

Chapter 2

Secondary School Education in Rural and Regional Australia

The 'elephant in the room' when considering equitable education provision for rural and regional Australia is cost. However, the question...should not be "How much does it cost to provide quality mathematics (or any other) education in rural and regional communities?", but rather should be "How much does it cost to **not** provide quality mathematics (or any other) education in rural and regional communities?"¹

Introduction

2.1 Secondary schools students in rural and regional Australia face significant barriers in accessing educational opportunities. Those barriers include difficulties in attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff, developing and raising aspirations in relation to further learning and substantial costs in accessing educational opportunities.

2.2 While much of the focus of submissions to this inquiry was on the issue of access to tertiary education for rural and regional students and the impacts of the proposed changes to Youth Allowance, the committee did spend considerable time during the hearings investigating the challenges faced by secondary students in rural and regional areas.

2.3 The committee heard evidence and received submissions of rural and regional schools achieving excellent academic results. The committee was also told of many of the initiatives in place to address the inequities faced by students in rural and regional areas. However, despite the work that is being done on this issue by governments, by schools, by families and by communities, the inequity remains and that inequity has impacts on students, on their families and on their communities.

2.4 This chapter of the report starts with an outline of some of the alternatives for secondary school education for rural and regional students. The report then moves on to look at the disparities in performance and completion rates for students at rural and regional secondary schools. It then outlines some of the challenges that face rural and regional students in accessing secondary education. The chapter then sets out some of the government measures in place to assist rural and regional students, and concludes with a discussion on the adequacy of these measures.

1 The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers, *Submission 685*, p. 1. Emphasis in original.

Education alternatives for rural and regional secondary school students

2.5 There is a range of options for rural and regional secondary school students to access education opportunities. In addition to attending local government or non-government secondary schools, options include:

- distance education, either as a full-time student, or taking single courses to extend the range offered by the local school.
- living away from home at a larger regional or metropolitan centre to attend school. This could involve attending boarding school, living in a hostel, private boarding or the family establishing a second home where the children live while attending school.

2.6 Each of these options has advantages and disadvantages for students, their families and communities and are discussed below.

Local secondary schools

2.7 The committee spent considerable time during the inquiry discussing with witnesses the challenges and barriers in relation to accessing education opportunities, particularly in relation to students at local rural and regional schools. Those issues primarily centred on attracting and retaining suitably qualified teaching staff, but also included the issue of limited subject choice and the additional costs faced by families in rural and regional areas to access educational opportunities. These matters are considered later in this chapter in the section 'Challenges and barriers in relation to accessing educational opportunities'.

2.8 The committee heard from school communities outlining the very positive aspects of their schools. For example, Manjimup Senior High School Council's submission to the committee outlined the achievements of that school:

Manjimup Senior High School is situated approximately [300] kilometres South West of Perth and is the only Senior High School in the inland corridor of the Warren Blackwood Education District. It has a current student population of 670 students...with [a socio-economic index] placing the school in the second lowest [socio-economic index] band; indicating that students do not come from an affluent background.

Manjimup Senior High School has attained outstanding results in Tertiary bound Entrance courses over the past 10 years and has consistently ranked as the highest achieving Country Public School for students achieving a scaled score above 75% and for the number of students finishing in the top third of the state in Secondary [Tertiary Entrance Examination] League Tables.²

2 *Submission 680*, p.1. See also Mr Kevin Wager, Principal, Ingham State High School, *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 65 explaining to the committee that his school performs above the state average for high schools.

2.9 The committee also heard the positive experiences that teachers have in teaching in these areas:

I have been a teacher for over 33 years and...a principal for 20 years at schools such as Mullewa District High School, Corrigin District High School, and Katanning Senior High School. I have now been at Broome Senior High School for the past six years. During this time I have raised and educated my family in the country...

I have enjoyed my time teaching in the country but I have had to work hard at building and supporting a quality workforce in those schools. Students in rural and remote areas are often much friendlier and more respectful than their city counterparts and they can achieve results equal to any other students, given the opportunity and the support to develop pride in themselves and the encouragement to take responsibility for their own learning. The staff I have worked with have always been dedicated and competent but they too require support and understanding of their needs.³

2.10 However, there are reasons that families may choose not to send their children to the local secondary school. The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia's (ICPA) submission stated that not all secondary schools offer an education that is appropriate to all students' individual education needs:

The spectrum of 'appropriate education' can span from the academically talented (gifted), through English as a Second Language school to a student with learning difficulties and disabilities. In smaller centres the education facilities frequently do not have the resources to meet the needs [of] all their students. Subject choice is often limited to a range which potentially narrows the student's career choices. Lack of competition, interaction and learning with class members are all things which leave these teenagers at a disadvantage when class sizes are small. Some schools do not have core subjects taught face-to-face with a teacher presenting in the classroom, and many schools are adversely impacted upon by community social problems. This creates a very difficult learning environment. In these circumstances, students either receive an education locally that is not appropriate, or their families elect to move them away to access a more appropriate educational facility in another centre.⁴

Distance Education

2.11 At the committee's hearing in Tweed Heads, Mr David Cox of the Southern Cross School told the committee how distance education caters to secondary students who are isolated by both geography and circumstances. Students isolated by circumstances include students suffering from a mental illness, students with a long-term illness such as cancer and students enrolled on behavioural grounds and

3 Mr Gary Downsborough, Principal, Broome Senior High School and representative of Australian Secondary Principals Association, *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, pp 76-77.

4 *Submission 264*, p. 5.

vocationally talented students, such as elite sports people, where their vocation makes it difficult for them to attend school.⁵

2.12 Mr Cox also explained to the committee that distance education is used by full-time students, that is, students who do all their schooling through distance education, and by students enrolled in a single unit. Mr Cox noted that where students enrolled only in a single subject, it was generally because this subject was not available at their local school:

Usually, in some of the smaller high schools, it is where the curriculum cannot provide for something such as a particular language. We offer a full range of languages, including Spanish, French, German, Italian, Chinese, Japanese...We also offer subjects which may not readily be available in a smaller high school or may not have been chosen by certain students. They can be anything from music, engineering studies, physics and chemistry or any of the humanities subjects.

...The main ones are extension English and maths. We offer those too. As I said, some of the smaller high schools and some of the central schools cannot always offer them. They may have a particularly good student in one of those subjects and we will support them.⁶

2.13 The committee was told of the successes of students through distance education. Open High School, a Sydney-based specialist language secondary school providing distance education language programs to students in NSW and the ACT, set out in its submission the success its students had in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) Examinations:

In 2008 Open High School entered 622 students in 27 courses over 10 languages for the Higher School Certificate Examination...

Open High School students achieved 9 Firsts in State and in 14 of the 27 Higher School Certificate courses offered by Open High School 30 students were placed in the top five places in the state. This consisted of 9 1sts, 6 2nds, 4 3rds, 6 4ths and 5 5ths.⁷

2.14 In terms of students transitioning from secondary to tertiary studies, Ms Bronwyn Stubbs, President of the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools, informed the committee that the feedback from secondary students is that distance education provides them with the skills to be successful at university.⁸

5 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, pp 3 and 5. See also Ms Bronwyn Stubbs, President of the Australasian Association of Distance Education Schools, *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2009, p. 19, who told the committee that Victoria has 500-plus secondary students enrolled in distance education in Years 7 to 10, with a significant component of those being due to medical reasons, either physical or social and emotional.

6 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, pp 2-3.

7 *Submission 627*, Attachment B, pp 2-3.

8 *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2009, p. 18.

2.15 Mr Cox noted that in New South Wales (NSW), distance education students receive an additional six points towards their university admission score to assist them to move into tertiary study.⁹ Mr Cox also told the committee that his school has a teacher employed almost full-time ensuring that students 'go to a reasonable alternative' when they finish at distance education:

Our biggest failures, I always think, are when we lose students or when students do not continue their enrolment. So one of the most important parts of our work is to have somewhere for students to go to. We have a teacher employed almost full-time to work on transition so that the students go to a reasonable alternative when they leave us.¹⁰

2.16 Mr John Clark, Principal of the School of Distance Education, Charters Towers, gave evidence to the committee of the vocational and training courses that his school offered as a means of giving students the opportunity to stay in the region:

...we have a strong vocational education and training component. There are not many secondary high schools that would have a range of certificate III courses, but we do. We deliver in business, education support, agriculture and a whole range of issues using partnerships with external agencies, purely for the reason that quite simply there are many students out there in the senior secondary pathways who do not want to go down the traditional boarding schools structure. I understand that that will always be a very strong highway for those with academic and maybe even different social aspirations, but there is a core group who wishes to stay in the areas. For them to get appropriate education past senior secondary, or even relevant senior secondary, is a challenge.¹¹

2.17 The committee also explored the impact that improved communication technology has had on distance education. Open High School outlined in its submission the introduction and possible impact of the 'Connected Classrooms program' in NSW:

Commencing 2007 NSW [Department of Education and Training] initiated its Connected Classrooms program to provide students in all public (metropolitan and rural / primary and secondary) schools with greater access to curriculum and opportunities to collaborate with fellow students in other localities through the use of interactive whiteboards, video conferencing and use of collaboration software tools.

This initiative is expected to reduce existing reliance on the traditional distance education model which at times has been unable to provide the kind of collaborative tools that engage students in their learning more successfully. Distance education schools in NSW were included in the first stage rollout of the interactive technologies of the Connected Classrooms Program and have played a leading role in the development of related

9 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 6.

10 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 6.

11 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 46.

online learning management systems, video conferencing and other interactive technologies such as collaborative desktop sharing to support rural and regional students in their learning.¹²

2.18 Ms Stubbs noted that technology was changing the role of the teacher in distance education:

It then raises the question: if the content is there, what is the role of the teacher? That is another one of the questions we ask, because I think there is very much a changing role for teachers about motivating students and providing them with the independent learning skills to be able to access and utilise what they can get online. It is about teaching them organisational skills. It is about all of those issues that enable students to access education full stop. That is the underpinning issue for low [socio-economic status (SES)] students, because frequently they are not bringing those skills to their education at the start. They are behind the eight ball in the skills required for learning. Even being able to sit and engage with a topic can be problematic for a child who has not been brought up to read a book or whatever. So it is about developing what I suppose you would call 21st century skills. They are skills that we have gained because we are in a different world. We did not have the technology in the past. We were forced to sit. We could not just skip backwards and forwards between things. There are a whole range of issues around parenting that gave many middle-class and upper-class students the skills to be able to access education, whereas it has consistently been an issue for low SES students. I think it is the internet access but also the ability to access education because of those underpinning skills.¹³

2.19 Submissions to the inquiry also noted the disadvantages of distance education. In her submission, Ms Narelle Whittaker stated that had her children remained at the local high school for secondary education they would have been required to undertake several subjects through distance education. According to Ms Whittaker, her family felt that 'this does not substitute satisfactorily for a qualified teacher face to face in front of a class'.¹⁴

2.20 One submitter noted that distance education was not a suitable method of learning for all students:

...for the vast majority this is not an acceptable method of teaching and is very isolating and requires a huge amount of self discipline and motivation beyond their age and experience. For those choosing education of this sort there is need for more mentoring for the student and the supervisor, especially during secondary education.¹⁵

12 *Submission 627*, pp 1-2.

13 *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2009, pp 17-18.

14 *Submission 407*, p. 1.

15 Mrs Jeanette De Landgraft, *Submission 565*, p. 1. See also Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, *Submission 443*, p. 3.

2.21 Mr Cox also told for the committee that distance education is expensive and resource intensive:

...it is quite expensive when you consider the cost of educating a student through distance education. For a student to do secondary schooling up to year 10 in a school, it is around \$8,400; for a distance education student it is about \$17,000. So it is more expensive, and the staffing ratio is much better. High schools are staffed at a ratio of one to 14 - one teacher to 14 students. In distance education centres it is about one to seven. So it is quite expensive and labour intensive.¹⁶

2.22 The Western Australian Catholic Education Office told the committee that in Western Australia, access to distance education for non-government school students could be expensive:

For a student in year 12 to study a subject – such as Chemistry – through [distance education], the cost is about \$2,200. For 4 students in a school the cost is therefore \$8,800. Most Catholic schools charge less than \$2,200 for an entire year's fees and the costs for [distance education] are therefore not affordable.¹⁷

2.23 In its supplementary submission the Queensland Council of Parents and Citizens' Association described distance education as an option for 'dedicated' students and noted that there are often logistical and staffing difficulties at the school level, such as provision of learning space, access to technology and supervision.¹⁸

Leaving home to attend school

2.24 Primarily, submissions and evidence that the committee received in relation to secondary school students leaving home to access educational opportunities related to students attending boarding schools, as opposed to students moving to hostels associated with secondary schools or families establishing a second home near a secondary school that suits the needs of the student.

2.25 The Independent Schools Council of Australia noted that while families were often reluctant to send their children to boarding school, '92 per cent of them would still choose boarding if making the decision again'.¹⁹ The submission of the Independent Schools Council of Australia went on to outline some of the benefits that families found in boarding schools:

The vast majority believe boarding leads to a well-rounded, balanced person. They believe this is due to living in a more structured and disciplined environment, and from having a sense of belonging within a

16 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, pp 7-8.

17 *Submission 292*, p. 4.

18 *Submission 250*, Attachment (Supplementary Submission), p. 2.

19 *Submission 744*, p. 7.

community. Most parents also believe that boarding helps teach children to be independent, self-reliant, tolerant and compassionate.

Where parents have a choice of school, the school's values play a significant role in their decision. A school's academic credentials may figure prominently, however parents attach equal importance to both the management and leadership of the boarding house, and the relative importance of both boarders and the boarding house within the wider school community.

They also look for tangible measures of a school's commitment, including academic support provided to boarders during study time, full-time boarding house staff, access to facilities, and after hours activities and events.²⁰

2.26 The ICPA's submission highlighted the negative impacts that moving away from home to pursue educational opportunities can have on students and their families:

The negative emotional impacts endured by rural and regional students and families in the situation of a student needing to relocate to pursue their education, must also be recognised. Usually the decision to send a child away to obtain an appropriate education is made reluctantly, and finally decided upon when all other options prove to be unsuitable for the child's needs. Not being able to be with your child to guide and support them as they assimilate and meet the challenges of living within a very different school community, can be very distressing for the whole family. The extent of the financial and emotional strain associated with the process of separation can sometimes culminate in health issues for all concerned, and/or poor academic and sporting performances for the student.²¹

2.27 The committee also received some evidence about the impact that students moving away from home to attend school has on rural and regional communities. For example, the North Burnett Regional Council in Queensland made the following observation about the impacts on the community of students moving away to pursue secondary education:

The exodus of students to boarding school...creates a significant hiatus in the community. Student and youth leaders are essentially lost to other communities (regional or metropolitan centres) and their social interaction change focus to those new communities. They become visitors in their home town during school holidays and often do not return to the community post secondary and/or tertiary study.²²

2.28 The committee was told that students and their families were now looking at alternatives to boarding schools because of the prohibitive costs, particularly non-

20 *Submission 744*, p. 8.

21 *Submission 264*, p. 3.

22 *Submission 490*, p. 2.

government boarding schools in metropolitan areas. Dr Peter Havel, Principal of Albany Senior High School, indicated that families were now sending their children to his school, and utilising the hostel in Albany, because it is a cheaper option than 'sending them to Perth to some of the elite private schools'.²³

2.29 However, for students in New South Wales, there are only limited hostel places as the Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW (BCEF) explained in its submission:

...the system has been in terminal decline possibly due to rural decline occasioned by drought and changed farming practices. Towns where hostels have operated include Tibbooburra, Walgett, Bourke, Cobar, Forbes, Broken Hill...The two remaining hostels at Broken Hill and Dubbo are full to capacity in 2009.²⁴

2.30 The NSW Farmers' Association noted that where boarding schools are not a financial option a family may establish a second home closer to the school and students then live there part-time:

Particular reasons for second house establishment sometimes focus on access to a broader and face-to-face senior secondary curriculum [generally] to a school which had the subject range and support that the student needs for tertiary entrance.²⁵

Disparities in performance and completion rates for rural and regional secondary schools

2.31 As outlined in paragraph 2.8, the committee heard from schools where students were achieving excellent academic results. Despite these positive examples, the committee was also told that the academic performance of students tends to decrease with increasing distance from metropolitan centres. At the hearing in Tweed Heads, Professor John Pegg of the National Centre of Science, Information and Communications Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR), talked the committee through comparative test data on numeracy benchmarks for students in years 3, 5 and 7:

23 *Committee Hansard*, 21 September 2009, p. 11. See also the Remote Area Planning and Development Board, *Submission 695*, p. 9, which quotes from a study (M. Alston and J. Kent, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, *The impact of drought on secondary education access in Australia's rural and remote areas – report to the Department of Education, Science and Training and the rural education program of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal*, 2006) which noted that students were being held back from boarding school when they reach high school and are either attending a hostel or continuing with Distance Education.

24 *Submission 235*, p. 6.

25 *Submission 555*, p. 7. See also the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia which indicated that another alternative where the local school could not offer an appropriate education for a student is the entire family relocating, *Submission 264*, p. 3.

The states and the federal government have established benchmarks at years 3, 5 and 7 and they want percentages of children to be above those benchmarks. When you look at the breakdown - metropolitan, provincial, remote, very remote - from 2003 to 2007 you notice a couple of things. As you move further and further away from metropolitan areas in Australia the numbers of kids reaching benchmarks decreases - and I must say that the benchmarks are pretty piddly, to be polite about it. If you take the worst-case scenario - very remote schools - that means that about 30 per cent of children are not hitting these very minimal benchmarks in year 3.²⁶

2.32 In terms of these differences in academic performance, the SiMERR National Survey made the following observation in relation to student achievement in science and mathematics:

The significant variations in the academic achievement of students in different parts of Australia may not be a recent phenomenon. Nevertheless, evidence of the variation has emerged in recent decades.²⁷

2.33 The SiMERR National Survey also notes that there are growing indications that education in rural and remote areas of Australia has begun to receive more attention in recent years. In addition, there appears to be a renewed recognition of the valuable economic and social contributions made by rural communities to the national output and wellbeing.²⁸

2.34 However, it is not only in academic performance where students at rural and regional schools can be disadvantaged. In 2000, HREOC found that country students were less likely to finish school than their metropolitan counterparts.²⁹ More recent studies of retention rates of students in Victoria have found that this trend continues:

Evidence shows that higher numbers of young people drop out of school prior to completing Year 12 in the rural areas in comparison to metropolitan. Based on 2008 figures there is a 11.1% difference in the retention rates of grade 10 to grade 12 students between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools, being 83.3% vs. 72.2% respectively.³⁰

26 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 29. In answers to questions on notice, Professor Pegg provided the committee with further information to explain the definitions of metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote used in this analysis, see Professor John Pegg, answer to questions on notice, 2 September 2009 (received 10 October 2009).

27 National Centre of Science, Information and Communications Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR National Centre), University of New England, *The SiMERR National Survey*, 2006, p. 24.

28 SiMERR National Centre, University of New England, *The SiMERR National Survey*, p. 8.

29 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Emerging Issues: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education*, March 2000, p. 8.

30 Victorian Farmers Federation, *Submission 747*, p. 6.

2.35 In August 2008, the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister highlighted the importance of school completion:

There is a well-established link between Year 12 completion and post-school achievement. Access Economics estimates that young people who leave school before Year 12 are approximately six times more likely to make a poor transition to post-school activities than those who complete senior schooling.

Evidence across [Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)] nations demonstrates that completion of senior schooling, or its vocational equivalent, is a key factor influencing future economic opportunities and engagement in life long learning. In Australia the incidence of unemployment among 20–24 year olds who have not completed upper secondary education or its equivalent is more than double for those who have.

Early school leaving can also be correlated with significant personal and social costs, increased potential contact with the health and criminal justice systems, and intergenerational disadvantage.³¹

2.36 The committee heard that these disparities in academic outcomes and completion rates are a result of a number of factors. As Ms Kimberlee Ryan of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development explained to the committee:

...rural schools can offer students a range of advantages, including more individualised attention, cooperative learning opportunities, close relationships with teachers and peers and strong ties with the local community. While the educational outcomes of rural students are lower than those of their urban counterparts, particularly for Indigenous students, this is due to a range of factors, including socioeconomic status, and does not imply that the learning outcomes in some rural schools are inadequate.³²

Challenges and barriers in relation to accessing educational opportunities

2.37 The committee spent considerable time during the course of the inquiry discussing with witnesses the challenges and barriers to students in rural and regional areas accessing educational opportunities at a secondary school level. Predominantly the issues which arose related to attracting and retaining suitably qualified teachers. The next section of the report contains a discussion of the issues in relation to attracting and retaining teachers in rural and regional areas. Other issues that were

31 The Australian Government, Quality Education: the case for an Education Revolution in our schools, 27 August 2008, p. 18, launched by the Prime Minister the Hon. Kevin Rudd and Deputy Prime Minister the Hon. Julia Gillard at the National Press Club. Available at: <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Resources/Pages/QualityEducation-ThecaseforanEducationRevolutioninourSchools.aspx>, accessed 26 November 2009.

32 *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 67.

raised with the committee included the need to raise students' aspirations to further study and the costs involved for students to access educational opportunities.

Attracting suitably qualified teachers to rural and regional areas

2.38 The committee heard a substantial amount of evidence relating to the difficulties in attracting suitably qualified teachers to regional, rural and remote areas and the impacts that this had on the educational opportunities for students in those areas.

Incentives and initiatives to encourage teachers to relocate to rural and regional areas

2.39 The committee heard that financial and other incentives are often put in place to encourage teachers to take on rural or regional teaching placements. For example, Mr Gary Francis of the Queensland Department of Education and Training stated:

...we have the Remote Area Incentive Scheme, which provides a range of additional benefits to people who do work in rural and remote schools - ...The financial [incentives] are provided through the Remote Area Incentive Scheme. Opportunities for promotion come by going into those locations. We certainly do actively market that as to a young motivated teacher.³³

2.40 Mrs Helen Walton of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales spoke of some of the other types of incentives that could be offered to teachers:

One of the big pushes that we have always had is around providing things like low-rent housing, because in some communities there really is no accommodation, particularly in the really isolated communities where, as I said, the school may be the primary employer. The township is not that large. With things such as that, there have been incentives in some areas to have additional holidays so that teachers can get back and visit their families, because historically a lot of staff have families on the east coast. If you move further west, particularly into far western New South Wales, it is a long way from there to wherever your family is - 1,200 kilometres or so. So there are additional periods when they can go back to visit their family. There has been some financial assistance to these people to encourage them to move out.³⁴

2.41 Witnesses representing state governments explained to the committee some of the other strategies that they had put in place to attract teachers to rural and regional areas. For example, Mr Colin Pettit of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training, explained that state had sought to attract teachers from overseas to fill vacancies:

33 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 57.

34 *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 8.

In 2007 we were some 250 teachers short across the year. That translated into 200-plus short in country locations. Of those, significant numbers, greater than 50 per cent, were secondary. So we do have an issue about attracting people to the country, particularly secondary teachers and well-qualified secondary teachers. We commenced an international search in countries such as Scotland, Ireland, England, Canada and South Africa. At the beginning of this year approximately 80 came in under 457 visas and others to fill vacancies that we knew we had specifically for the country. Most of those have been very successful...That is one strategy that we have used...

That was tagged and targeted to secondary education, particularly around science and mathematics. Some very experienced teachers put their hands up to come across and we were very happy with that. It still did not help the full picture, so to support that we have also had fairly strong recruitment advertising on TV over the last six weeks, which the marketing people tell me is starting to have an effect. Time will tell, though, next year when people want to actually go. We also have other programs such as the Remote Teaching Service, where we pay significantly more for teachers to go to particular locations. We also have a Country Teaching Program and a Metropolitan Teaching Program - and they are predominantly tagged for secondary at this stage...where we pay significantly more for teachers to go to various locations. That has had some success, but the extra money and the conditions are not always what people are looking for to attract them to certain locations, so we are still looking at how else we can deal with that...³⁵

2.42 A representative from the Queensland Department of Education and Training told the committee that state had been working on strategies to raise awareness among Year 11 and 12 students of the career opportunities of working as a teacher. The Queensland Department of Education and Training has also been working on improving the transfer teachers by setting regional targets for transfers internally and for bringing new people into regional areas.³⁶

Retaining teachers in rural and regional areas

2.43 However, the committee heard it is not just a matter of attracting teachers to rural and regional locations, but also retaining them in those areas for more than a couple of years. Professor John Pegg of the SiMERR National Centre gave the

35 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 11. The Western Australian Department of Education and Training also allocates additional teaching places to schools, depending on the size of the school, to accommodate for the fact that the schools can not necessarily attract the numbers of teachers required to run a comprehensive program throughout the school.

36 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, pp 56-57. See also Mrs Helen Walton, Publicity Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales, *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 8, discussing campaigns run by the NSW Government to increase awareness of teaching opportunities west of the Blue Mountains.

committee the following example of the impact that continual turnover of staff could have on a school, particularly in a very remote area:

We have this program called QuickSmart which we have again developed through the national centre. In 30 weeks children can grow two to four years in literacy or numeracy. We went into an Indigenous school in the Northern Territory that had never had a child above the benchmark. They put 19 kids on the program. At the end of the program, 18 were above the benchmark and one missed out on the benchmark by one mark.

...Everybody was so excited. Then we went back the next year to see how it was going and found the program was not being offered in the school. When I asked why, it was because every teacher, including the principal and deputy, had transferred out. So the whole staff had left and a brand new principal and staff had come in...We know that in these areas it takes over a year for teachers to come to grips with the issues of working in that area.³⁷

2.44 Professor John Pegg indicated that a period of five years was ideal in terms of a teacher remaining at a rural location and seeing an improvement in student outcomes:

Somewhere around five years in the game - and it might be true in a lot of professions - it starts to show and you bring this additional experience and know-how to the situation. What happens in rural areas is that we have teachers for one, two or three years. If you think about it, what organisation in the world could survive where you keep turning over people every couple of years? The parliament would not work; nothing would work if you did not have a corporate memory following on and support people. Yet in rural schools it gets tolerated that people are there for just a couple of years. We have to be careful because, if we said that we do not have young teachers, then we would not have teachers at all. There is a lot of effort going on that but you have to appreciate that in the first year of teaching it is about thinking about yourself as a teacher, about your class, about discipline, about trying to come to grips with things. You know the subject area but how you are going to transmit that.³⁸

2.45 The committee discussed with witnesses whether a system of 'bonding' teachers to rural and regional areas, that is, where teachers commit to serving a particular period in a rural or regional area and in return receive a reward, such as payment of university fees, or preferential relocation to an area of their choice when their term expires. The committee notes the concern that Mr Robert Fry, President, Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, raised in terms of 'bonding' teachers to a placement for five years:

...it would certainly have an effect. But it could have a detrimental one, too, because one of the challenges is getting them here in the first place. For a person who is 22 years of age or whatever, five years seems a heck of a

37 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 38.

38 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 36.

long time in their life...But it is a psychological thing. I think the problem would be that some people would be a little bit averse or scared of entering into what effectively becomes a five-year contract. But it would have some merit.³⁹

2.46 To this end, Mr Fry noted the impact of previous policies of compulsory rural placements had been a 'mass exodus' at the end of two years:

You used to hear conversations with teachers saying, 'I've only got six months to go.' They were counting it down. I think that is so negative and it is negative for the kids too. Some were quite open about it in saying, 'I've only got six months to survive in this place now and then I'm out of here.' I do not think that is what it is about. When you move to the place you are taking it on as your home for whatever period of the time that might be but to put time lines around it from the beginning does generate some risks and problems.⁴⁰

2.47 Professor John Pegg of the SiMERR National Centre spoke to the committee about the factors which attracted teachers to non-metropolitan areas are not necessarily the factors which kept them at the school:

...the incentives that got teachers into rural areas were not the same ones that keep them there. What got teachers to go to rural areas was money, lower class sizes and promotion opportunities, but what kept them there was their love of the community, their involvement in the community and their sense of place in the community...⁴¹

2.48 The committee spoke with some witnesses about the role of local governments and other community organisations in retaining teachers in rural and regional areas. Mr Colin Pettit of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training stated that his department worked with a range of agencies:

For example, the Wheatbelt Development Commission is extremely proactive in working with us to try and establish a 'welcome to the bush' approach. They have been very good at trying to get their communities on song to welcome not only teachers but also nurses and police and the like. They have been working pretty closely with us for the last two or three years.⁴²

2.49 Professor Pegg also informed the committee about one of the 'sobering' reasons which caused teachers to leave rural communities:

The other thing we found out - and I found this one of the most sobering things, which I tend not to share very often - was to do with the reasons why people leave rural areas. One is that their spouse has got employment

39 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 57.

40 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 59.

41 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 31.

42 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 12.

somewhere else. That is acceptable. That happens everywhere. But the next reason, which was very, very close - almost identical - statistically was that teachers left rural areas because of their concerns about their own children's education. I do not know how that strikes you, but here are people who have gone out to live in rural areas and yet they are leaving because of their concern. They are actually fighting the good fight out there and doing the right thing and yet they are leaving because [of their] concerns about their own children.⁴³

2.50 The committee notes the evidence of Mrs Helen Walton of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Association that this experience is not limited to teachers:

What we are finding in some of our regions and what is being reported to us is that there is [a] turnover of professional staff in many areas, particularly in health. That is one area where people do come out for a few years and then say, 'I've done my years now; I'm going back to the city.' Some families are sending their children off to boarding school. The parents are saying, 'My child wants to be a doctor, the same as I am, but can't choose the subjects within the curriculum of the area that I am in because the school does not offer a wide enough range of subjects within the curriculum because there are not enough students to access it.'⁴⁴

2.51 The committee notes the evidence it has received that highlights the importance of a sense of community can play in retaining teachers in an area. To this end, the committee is troubled by the evidence it has heard in relation to the turnover of teachers, and other professionals, in rural and regional areas because of concerns that those families have about the education of their own children.

2.52 As was described by Professor John Pegg in relation to the Quicksmart program, this turnover can impact significantly on the academic performance of students at a school – within the period of a year a promising program addressing literacy and numeracy issues is lost to the school because no teachers remain to continue the program.

2.53 With the turnover of other professionals in an area, this impact spreads, not only through the education sector, but through health and business sectors.

Providing support to teachers

2.54 One important factor for teachers in rural and regional areas is the provision of support and professional connectedness to other teachers. For example Ms Kimberlee Ryan of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development noted to the committee that one of the reasons that teachers may be

43 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 32.

44 *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 14.

reluctant to take up positions in rural areas is a perception of isolation and having fewer colleagues with which to interact.⁴⁵

2.55 In this context, the committee also notes the comments of Mr Frank Italiano of the Western Australian Catholic Education Office in relation to providing teachers not only with financial incentives to teach in rural areas, but also support and mentoring:

The mentoring of those teachers in those schools once they go to those areas is really important. If you are isolated and lacking the opportunity to obtain materials and information from others, that makes your job a little bit harder so the chances of you staying on would be lower.⁴⁶

2.56 The committee notes the work that the Western Australian Catholic Education Office is doing to address this concern:

...new graduates and new teachers in those schools...they are encouraged to join associations. For example, if you are teaching history or English you would try to join the teacher association where that provides you with networking opportunities, professional development through the year, courses that are available through the year.⁴⁷

2.57 The committee also heard from witnesses describing the difficulty for teachers in rural areas to access professional development opportunities.⁴⁸

2.58 The committee also notes the evidence of Professor John Pegg of the SiMERR National Centre of other factors that may make teaching in rural schools more challenging for teachers, such as teaching outside their subject areas and teaching composite Year 11 and 12 classes.⁴⁹

2.59 The SiMERR National Survey made a number of recommendations in relation to the provision of support for rural teachers, including:

- That state and territory education systems sponsor the establishment of a professional Association of Rural Educators.
- The establishment of a Rural School Leadership Program, by education authorities in collaboration with universities and professional organisations. The program would target teachers with significant leadership potential.

45 *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 68.

46 *Committee Hansard*, 21 September 2009, p. 40.

47 *Committee Hansard*, 21 September 2009, p. 42.

48 See Mrs Jane Fuchsbichler, Executive Portfolio Holder, Western Australian Farmers Federation, *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 63, and Mrs Therese Byrne, Principal, Charters Towers State High School, *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 70.

49 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 36.

- The establishment of a Centre of Excellence in rural and regional pre-service teacher education at universities in each state and territory.
- That education authorities, in collaboration with professional organisations, develop and monitor induction and orientation strategies to support the particular needs of teachers new to rural and regional schools.⁵⁰

2.60 The committee discussed with a number of witnesses a possible role for teachers who are retired, or nearly retired, to return to teaching in rural and regional areas. Mr Pettit of the Western Australian Department of Education and Training explained to the committee that such a program already exists in that state:

...in the Murchison we are running a trial that is now in its second year where we have retired teachers going into classrooms, dealing specifically with literacy and numeracy right through to year 10. They are retired teachers who have been long-serving, good quality teachers. They go in for two weeks at a time. They come out for two weeks and then they go back in for two weeks, but they work side by side with the teachers. We have found that that has been a very positive program and we are looking at expanding that into other locations.

...We do have a flying squad - principals, deputies and teachers - and where we have short-term vacancies occur, for whatever reason - up to, say, a term - these people are prepared to go to any location for a term and be very supportive. They are all retirees and their expertise and experience are just invaluable in those communities. So we do use them on a regular basis right across the state.⁵¹

2.61 Mr Robert Fry, President of the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations, highlighted for the committee the importance of having a 'good balance' of teachers:

Graduates are great - they usually come with a lot of enthusiasm - but lack experience. That is why you need to have your experienced teachers working beside them, and that is something that I know a lot of rural and remote teachers struggle with. When they get out into the field on their first assignment, there is a lack of support around them. That support can be the other teachers with the experience to help them through. It is a challenging one, but some sort of bonding arrangement may work. But I think it may be something that works better with a more mature person than with younger people.⁵²

50 SiMERR National Centre, University of New England, *SiMERR National Survey*, pp x- xiii.

51 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 17. See also Mr Gary Downsborough, Principal, Broome Senior High School and representative of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 82, Mrs Helen Walton, Publicity Officer, Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations of New South Wales, *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 9.

52 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 57.

Developing and raising aspirations

2.62 An significant barrier to students pursuing educational opportunities can be a lack of aspiration within the community. For example, Mr Garry Costello of The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services explained to the committee the impact of low aspirations in relation to the area of Mount Gambier:

the tertiary educational rates are significantly lower here. I think the quote was about six per cent compared to something like 20 per cent. We know that that is a very significant factor in determining the aspirations that the students in this area have for their tertiary education. As the principal of a large school, my concern has always been with our most disadvantaged young people. Particularly if no-one in the family has had a tertiary education, we really need to incentivise ways of getting people who have the talent. I look at my own children and I know that some of their friends have as great a talent or ability to go on but they have not done so because there was not that kind of social capital in the family and not that understanding that you need to make the sacrifices longer term for your children to have those kinds of benefits.⁵³

2.63 The committee spent considerable time discussing with witnesses the role of aspirations in a student's desire to continue to further education, and how those aspirations could be raised.

2.64 Many witnesses highlighted to the committee the importance of family and community aspirations and an individual student's aspirations in relation to further education. For example, Mr Joe Piper, a member of TAFE Directors Australia, told the committee:

The aspirations of a community, or those young people in a community, are often linked to the experiences in their own home. In the 2006 census for the Barwon region, which covers from Geelong in Victoria all way through to the South Australian border, 45 per cent of 44- to 64- year-olds were found to have no formal qualifications post secondary school, and many of those did not do year 12. It is 30 per cent for 20- to 44-year-olds...often young people will suffer, through a lack of aspiration to go on to tertiary education, because they have no guidance. They have no mentors in their homes.⁵⁴

53 *Committee Hansard*, 23 September 2009, p. 65.

54 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 64. See also Professor Neil Otway, Director, Centre for Regional Engagement, University of South Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 23 September 2009, p. 41, Mr Garry Costello, Regional Director, Limestone Coast District, Department of Education and Children's Services, *Committee Hansard*, 23 September 2009, p. 65, Mr Colin Sharp, Director, Planning and Audit, Charles Sturt University, *Committee Hansard*, 24 September 2009, p. 3, and Professor Jennifer Nicol, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Humanities, Curtin University, answer to question on notice, 21 September 2009 (received 19 October 2009).

2.65 Witnesses noted the importance of tertiary education providers engaging with secondary school students as a means of developing and raising aspirations.⁵⁵ Submitters provided the committee with examples of how tertiary providers are engaging with secondary students. For example, Newcastle University outlined in its submission how it has invested in outreach programs which have proven to be valuable in assisting students, particularly those from regional and rural areas, to build aspiration, to realise their potential for higher education and to understand the opportunities provided by tertiary study. Programs included:

- Higher School Certificate Study Days in Newcastle and the Central Coast to assist Year 12 students with their Higher School Certificate studies.
- A residential summer school, the Year 9 Girls + Maths + Science = Choices Summer School. This initiative targets female year 9 indigenous and non-indigenous students from equity target groups such as students from regional and rural areas, low socio-economic status and non-English speaking backgrounds and/ or students with a disability.
- UniLink which helps to address the Hunter region's growing youth unemployment problem by encouraging more local school students to complete Year 12 and then consider further education.
- the SMART (Science, Maths, And Real Technology) program which in August conducted science shows in nine remote Arnhem Land communities. The program provides resources for teachers, including a workshop discussing ideas about science and technology in the classroom. SMART reaches around 20,000 people across Australia each year. It is a partnership between the University of Newcastle's Faculty of Science and Information Technology, the Australian Government Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Engineers Australia and the Arnhem Land Progress Association.⁵⁶

2.66 RMIT University in Melbourne outlined how its role as a dual sector university is important in engaging secondary students:

At RMIT we are, of course, a dual sector university, rather like Victoria University, but we also have within our [technical and further education college (TAFE)] component quite a significant [vocational education and training] and [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning] group of students, about 500 students - so we have the equivalent, if you like, of a reasonably large high school among our university population. It would seem to me that initiatives like that are perhaps one way of bringing to students'

55 See for example Mrs Elizabeth McGregor, member of TAFE Directors Australia, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, pp 56-57 and Professor Andrew Taggart, Dean, Faculty of Arts and Education, Murdoch University, answer to question on notice, 21 September 2009 (received 19 October 2009).

56 *Submission 364*, p. 7. See also University of Tasmania and the Tasmanian Academy, *Submission 519*, p. 4, which discusses the Claremont College project aimed at raising the awareness of the value of continuing on to higher education study among students, staff, parents and members of the community in the College's catchment area.

attention the transformative nature of education if that is in fact something with which they wish to engage. That of course applies not only to regional and rural students but also to metropolitan, urban, students. Given that we are a dual sector university, we do have in place pathways for students from VET courses into higher [education] courses.⁵⁷

2.67 Professor Lin Crase, Executive Director of the Albury-Wodonga Campus of La Trobe University, outlined how as part of this engagement it is important to provide students with 'real-life' examples, which can be difficult in rural and regional communities:

...the formulation of those aspirations appears to happen very early, and part of the challenge with regional communities is that often they are of such a size that it is actually quite difficult to provide real-life examples for some of those students in small communities about what success looks like. So regrettably we see enrolments that chase TV shows. We see people queuing up to do forensic psychology because of some TV show because that is the only thing they can relate to. In real life communities we do not have a forensic psychologist that we could trot out and look at and see what they actually do versus what they do on television. In a regional context those challenges are even greater because we often do not have the role models close at hand in small communities of a thousand people to demonstrate the benefits of education. At the end of the day we simply try to emphasise to people that those who have degrees on average earn about a million dollars more over their lifetime, ostensibly are healthier, ostensibly are happier - you can record happiness in that context. So we can emphasise that to people, but they do need to see real-life examples that they can attach to at a very young age and that is quite difficult.⁵⁸

2.68 The committee also notes the observation of Mrs Helen Walton of the Federation of Parents and Citizens' Associations in NSW that TAFEs have had a better profile and link with secondary schools, and universities are now beginning to realise the importance of this engagement:

I think some of the universities are actually recognising that they do need to go into areas and perhaps be a little bit more proactive in linking in with the high schools and possibly the TAFEs, just to offer more of a range. Also, to give kids the opportunity to recognise that, as I said, in some communities the link between TAFE and high school often means that kids say, 'Oh yes, well, I'm going to TAFE after I've finished school,' whereas I think universities are now going, 'Maybe we need to have a profile in those schools as well for kids to maybe have a look at the opportunities they have got to link with us as well.' But, as I said, the experience that we have had is probably the stronger link between TAFE and high schools and it is only

57 Professor Joyce Kirk, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, RMIT University, *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2009, p. 2.

58 *Committee Hansard*, 24 September 2009, p. 12.

now they are starting to get that external university movement into the high schools.⁵⁹

2.69 The committee also received evidence in relation to tertiary institutions engaging with secondary school students and providing them with an alternate pathway to university as a means of raising aspirations. For example, Mr Chris Jones of Great Southern TAFE told the committee of a pilot program that his institution had been running with students at Katanning Senior High School:

...we have looked at the poor progression of students to [Tertiary Entrance Examinations] - that is matriculation...- and we have worked with schools to provide an alternative entry pathway that combines a certificate IV in [vocational education and training] with a Western Australian Certificate of Education, and that meets the minimum entrance requirement for several universities in Western Australia.

I think it is really important to acknowledge that it is no good sending someone to university who has no aspirations to go there in the first place. The students have already said, 'We want to go to university.' What has happened is that at the end of first semester they start to think, 'Maybe I am not going to get to university this way,' or they persevere and perhaps do not do as well as they should. So with Katanning Senior High School we have put together a combined program between TAFE and the high school. Students attend school for 50 per cent of the time and TAFE for 50 per cent of the time. While they are at TAFE, they do a certificate III or a certificate IV VET qualification. This gets into the area of management of VET in Schools. But, prior to this pilot, nobody would do a certificate III or a certificate IV qualification while they were at school. They would have to leave school to do that because the time constraint was too great. We have combined the two, with the support of the high school, the TAFE and the parents.

...there are universities that accept as a minimum entry requirement, other than the [Tertiary Entrance Examination], a certificate IV and a...Western Australian Certificate of Education. The certificate IV contributes 50 per cent towards the Western Australian Certificate of Education. The students are coming out of their three years at high school with a certificate III or a certificate IV VET qualification. At Katanning it is a certificate IV in information technology. They also have their [Western Australian Certificate of Education], which means that they have had some academic rigour on the way through, particularly in English, which we think is important. They have also met the minimum entry requirements of university.⁶⁰

59 *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 11.

60 *Committee Hansard*, 21 September 2009, pp 17 and 24-25. See also Professor Joyce Kirk, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, RMIT University, *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2009, p. 4, discussing the university's non-entrance examination admission scheme.

2.70 Some witnesses also highlighted that aspirations could be increased by virtue of the physical presence of a university in the town. For example Mr Paul Barnett, of the University of Tasmania outlined the impact that the opening of the Cradle Coast campus of that institution had on aspirations in Northern Tasmania:

...we established the Cradle Coast campus maybe 10 years ago. Over that period, the number of students on the campus has grown from about 140 full-time students to over 400 full-time students. The other impact of that - and I think it reinforces the point about establishing aspirations in that community - is that, on top of the enrolments at the Cradle Coast campus, we have also virtually doubled the number of students from that region who are now studying at other campuses of the university. In 2000, there were about 1,000 students from that region studying at Launceston or Hobart, but now we have almost 2,000 students in that situation. A number of those students developed their initial confidence through doing their first year at the Cradle Coast campus and then they moved on. I think just our being involved in the community has increased the aspirations in that area.⁶¹

2.71 Mrs Elizabeth McGregor, a member of TAFE Directors Australia, also noted that cultural factors can be very important in forming aspirations. Mrs McGregor described for the committee the 'Deadly Days' festival which were being used as a means of engaging Indigenous students in vocational education:

Today I was at a federally funded festival called Deadly Days, which is the culmination of a range of programs that we have been running for young Aboriginal people to help them stay at school and get involved in vocational education while they are at school to ensure that they have aspirations, which is the key element to success. For Aboriginal people that is intimately connected to identity...

My point is that, in working particularly with Aboriginal communities, that other stuff around identity and how you build aspirations - if you accept that, and international research indicates that as well as people having options they have to have a belief that they have a right to education - has to connect to their sense of themselves and then they are right as they are on a pathway.⁶²

2.72 Developing and raising the aspirations of students is of critical importance to setting them on the path to lifelong learning. As is the case with attracting and retaining teachers, this is a matter which needs to be addressed not just at the level of the school, but at the level of the family and the community.

2.73 The committee is impressed at the innovative and progressive solutions that are being found to raise the aspirations of students in rural and regional areas. However, the committee notes that the current approach lacks a coordinated and

61 *Committee Hansard*, 11 November 2009, p. 87. See also Mr Colin Sharp, Director, Planning and Audit, Charles Sturt University, *Committee Hansard*, 24 September 2009, p. 12.

62 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, pp 56-57.

cohesive structure, with secondary schools being reliant on whatever outreach program they may be able to access from a tertiary institution.

Costs

2.74 The committee received some evidence about the costs associated with accessing secondary educational opportunities for rural and regional students. However, as most submissions focussed on the costs of tertiary education for rural and regional students, the committee will only cover this issue briefly.

2.75 A number of submissions commented on direct costs, in particular, in relation to boarding schools.⁶³ The Isolated Children's Parents Association of Queensland also commented on additional costs for students and their families associated with boarding school, including:

...limited family attendance at school events due to the high cost of travel and the inability for both parents to be absent from the family business at any one time...Attendance at parent organisation meetings, information evenings and parent-teacher interviews is most difficult.

It is helpful financially if it is possible to rely on other family members for accommodation when attending school functions.⁶⁴

2.76 However, there are additional costs that students and their families may face, even if they remain living at home and studying at a local school or by distance education. For example, the Open High School highlighted that few of its rural and regional students travel to Sydney for tutorials and study days, because of the cost:

The majority of students in rural and regional areas are unable to travel to Sydney as the travel and accommodation costs are prohibitive with many parents not able to take time off work. A small number of families do travel long distances to Sydney and incur travel and accommodation expenses. These costs are not reimbursed by the school. The school has a Student Assistance fund which is used to support families experiencing financial hardship with fees and textbooks. The use of the fund does not extend to subsidising travel and accommodation costs.⁶⁵

63 See for example, the Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW, *Submission 235*, pp 1 and 6, Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, *Submission 264*, p. 3, and Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, *Submission 292*, p. 1.

64 *Submission 402*, p. 2.

65 *Submission 627*, p.1. See also Name Withheld, *Submission 15*, p. 1, where the submitter discusses sending both children to Adelaide during holidays in Year 12, at a cost of \$5,000 per child, to access tutoring, and the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of WA, *Submission 443*, p. 3 which gives the example of a Year 12 student travelling to Perth for Tertiary Entrance Exam revision seminar, which cost the family \$3,000 for flights and accommodation.

Other matters

2.77 The committee heard from submitters and witnesses about other concerns they had in relation to the access of educational opportunities for secondary students in rural and regional areas.

2.78 Submissions highlighted the limited educational opportunities that might be available in rural areas in terms of the curriculum on offer, due to either difficulties in getting qualified teachers, or there being a limited number of students wanting to study a subject. For example, Mrs Wendy Sawyer wrote to the committee of her family's experiences:

The numbers are so small in years 8 to 10 that the local school offers only the basic curriculum and we believe our boys, all being fairly academic, would benefit from a wider subject choice and continuity of teaching staff and consistency in discipline, which we believe were not available locally.⁶⁶

2.79 Ms Debbie Irwin, who has been a teacher for 30 years, wrote in her submission of how she recently became aware of the disadvantages faced by students in country NSW:

I moved to Westport High School on the North Coast at the end of 2007. The reduction in educational opportunities is astounding. No access to HSC revision lectures and courses, reduced access to HSC marking for teachers, minimal access to universities for extension activities such as Siemens Science Experience, Astronomy Lectures, Nyholm Youth Lectures etc and massively increased costs and time required to attend museums, galleries, conferences and courses to name a few.⁶⁷

2.80 The committee notes some of the innovative measures that are being undertaken to expand the curriculum in rural and regional areas. For example, the committee was told of the work of Murdoch University which is working with five high schools to provide higher maths courses:

In our Rockingham region we are working very closely with five senior high schools...the five high schools came to us and said, 'Can you do hard maths at university?' The five high schools could not get a cohort to teach 3A, 3B, 3C and 3D maths in year 11 and 12. We said, 'Yes, we can.' So now the five high schools have their maths program delivered from our Rockingham campus. That serves 13 students in five senior high schools.⁶⁸

66 *Submission 267*, p. 1. See also Ouyen P-12 College Parents' Association, *Submission 532*, p. 1, and Parents Victoria, *Submission 533*, p. 2.

67 *Submission 697*, p. 1.

68 Professor Andrew Taggart, Dean Faculty of Arts and Education, Murdoch University, *Committee Hansard*, 21 September 2009, p. 56.

2.81 Mr David Cox, Deputy Principal, of the Southern Cross School explained to the committee that one factor which he felt was often missing at rural and regional schools is an element of competition between students:

I taught at Nyngan in central New South Wales when I was first promoted as a social science head teacher. I taught some very intelligent students there. I was very aware that they do not know how good really good is - in some of those schools who have teachers who are really enthusiastic. They still do not know how bright the really bright students are. I am not saying they do not work hard to get the best out of them, but it is hard to compare. One of the things that works in schools, if you are an intelligent student, is to have intelligent students around who push you. If there is not that competition quite honestly you do not always get the best out of students.⁶⁹

2.82 The committee was also told of students travelling great distances to school each day. For example, the Tasmanian Principals Association noted that students from Dover, south of Hobart, are travelling into Hobart for school each day, a journey requiring that they leave home at 7am and did not return home until 5pm. In addition, this trip costs students \$18 per day.⁷⁰

Indigenous Secondary Students

2.83 The committee was provided with some information in submissions regarding issues in relation to secondary education opportunities for Indigenous students. The committee also sought further information from witnesses at the hearings in relation to this matter. This section of the report gives an overview of some of the issues raised with the committee. The committee does not intend this as a comprehensive analysis of secondary education opportunities for Indigenous students. Further, the committee also recognises the work of the Senate's Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities (Select Committee). The Select Committee is inquiring into, amongst other things, the impact of the Australian Government's Emergency Response, and specifically on the state of health, education, welfare and law on regional and remote indigenous communities.⁷¹

69 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 6. See also Professor John Pegg, SiMERR National Centre, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 32, noting that when there are capable students at a school, other students will look at them and say 'I can do that'.

70 *Submission 540*, p. 1. See also North Burnett Regional Council, *Submission 490*, p. 2 and Mrs Charlotte Della Vedova, *Submission 746*, p. 1.

71 For more information on the Senate Select Committee for Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities, see the Select Committee's webpage:
http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/indig_ctte/index.htm.

2.84 The committee heard from a number of witnesses in different states in relation to the participation of Indigenous students in secondary education and programs in place to assist Indigenous students. The Northern Territory (NT) Government provided the following information to the committee :

At the senior secondary level the NT is starting to see some improvement for Indigenous students, but there is a long way to go. While the percentage of 15-19 year olds in the NT population is around 40% only 31% of the year 10-12 cohort attending school is Indigenous and only 14% of NT [Certificate of Education] completers are Indigenous. Of these only 28% reside in remote areas.

From a government service delivery point of view the challenge of delivering quality services for this group is also the biggest logistical and resourcing challenge.⁷²

2.85 Ms Jan Andrews of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services provided the following information to the committee on the provision of educational opportunities to Indigenous students in that state:

The experience of the education department here is as follows. We effectively have residential accommodation, the Wiltja centre, for Indigenous students coming to Adelaide for secondary school. We have three regional hostels for secondary students. For Indigenous families in particular that offers a great assurance. We also have culturally appropriate housekeepers, minders and supports. That has, time and again, saved a young Indigenous person and put them into another year of study in the senior-secondary transition.⁷³

2.86 Mr Frank Italiano of the Western Australian Catholic Education Office discussed with the committee the problems caused by the low literacy levels of Indigenous students in remote communities:

We have evidence that the literacy levels are very low, so trying to provide secondary courses for those students is difficult because, perhaps, literacy levels for a person in year 9 or year 10 would be at the year 4 level...it is generally in the remote Indigenous communities.⁷⁴

2.87 Secondary school principals in far north Queensland detailed for the committee the disparity in the number of Indigenous students continuing to university, compared with the broader school population:

In [Charters Towers] we have an Indigenous population of about eight per cent and in my school it is about 30 per cent. About one student per year will go on to university, so it is not very many. There are lots of reasons around that. Some are not eligible to go to university, but leaving home is a

72 *Submission 301*, p. 2.

73 *Committee Hansard*, 23 September 2009, p. 4.

74 *Committee Hansard*, 21 September 2009, p. 37.

big thing for our Indigenous students. We find that they really do not want to leave their home.⁷⁵

...Last year we had one Indigenous student who went on to university out of six who were in that year 12 cohort. Basically one-third of the mainstream students were eligible to go on to university. There is a significant disadvantage for Indigenous students there as well as the disadvantage of the number being retained from grade 10 through to grades 11 and 12.⁷⁶

2.88 However, the committee also heard some positive initiatives in relation to educational opportunities for Indigenous students. Mr Ernest Christie of the Townsville Catholic Education Office spoke to the committee about Indigenous communities sending students to schools where the students could learn skills that are of value to the community:

Each of those communities had different reasons for wanting to send their students to the school. It was not just one size fits all.

In the Torres Strait, for example, they do not grow any vegetables. They wanted their boys to learn how to grow vegetables hydroponically, so they were attracted to the rural setting of Abergowrie College. In Charters Towers and Hope Vale, they have a real tradition of working with cattle and on cattle properties, so that community would send their kids to Columba Catholic College because it has animal husbandry in cattle, veterinary work in cattle and the Cattle Club. Often the schools would build their own capacity to service those students. The curricula they offered served the community.⁷⁷

2.89 The schools have excellent retention rates and also offer valuable pastoral care support to the students:

We have Indigenous staff. We employ people from those communities, who also work with the kids in the boarding capacity. That is so essential. The schools have built transition houses so that families can come down if the kids are homesick, can stay on campus and can work with those kids through those difficult times. Again, it is all at a cost, but it is improving their chances of success.⁷⁸

2.90 The committee also heard from Mr Dale Murray of Edmund Rice Education Australia about the outreach program that organisation is currently running in Mount

75 Mrs Therese Byrne, Principal, Charters Towers State High School, *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 67.

76 Mr David Morris, Principal, Northern Beaches State High School, *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 68.

77 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, pp 38-39.

78 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 41.

Isa. Next year Edmund Rice Education Australia will establish a flexible learning centre in Mount Isa, catering for Indigenous students:

We are currently aware of about 75 to 80 young people in Mount Isa who are probably in the middle school age, are all Indigenous and are not in school. They are the ones we know of. We are also aware of a range of another 50 or 60 kids heading toward the senior phase of learning not being at school and not having been at school for a fairly long time. How we know that is we have an outreach running there at the moment. We are knocking on doors in the morning, picking kids up, taking them to a site and working with them. Their brothers and sisters are running out, saying, 'We want to come to school.' We are saying, 'No, you're too little.'

Over the last couple of years we have been working mainly with the education department in the Isa and the Kalkadoon nation to develop a response there. As fate would have it, the Mount Isa Christian College closed and it became available for purchase. Edmund Rice Education Australia bought it...Now we have to refurbish it. This leads into some of the questions. Staffing it is complicated, as you would be aware; as soon as you step outside of the metropolitan areas, it is complicated, particularly around incentives for staff and particularly in places like mining communities, where rent is extraordinary. For us to buy facilities to house people is complicated, so we have to work out how we do that.

We have been lucky with our staffing arrangements, though, because we are quite specialist in the nature of the work that we do, so we are getting more and more people who have a sense of dissatisfaction with the mainstream classroom environments and are looking for something different.⁷⁹

2.91 The committee notes that the Australian Government has in place measures aimed at addressing the disparity in educational outcomes for Indigenous students and these will be discussed in the next section of the report.

Committee view

2.92 The barriers to secondary school students in rural and regional areas accessing educational opportunities are numerous and complex. They are matters that are not solved only through money – money is not enough to retain teachers in rural and regional communities and money is not enough to make a student aspire to further education.

2.93 Sometimes, money can provide opportunities – students can travel to metropolitan areas to boarding school, to revision courses to universities for extension activities. The committee recognises that some families are willing to pay for their children to have access to these opportunities, but those opportunities obviously come at a cost – not only in financial terms, but in terms of time and in terms of effort for both the student and their family. However, there are still many people in rural and

79 *Committee Hansard*, 10 November 2009, p. 75.

regional areas who also want their children to access these opportunities, but can not afford to pay.

2.94 The committee is particularly concerned at the disadvantages faced by Indigenous students. As the committee heard, these students face some of the biggest hurdles in accessing education, particularly once they have become disengaged from mainstream schooling. The committee recognises the importance of outreach and flexible learning projects, such as those run by Edmund Rice Education Australia, which centre on a social-inclusion agenda.

2.95 The committee is concerned at what it sees is a growing disparity in educational opportunities between rural and regional, and metropolitan areas. A situation where those who have the option, chose to leave rural and regional areas – a choice which, while beneficial for the students and families involved, reemphasises the disparity to those who remain.

2.96 The committee notes the grim picture painted by Mr Gary Downsborough, Principal of Broome Senior High School and representative of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association, of how education systems in these areas can deteriorate:

There is little support to tackle inherent problems such as the high percentage of inexperienced teachers, the lack of local professional development for staff, few relief teachers, high staff changeover in schools, low expectations and goals of parents for their children, lack of vocational pathways within the area where the students live and rumours and negative press affecting attitudes. Students in high socio-economic groups go away for schooling, hence poor students have to be integrated into the classrooms and there are no centres or alternatives in a lot of these places for extreme-behaviour students.⁸⁰

2.97 The committee shares the vision of Professor John Pegg of the SiMERR National Centre of rural and regional education:

...we want parents to be able to send their children to rural schools and not feel that they are giving them second best. We want kids to go to rural schools and get the same sorts of marks that they would get if they lived in Sydney, and we want teachers to be in rural areas and not feel professionally isolated.⁸¹

2.98 The committee recognises that governments, communities and other organisations are all taking steps to address this issue. Some of those steps are positive for example, the establishment of outreach programs that universities and TAFEs are developing to connect with secondary school students. Some of the initiatives that the committee were told about are making great progress only to fail through a lack of

80 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 77.

81 *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2009, p. 31.

long-term planning. The committee notes the fate of the Quickstart program in a remote school, in which students made great leaps forward in literacy and numeracy, and then was not run the next year because of an entire change of staff in the school. The committee sees this as an opportunity lost.

2.99 The committee is not in a position to put forward any solutions to these issues. The nature of this inquiry has been awareness-raising. From the limited time that the committee has had, it is of the view that the barriers to secondary education at a rural and regional level requires a comprehensive and systematic investigation, in the style of the recent Review of Australian Higher Education. The focus of that inquiry should be how to establish a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia.

Recommendation 1

2.100 The committee recommends that the Australian Government commission an investigation into the barriers to rural and regional secondary educational opportunities with a view to developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia.

Recommendation 2

2.101 In developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary education opportunities in rural and regional Australia, the committee recommends that consideration should be given to strategies for ensuring that literacy and numeracy programs, once introduced into schools, are able to be maintained within those schools.

Government measures to provide for rural and regional students

National Youth Compact

2.102 Through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), States and Territories have established a 'Compact with Young Australians'. Part of the Compact with Young Australians is the introduction of a National Youth Participation Requirement to ensure that all young people complete Year 10 and participate in education, training, employment or a combination of these activities until the age of 17. The Compact with Young Australians entitles all Australians under the age of 25 to an education or training place.⁸²

2.103 This section of the report discusses funding available for schools as well as students to assist them to access educational opportunities.

82 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), *Submission 523*, pp 29-30.

Funding for secondary education in rural and regional areas

2.104 The Australian Government has a number of funding initiatives which provide institutional funding to rural and regional areas.

*Remoteness Loading*⁸³

2.105 Non-government schools receive a remoteness loading on their per capita recurrent grant funding if they have students studying at eligible locations. The funding is provided in recognition of the higher cost of delivering education services in regional and remote regions of Australia and the negative impacts that this can have on student achievement levels.

2.106 Non-government schools or campuses classified as 'Moderately Accessible', 'Remote' or 'Very Remote' receive an additional five per cent, 10 per cent or 20 per cent respectively of the funding entitlement associated with their socio-economic status score. In 2008, 439 non-government schools received the loading, across 469 campus locations.

*Country Areas Program*⁸⁴

2.107 The Country Areas Program (CAP) also provides assistance to rural and geographically isolated students at non-government schools to cover the additional costs associated with schooling from geographically isolated areas. In 2008, 1,413 government, Catholic and independent schools received CAP funding of \$30.5 million for 5,586 projects.

2.108 State and Territory educational authorities determine their own eligibility criteria and priorities for disbursing CAP funds to individual schools. Funding cannot be used as substitute funding for resources and services but may be used as supplementary funding for:

- curriculum enhancement (eg excursions, music and attendance at sporting events);
- information and communication technology;
- professional development;
- school support; and
- purchase of tangible items.

83 *Submission 523*, p. 15.

84 *Submission 523*, pp 15-16

*Drought Assistance for Schools*⁸⁵

2.109 The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (the Department) submission notes the 'Drought Assistance for Schools' Program, which is designed to benefit students and was introduced in recognition of the impact of years of drought on farming families.

2.110 In 2007-08 a total of \$24,000,030 in funding was delivered to 3,030 government and non-government schools in rural and remote locations across Australia. In 2008-09, 2,318 government and non-government schools received \$17,417,170 in funding. In 2009-10, approximately \$25 million is available under the program:

The funding is intended to make it easier for rural families to meet ongoing education expenses and the cost of educational activities such as student excursions which may be cost prohibitive for families experiencing financial hardship as a result of prolonged drought.

*Assistance for the Northern Territory*⁸⁶

2.111 The Australian Government provides specific assistance to students in the Northern Territory in an ongoing effort to close the educational gap. That assistance includes:

- The School Nutrition Program which delivers breakfast and lunch to school aged children.
- The investment of \$11.2 million over one year for teacher accommodation to address housing shortage and to increase teacher employment and retention.

2.112 The Department's submission also highlights \$5 million in funding to the Wadeye community for additional teacher housing, and \$7 million in funding under the Building the Education Revolution funding for 15 additional classrooms in schools servicing remote communities in the Northern Territory.

Programs aimed at raising aspirations

2.113 A representative of the Department explained to the committee during the hearings the initiatives that the Australian Government has put in place to raise the aspirations of low socioeconomic (SES) status students to attend university:

...there is a new program worth approximately \$400 million in support of the participation of low-SES students at university. One element of that is what we call the participation and partnerships program. That will be allocated to universities to engage in what we call outreach activities, which will enable universities to engage with schools in various sorts of activities

85 *Submission 523*, p. 36.

86 *Submission 523*, p. 39.

designed to raise aspirations among students to go to university. It is anticipated that we will have guidelines for that program coming out fairly shortly.⁸⁷

2.114 The Department's submission also outlines specific programs designed to engage and support students to complete secondary education:

- the Local Community Partnerships initiative established to support young people from 13 to 19 years of age to achieve a successful transition through school and from school to further education, training and work.
- Youth Pathways targeted at young people aged 13 to 19 who are the most at risk of not making a successful transition through school and from school to further education, training and employment. The program is aimed at reducing the number of early school leavers who are not employed or in education in the 12 months after leaving school.
- Connections which provides a full-time education and personal development program for young people aged 13 to 19 who are disconnected from mainstream schooling.⁸⁸

2.115 Ms Kimberlee Ryan of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development indicated that raising aspirations and engaging students in education is a challenge for all governments:

...there would not be a jurisdiction in the world that does not face that challenge of lifting the aspirations of students, particularly in disadvantaged areas, to stay engaged in education and training and transition to meaningful employment and further learning. So we are working on that from a systems point of view in terms of the whole school improvement agenda here, really building teacher capacity to engage students more effectively, broadening curriculum options and pathways available to students and wrapping around a broad student engagement and welfare framework around that work to keep kids able to engage in different contexts for education and training...all of our efforts in our school improvement agenda and our blueprint are aiming at that retention and engagement of students as far as they can go.⁸⁹

Other Programs

2.116 The Department's submission outlines a number of initiatives that Australian governments, through COAG, have put in place to 'transform schools and schooling for teachers, students and the community'.⁹⁰ These initiatives include The National

87 Mr Phil Aungles, Acting Branch Manager, Equity, Performance and Indigenous Branch, DEEWR, *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, p. 65.

88 *Submission 523*, pp 48-49.

89 *Committee Hansard*, 12 November 2009, pp 68-69.

90 *Submission 523*, p. 29.

Partnerships to address disadvantage in low SES school communities and the National Education Agreement. Under the auspices of these programs, the Australian Government has committed more than \$47.7 billion in funding for both government and non-government schools to:

- attract, train, place, develop and retain quality teachers and school leaders and support schools to run as professional organisations working with their community;
- ensure students have access to a national curriculum;
- raise parental and community expectations of educational outcomes;
- introduce transparent and more robust accountability to improve student performance by providing parents with clear information on how their child is progressing at school and how they compare with others in their community and across Australia;
- support teaching and learning in schools through appropriate infrastructure;
- review funding and regulation across government and non-government school sectors; and
- provide support to students with additional needs.⁹¹

2.117 The Department's submission also highlighted work being done through the following programs which may assist schools, students and families in remote, rural and regional areas:

- Building the Education Revolution program,
- the Australian Government's Capital Grants program,
- The Le@rning Federation,
- Improving the Practical Component of Teacher Education Program and
- The National Secondary Schools Computer Fund.⁹²

2.118 The Department's submission also notes \$577.4 million in funding for the *National Action Plan on Literacy and Numeracy*. \$540 million of this funding has been allocated to the *Smarter Schools: National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy* to ensure an increased focus and commitment to improving the literacy and numeracy outcomes of students. Initial funding for the *National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy* is being used for literacy and numeracy pilot initiatives which are trialling or expanding on initiatives to lift the literacy and numeracy performance of students in disadvantaged communities.⁹³

91 *Submission 523*, p. 29.

92 *Submission 523*, pp 46-47.

93 *Submission 523*, p. 15.

2.119 The committee notes that these initiatives are not specific to rural and regional students, however they may benefit rural and regional students.

Funding for secondary students required to live away from home

2.120 The Department's submission outlined some of the funding available for secondary students who are required to live away from home for secondary study.⁹⁴

2.121 Students aged 16 years and over may receive youth allowance or ABSTUDY to study away from home for Years 11 and 12 and for vocational education and training.

2.122 There is also the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC), which provides allowances to geographically isolated families with primary, secondary and certain tertiary students who cannot attend an appropriate state school on a daily basis because of geographic isolation.

2.123 The AIC has several allowance types which are tailored to assist a range of education options for isolated families. In 2009, the basic rate of the AIC Boarding Allowance is \$6,824. In addition, the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance (\$2,261 in 2009) is available. The AIC Additional Boarding Allowance is specifically targeted at lower income families whose geographically isolated children board away from home to access schooling.

2.124 Other AIC payment types are:

- the second home allowance where a family maintains a second home so that student can attend school daily. In 2009, the second home allowance is \$198.80 per fortnight, per student, up to a maximum of three students in a family.
- the distance education allowance of \$3,412 per year, and the distance education allowance supplement of \$1,045 per year, which assists families whose children live at home and study via distance education.⁹⁵

2.125 In 2008, 11,212 students received AIC allowances at a cost of \$62 million. Of these students, 2,031 received the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance.⁹⁶

94 *Submission 523*, p. 24.

95 Centrelink, *Assistance for Isolated Children Payment Rates webpage*. Available at http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/payments/aic_rates.htm, accessed 9 December 2009. Payment rates are effective from 20 September. See also Centrelink, *Assistance for Isolated Children*, Brochure, pp 21-22. Available at [http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/filestores/st008_0810/\\$file/st008_0810en.pdf](http://www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/filestores/st008_0810/$file/st008_0810en.pdf), accessed 9 December 2009.

96 See *Submission 523*, p. 24.

2.126 State Governments also offer allowances which may supplement the AIC Scheme.

2.127 The Western Australian Government offers the *Student Boarding Away from Home Allowance* to families with students who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate primary and/or secondary school and are required to board away from home. The allowance of \$2,000 supplements the AIC and students who are eligible for the AIC are automatically eligible for the *Student Boarding Away from Home Allowance*. The *Student Boarding Away from Home Allowance* is also available to families receiving the AIC who have set up a second home. In 2008, there were 2,142 applications for the *Student Boarding Away from Home Allowance*, with a total of \$2.36 million provided to parents and boarding providers.

2.128 The Western Australian Government has also established boarding facilities adjacent to public senior high schools in nine regional areas. The full cost of the boarding service, provided by the Country High School Hostels Authority, is \$16,750 per student. The Western Australian Government subsidises this cost, with the net cost per student in 2009 being \$9,430. For students receiving ABSTUDY, the full cost of this boarding service is met by the Australian Government. For a student receiving AIC and the *Student Boarding Away from Home Allowance*, the net cost of boarding in 2009 is \$606.⁹⁷

2.129 The Northern Territory Government offers assistance for students who are boarding through the *Student Assistance and Supplementary Boarding Allowance Schemes*, which is designed to complement the AIC. It provides some travel assistance and supplementations of costs of boarding, but not for students already receiving similar subsidies under ABSTUDY.⁹⁸

2.130 The Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW (BCEF) also noted that the NSW Government offers a *Living Away from Home Allowance*. The allowance is valued at a basic rate of \$1,227 per year, with a Year 11/12 supplement of \$288.⁹⁹

2.131 The NSW Government also offers a *Boarding Scholarship for Isolated Students*, valued at \$4,100 for 2009. The *Boarding Scholarship for Isolated Students*

97 Western Australian Government, *Submission 528*, pp 5-6 and 10. The locations of regional hostels are: Albany, Broome, Esperance, Geraldton, Katanning, Merredin, Moora, Narrogin, Northam. The Western Australian Government provides a subsidy to maintain the viability of small boarding facilities in key service centres which receive insufficient revenue from fees to meet operating costs.

98 Northern Territory Government, *Submission 301*, p. 2.

99 *Submission 235*, p. 8. See also, NSW Department of Education and Training, *Living Away from Home Allowance: 2009 information and application form*. Available at: http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/studentssupport/scholarshipsmore/lafha_applicat.pdf, accessed 12 November 2009.

was established to assist students from rural areas who are disadvantaged by a low family income and geographic isolation.¹⁰⁰

Adequacy of government assistance

2.132 The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA) notes the average cost of boarding and tuition fees for secondary students is between \$25,000 and \$30,000 per year. The ICPA note that the basic AIC boarding allowance rate has not kept pace with boarding fee increases:

The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance (2009) is \$6,824 per annum. Generating sufficient income to meet education expenses is extremely difficult for families. As the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance is linked to a Parental Income Test, many rural and remote families are not eligible, because the Parental Income Test (2009) is \$32,800 at the lower limit, and this figure is unrealistic in relation to wages/salary earned. AIC provides warranted support but the payments have not kept pace with boarding fee increases, which regularly exceed the [consumer price index].¹⁰¹

2.133 The BCEF informed the committee that traditionally students have had access to school-term hostels, linked to local high schools, where boarding fees range from around \$6,500-\$8,800 per annum. These boarding fees are manageable for families who are eligible for the AIC and NSW Government's *Living Away from Home Allowance*. However, the BCEF noted that there has been a decline in the hostel system are only two remaining hostels in regional NSW, in Broken Hill and Dubbo, and both are full to capacity in 2009.¹⁰²

2.134 The BCEF stated that in these circumstance many families were then limited to considering boarding schools in rural and regional areas, where fees for tuition and boarding ranged from \$8,592 (for an agricultural high school) to \$29,860 (for a non-government boarding school).¹⁰³ The BCEF also noted in its submission that boarding fees and tuition for metropolitan boarding schools could be around \$43,152, and for most students is prohibitive before any reductions or allowances are considered.¹⁰⁴

100 See NSW Department of Education and Training, *Boarding Scholarship for Isolated Students: 2009 information and application form*. Available at: http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/studentsupport/scholarshipsmore/bsis_applicat.pdf, accessed 12 November 2009.

101 *Submission 264*, p. 3.

102 *Submission 235*, p. 6. Previously hostels had operated in Tibboorburra, Walgett, Bourke, Cobar and Forbes.

103 *Submission 235*, p. 6.

104 *Submission 235*, p. 1.

2.135 The BCEF made the following observation on the adequacy of government assistance for rural and regional students who are required to live away from home for secondary school:

For some students the annual boarding fees could be offset by a maximum combined [Australian and NSW] government assistance allowance of \$10,660. While it covers the cost of boarding fees in hostels and Agricultural High Schools, it does not cover other hidden expenses such as elective subjects, laundry, sports uniforms, school [organised] week-end travel, excursions, visiting performers. Given that there is an unwritten expectation that parents contribute notionally towards their child's secondary 'board & keep' (*estimate of \$100 p/w*) it would be assumed that the AIC and the [*Living Away from Home*] allowances are adequate to more than adequate.¹⁰⁵

2.136 However, the BCEF go on to note that access to the hostel and government boarding schools where lower fee structures apply is extremely limited. Therefore, BCEF advocate for a number of measures, including:

- an increase in the AIC for isolated families who have been rejected for a place at a government boarding school or hostel and must enrol at a non-government school where tuition fees apply;
- raising the value of the AIC and the NSW Government *Living away from home allowance* to reflect more adequately the 'extras' that parents are required to pay; and
- raising the combined family income threshold to \$60,000.¹⁰⁶

2.137 Both the ICPA and the BCEF noted inconsistencies between the state and Australian Government assistance schemes:

The overlap of Federal and State Government responsibilities pertaining to education creates disorder. Inequities between states, in regard to accessing an appropriate education with financial assistance, are being caused by state education authority's definitions of an appropriate school under the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme. ICPA has lobbied the Federal Government...to revise the AIC guidelines, to enable a child to access an education by receiving the AIC allowance when a school, within the context of a rural or remote community, cannot meet the educational needs appropriate to that child.¹⁰⁷

105 *Submission 235*, p. 8 (emphasis in original).

106 *Submission 235*, pp 9-10.

107 *Submission 264*, p. 7. See also Bush Children's Education Foundation, *Submission 235*, p. 10, which advocates a common definition of 'isolation' and 'remoteness' with regard to aspects of the criteria for Assistance for Isolated Children and the NSW Government's *Living away from home allowance*.

Bypassing of Local Schools.

2.138 One issue raised with the committee in terms of accessing additional funding for rural and regional students living away from home, was the 'bypassing' of local schools. Mr Colin Pettit of the WA Department of Education and Training explained to the committee how bypassing operated in that state:

To receive both [the Western Australian government student boarding away from home allowance, approximately \$2,000, and the AIC] the school within their community has to be deemed not able to provide a sound education program for their students...if you are a hundred kilometres away in a small district high school with only 10 students, we cannot provide you with best possible education so we will offer that as a bypass, and if you are offered a bypass then you are eligible for these two subsidies.¹⁰⁸

2.139 The committee was informed that in Queensland the bypassing of the local school requires community consultation. This can lead to community conflicts between those who want the school to be bypassed, and those who do not:

Those living in towns in Central Western Queensland are not able to access the same allowances as those out of town unless the whole community has agreed that their local school is a 'bypass' school. Whole of community meetings involving the local schools are held when a community expresses a desire to become a bypass school...

There are arguments for and against bypassing as providing allowances for people living in towns allows them choice IF the local school does not suit their real (not perceived) needs e.g. if there is a bullying issue, or their child is gifted and talented and not being catered for locally. But, if bypassing became an easy option it may severely detract from resourcing of the local school (which is based on numbers).

There are many families who cannot afford the extra costs (on top of the allowances) required to pay the full cost of sending a child away to boarding school and need to and or WISH to attend their local school.

...

The issue of bypassing is one fraught with danger for rural and remote areas, as a decision to bypass, by a community, may have negative impacts on the local schools resourcing, in turn reducing the quality on offer and also creating a two tiered community.¹⁰⁹

108 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 4.

109 Remote Area Planning and Development Board, *Submission 695*, pp 6-7 (emphasis in original).

2.140 The committee received evidence that the requirement for bypassing of the local school could also impact on gifted and talented students being able to access educational opportunities in metropolitan areas. Mrs Roxanne Morrissey of the ICPA gave this example of a gifted and talented student:

They have these wonderful programs here in WA, scholarships for gifted and talented children. There is a source of accommodation, but there is only that one source. If you live in a regional area and you qualify for a gifted and talented program - for instance, if you live nearer to Port Hedland and your child qualified for a music program at Perth Modern School here - you would not qualify for any assistance to actually move to Perth to be able to do that program, because you have a high school in your area. It does not matter that it does not offer a music program as such; the fact is it is deemed an appropriate school so, therefore, you do not qualify for the assistance for isolated children allowance.¹¹⁰

2.141 The WA Department of Education and Training provided the following explanation of its policy in relation to gifted and talented students and the bypassing of local schools:

We do it case by case, and they are not all accommodated. We need to be very clear there. Particularly with gifted and talented children - that is something that we will put to the inquiry- perhaps that is something that the federal government might need to have a look at. It is deemed that we can provide the gifted and talented children from country locations with support up to year 10 through isolated and distance education - so through electronic means. However, some of the parents are indicating that that is not as fulfilling for these students as is needed. Because of the rules between the state and federal levels, we have not actually moved too far on that. Once that child reaches year 11, they automatically qualify and will be given access to these programs, because the quality of the program they need, particularly at year 11, is far superior to what others need, so we just have to make sure that we provide them with that opportunity.¹¹¹

Committee view

2.142 The committee notes the evidence that it has received in relation to the adequacy of the financial assistance available through the AIC and associated State and Territory allowances. The committee notes that the concerns in relation to the adequacy of the AIC is mainly in relation to boarding school fees. The prices of government hostels appear to be set at a level which, with the assistance of the AIC and any State government supplement, are affordable.

2.143 The committee believes that the costs incurred by families in accessing secondary educational opportunities, belies the larger problem of families feeling the

110 *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 20.

111 Mr Colin Pettit, Executive Director, Regional and Remote Schools, Western Australian Department of Education and Training, *Committee Hansard*, 22 September 2009, p. 6.

need to send children away to school because of the lack of educational opportunities in rural and regional areas.

2.144 The committee recognises that sending students to boarding schools will be a matter of necessity for a small number of families because of geographical isolation. For a small number of families the decision to send children to boarding school is a matter of preference, based on factors other than cost, such a family tradition of attending a particular school. For the vast majority of families however, the decision to send children to boarding schools is one they feel forced into making because of the limited opportunities at local schools.

2.145 As the committee noted above, these choices that families are forced to make, have a flow on effect to the community they live in. When students leave a regional area, it results in lost opportunities and resources for local schools with flow-on effects to the wider community.

2.146 The committee's view is that the solution to this issue does not lie in necessarily increasing the value of the AIC, but in providing families with a real alternative to sending their children away to school. However, providing families with real alternatives to sending their children away to school is not an issue that can be resolved in the short-term.

Recommendation 3

2.147 The committee recommends that as part of the investigation into the barriers to rural and regional secondary educational opportunities with a view to developing a long-term strategy to address the inequity in secondary educational opportunities in rural and regional Australia, consideration should be given to whether the current level of funding under the AIC Scheme is appropriate.