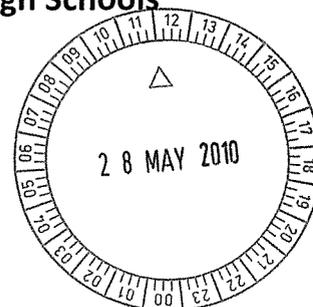


Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations

Inquiry into the removal of Year 11 and 12 Courses at District High Schools

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Background:

The Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO) is widely recognised as Western Australia's peak parent body, providing high level representation to Parent and Citizens organisations throughout the state. WACSSO strives to ensure that parents are involved in all policy decisions. WACSSO are committed to a public education system available to all young people irrespective of their age, socio-economic status, culture, gender, level of ability or geographic location.

Submission:

Report against the Terms of Reference.

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

WACSSO believes that the decision making process has been inadequate and characterised by severe lack of community consultation. As the peak parent body in Western Australia, representing in excess of 650 public schools (many of which are rural or remote), WACSSO should have been a prime candidate in any consultation process. In line with the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council's examination of District High Schools, WACSSO advocates that any alterations made to these schools should only be implemented after extensive consultation with local communities at both an individual school level and with relevant representative bodies.

The rationale behind the decision to remove year 11 and 12 courses from District High Schools appears to be driven by the want to create short-term budget savings rather than strengthening the equitable provision of education services throughout Western Australia. Any alterations should take into account the vast diversity, both geographically and socially, of the State and then provide services accordingly. It is the belief of WACSSO that the termination of year 11 & 12 will result in some students disappearing from the system and in increased enrolments in private education.

b) The effect of the decision on the State budget, the affected students and communities;

The removal of year 11 & 12 in district high schools will have far reaching adverse effects simultaneously on students and communities. WACSSO believes that regardless of where a student lives there is a responsibility for governments to ensure adequate resources to provide educational needs for students in rural and remote areas. The termination of upper schooling in District High Schools will have verifiable effects on the academic performance of students. Many District High Schools exist in low socioeconomic areas where many families derive income from seasonal or low paid rural work. Their ability to find alternative arrangements is limited.

If year 11 and 12 classes are to be removed from district high schools one key practicality that needs to be addressed is the provision of transport. In many areas district high schools are a considerable distances from their nearest neighbouring secondary schools. In various cases a bus trip from a student's place of residence is impractical and prohibitive. An example of this is can be demonstrated by examining the case of Wyndham District High School. Senior classes at Wyndham were discontinued resulting in students having to travel daily to Kununurra District High School, a round trip of 2.5 hours. A recent report in the *Kimberley Echo* states that despite ten Year 10s being enrolled at the Wyndham school last year only two have been regularly catching the bus to Kununurra. It is believed that the extensive travel has fatigued students and has been a contributing factor to the fall in attendance.

An alternative to daily travel is for students to board however there is a severe shortage of government provided boarding facilities. WACSSO believes that places in government boarding schools should be made available as a priority for students where no alternative but boarding away from home exists. There is currently only one operating government hostel in the metropolitan area.

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

The main educational alternatives available to students in rural and remote areas, after the removal of year 11 and 12 in District High Schools, is to either board or to travel to the nearest school providing year 11 and 12. These alternatives are not cost effective.

Currently students who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate state school can receive financial assistance through the Commonwealth Government Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme. This scheme provides funding for students who must board away from home or for students who are enrolled in full-time studies in an approved distance education course. At the maximum rate of assistance students in this category can receive \$9,221 p.a. - \$6926 of this being a basic component which is not subject to income tests. The Department of Education also provides assistance through the Boarding Away From Home Allowance (BAHA). This allowance provides \$2050 for students who have qualified for the AIC scheme. This funding does not equate to a saving when compared with the cost of employing an upper school teacher at District High Schools. It is the State Government's responsibility to

provide all students with access to public education. By advocating boarding as a legitimate alternative, the State Government in many ways transfers their obligation to the Federal Government.

There is scope for the Department of Education to maximise delivery through other arrangements. As an alternative to providing additional teaching staff for year 11 and 12 courses at District High Schools the Department of Education and training could provide a full curriculum component through the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) at what could be assumed to be a cost effective solution. Students would be able to continue studying upper school subjects at their school while learning through SIDE's web-based modules. Regrettably, the SIDE funding component of school's annual budgets has recently been reduced meaning that greater pressure has been placed on their ability to provide these services.

d) Any other relevant matter.

WACSSO believes that the removal of year 11 & 12 from many district high schools will affect the performance of students in rural areas. There is a real need for funding to be maintained or increased in these areas. Rural and remote students already have more difficulty achieving education benchmarks and the possibility of relocating would only further stress their prospects. All students have the right to an equitable and adequate education system. In addition, any changes that are made to the existing system need to acknowledge that parents, students, schools and communities need to be given time to make associated arrangements. A clear and considered timeline is vital.