higher literacy skills and are able to work more independently they still need a great deal of support from members of our school staff. Due to a variety of reasons including cultural, mental health concerns and parental choice 8 students are currently studying using this arrangement. Our Staff works closely with teachers from SIDE (School of Isolated and Distance Education) and TAFE in order for these students who are studying a variety of TEE or TAFE subjects to achieve at their optimum. Without the option to study at a District High School many of these students would be unable to access this level of education. Parents do not always have the capacity to support their students on a SIDE program from home. It is socially isolating for these young people to expect that they study by SIDE at home when a District High School is available and able to be accessed using existing transport arrangements.

The school needs funding to cover both the duty of care aspects as we cannot expect this number of students to work constantly without supervision and to continue to provide them with on-going support. This dual approach has worked to assist in overcoming disadvantage and providing significant benefits for the students who remain in their local community.

d) any other relevant matter

The role of the Participation Directorate has been to assist young people who do not attend schools, are not engaged in employment or training and many who are transient with various risk factors. With the future reduction in this Directorate there will be no monitoring or assistance for these students. They remain at risk of failing to be productive members of society and schools are not resourced to cater for their needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Please find attached supporting letters from Wongan Hills P&C, Apex and Wongan Hills /Ballidu Shire CEO.



Ms Ilona Jachmann
Principal
Wongan Hills District High School
26 May 2010