

**PUBLIC****STANDING COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS****INQUIRY INTO THE REMOVAL OF YEAR 11 AND 12 COURSES AT  
DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOLS****SHIRE OF LAKE GRACE SUBMISSION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Shire of Lake Grace submission regarding the inquiry into the removal of Year 11 and 12 courses refers to specific examples based on the author's experience as the Chief Executive Officer at the Shires of Lake Grace and Wyalkatchem respectively.

The Shire of Lake Grace does not believe that the proposed educational alternatives are adequate and cost effective. They will certainly have a major social impact. The Lake Grace District High School has 16 Philippine students who belong to families brought in by Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH) to solve an employment issue at one of the State's key primary grain receival points. CBH is now picking this up as a major employment initiative that includes further increases for Lake Grace. These people are on 457 visas and as such are not entitled to the subsidies offered by the Government for isolated students. Apart from this situation, provision of bus services to the regional centres is not a viable option. Lake Grace students would need to attend either Narrogin or Katanning which are 134km and 130km further away respectively.

The Shire is concerned that the changes proposed by the State Government are rationalistic in nature rather than based on a sustainable community approach. Such a change would see the Shire's young families move on and thus commence the spiral of decline evident in many other rural communities.

**a) The decision making process and rationale behind the decision**

The Hon. Minister in her comments to the media on 16 March 2010 indicated that the basis for the decision regarding the removal of Year 11 and 12 courses started back in 2006. This included targeting those district high schools that had single students in Years 11 and 12 and at the end of the day, the provision of Year 11 and 12 in a district high school was originally a transitional arrangement. She stated that this change is about providing quality education. To assist with this change there are substantial subsidies available to families to assist with the costs of accommodation and education. At the end of the day, the affected children can also access buses if they need to.

In this context, both the decision making process and the rationale behind the decision to remove Year 11 and 12 courses appears flawed. This is because from a policy making point of view a decision has been made based on poor community consultation. Proper consultation involving the proposed policy put out for comment would have revealed at least two situations in rural WA that the author has had particular involvement with:

**Example One – Lake Grace District High School**

The Shire of Lake Grace has an area of 10 747 km<sup>2</sup> situated 356kms southeast of Perth and 246 northwest of Albany. The population is 1 456 across the district including four towns (Lake Grace, Newdegate, Lake King and Varley). The Lake Grace District High School is located in the township of Lake Grace on the western end of the Shire with 179 students across all age groups. The school catchment also includes Kukerin and Pingaring.

In January 2009, Cooperative Bulk Handling (CBH) brought to Lake Grace four Philippine employees and their families under the 457 Visa process to fill a number of grain receipt operator positions that CBH was unable to fill previously. The four families concerned have brought with them 16 children which increased the Lake Grace District High School population by 10%. These children are currently accessing Year 11 and 12 at the school and will continually need access to Year 11 and 12 at the local level during the next three years and beyond. It needs to be noted that as the Philippine employees are not permanent Australian residents, the families concerned are not entitled to the assistance provided to other Australian families who send their children away to school.

Further expansion is proposed by CBH for Lake Grace and in hand with this will seek the recruitment of more Philippine employees. The Regional Manager for CBH has confirmed this approach will become a major employment initiative for CBH in general. The reopening of the Ravensthorpe mine and the gearing up of mining in general is once again starting to impact on employee numbers and availability.

In regard to catching a bus each day to a regional centre such as Narrogin or Katanning this is ridiculous. Both locations are 134km and 130km further away respectively.

The Shire is aware that the High School principal wrote to the Regional Director regarding this matter on three occasions and to the Executive Director on one occasion.

**Example Two – Wyalkatchem District High School**

The second example involved the author becoming aware of the proposed change in the first half of 2009. At that time as the then Chief Executive Officer at the Shire of

Wyalkatchem, the author in conjunction with the former Principal of the Wyalkatchem District High School were in the process of developing a strategy to secure the community's future based on the introduction of an aircraft pilot training program. Essentially this program had the potential to double the number of students at the school including the implementation of permanent on site Year 11 and Year 12. Major stakeholders were interested in the scope of this program including Swan TAFE and other private recreational training providers. The Shire was then successful in securing substantial funding from the State Government to upgrade the airstrip which at that point was an all weather air strip to 1500m.

The focus of the proposed aviation training program changed when at a meeting with the Executive Director responsible for rural programs it was confirmed that the "verbal policy" regarding supporting Year 11 and 12 in district high schools was coming into effect and that the Department was no longer in a position to provide resources for such initiatives. However, he did not have a problem with the school's infrastructure being made available for tertiary students who wanted to undertake such a training program.

It should be noted that the Shire of Wyalkatchem Chief Executive Officer was subsequently appointed to the Ministerial Taskforce on Aviation Training in the Wheatbelt which was headed up by the Hon. Max Trenorden.

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

The State Budget

Education is one area that should not be compromised under the State Budget process. The Shire feels that the changes have been brought through to assist the 3% savings that the Government was seeking in order to achieve its current surplus.

Affected Students

The numbers in question at the Lake Grace District High School that will be impacted by the Government's decision to remove Year 11 and 12 are as follows:

Year	No Students	Year 11	No Students	Year 12
2010	5		2	
2011	1		5	
2012	1		1	
2013	1		1	

**Table One: Number of Affected Students. Source Lake Grace District High School**

The majority of the students referred to in Table One are Phillipine. Phillipine families and some of the other residents like to keep their children close and will not send them away. It has already been mentioned the Phillipine families cannot receive any assistance regarding education or boarding at an appropriate facility in a regional centre. The Principal of the Lake Grace District High School has commented that those from

other backgrounds will be kept at home or home schooled as they belong to very close knit families.

Also the numbers for Year 11 and 12 are set to increase as CBH once again look towards bringing in further employees from overseas.

The Philippine students and their respective families have fitted in well to the Lake Grace community. The families practice the Catholic faith and have values that are reflective of the community in general. Some of the boys have also taken up playing Australian Rules Football. Lake Grace is a safe community and is non judgmental regarding race.

It is felt that these students if forced to relocate somewhere else would struggle and in some cases would be "eaten alive" or bullied. Anecdotal evidence on this point is very strong including a number of the Philippine parents stating regularly they are grateful for the lack of bullying at the school.

### Communities

The locality of Lake Grace itself is a stable community. Although numbers have declined in the past, the evidence suggests that there are just as many people moving in to Lake Grace as moving out. This is also confirmed by the number of students at the school where there are 179 students at the school across all years. So Lake Grace does not consider itself a declining community. However, the other townships in the Shire (Newdegate, Lake King and Varley) have not been so fortunate.

Tonts (2000) maintains that Australia has a long history of public sector intervention in support of economic and social development in rural areas with a particular focus on health and education. In other words, both the Federal and State governments up until the advent of economic rationalisation had a policy of ensuring that there is equity between urban and rural areas. This approach ensured there was a reasonable level of wellbeing maintained along with making an important contribution to the economic and social viability of local communities.

Tonts (2000) summarises that small rural schools not only provide education, but retain young people in communities, help to avert problems caused by lengthy travel for students, and provide a centre for activities such as sport, voting and community meetings.

For Lake Grace, the advent of the Philippine families has not only been a boon for the school, it has solved a major employment issue for CBH, provided key diversity to the population and has also seen the Philippine women employed in a range of jobs including domestic/commercial cleaning that had become a problem for the local community. The youth concerned also undertake seasonal work at CBH. Because they are already in the local community CBH can plan several months in advance knowing that it can put on at least 4-5 local students each year to do grain receival work.

The Shire is therefore concerned that the changes proposed by the State Government are rationalistic in nature rather than based on a sustainable community approach. Such a change would see the Shire's young families move on and thus commence the spiral of decline evident in many other rural communities.

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

The Shire of Lake Grace is the 25<sup>th</sup> most productive agricultural region in Australia and is the second most productive agricultural district in Western Australia (Fletcher, 2010). The Shire's contribution to the Australian economy cannot be underestimated. In other words, the people in the Shire of Lake Grace do their bit and it is only reasonable that they in return receive due consideration when it comes to the provision of services by the State including the level of education it can access. As stated so far in this submission, the educational alternatives proposed are inadequate, certainly not cost effective for the families involved and will have a major social impact on the respective communities in the Shire.

The Minister has spoken about how this change is in keeping with quality education. A key factor in building stronger communities is indeed the quality of education provided. As such, this depends on a range of factors including the systems that are used to train, hire and fire teachers along with curriculum development and the implementation of suitable policies and so on (Hughes et al, 2007). The Lake Grace District High School is an independent school. So it has the capacity to recruit quality teachers outside the normal education system and has done so already. It is clear that it will continue to provide limited in person teaching to those Year 11 and 12 students that require this level of support regardless of whether the small amount of funding (0.6 FTE) it currently has is withdrawn or not. It is doubtful that the change in direction by the State that impacts on its youth will contribute to Lake Grace becoming a stronger community.

Research into rural and remote education in Australia, and in particular Western Australia (Tomlinson, 1994; Evans, 2004) does not recommend diverting students from district high schools to larger senior high schools and also comment that these larger schools do not necessarily provide better education. It is clear from the research that district high schools are very important institutions to rural communities such as Lake Grace. In simple terms if the secondary part of the school is compromised then it hastens the decline of families in the general area.

Gray and Lawrence (2001) discuss social injustice and spatial challenges. One solution would be to increase the use of SIDE, an excellent system. The existing resources at the school could be diverted into this program. The school has a dedicated room, computing equipment and other facilities in this regard. Technology is improving all the time and the students will still have the social contact that they need regarding their development and continued integration into the community.

**d) Any other relevant matter**

Nil

**Appearance before the Standing Committee**

The author is prepared to appear before the Standing Committee if required.



Sean Fletcher  
**Chief Executive Officer**

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**REFERENCES**

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