

Re: Senate Inquiry into Education Opportunities

Senator Fiona Nash
Suite S1-35
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Senator Nash

I am writing this letter to express my concern at the inadequate measures taken by the Rudd government to provide equitable access to secondary and post secondary education opportunities for rural students.

We currently have four children undertaking secondary and primary education in Western NSW. We presently have three children attending boarding school in Orange and one child attending the local public central school at Warren.

I would like to outline the following concerns:

We have made the difficult choice to bypass the local school for secondary education because we feel the opportunities that exist there for academic, cultural and sporting pursuits are extremely limited. Many opportunities in these areas would require us to travel over a hundred kilometres daily to Dubbo to access. The local central school is the only choice we have for secondary schooling. It cannot cater for a wide range of subject choice. If our children were to attend this local school they would have to study several of their subjects by distant education. We feel that this does not substitute satisfactorily for a qualified teacher face to face in front of a class. The cost of sending children to boarding school for secondary education is very high. We are unable to access the Allowance for Isolated Children from centrelink due to our proximity to the local bus however I feel we are extremely isolated from many opportunities by living in this area and only having the choice of one school. The local school can generally provide a qualified teacher, but not always in the subject area. Due to the small size of the school, teachers are often required to teach out of their subject area. I feel that this greatly disadvantage students.

Whilst the local central has some wonderful teachers who I cannot speak highly enough of, I believe it doesn't deliver the same opportunities to students who live in metropolitan areas because of its isolation. I strongly believe that families that live in a community where there is only a choice on one school should be given the opportunity to receive the AIC allowance. Many families, who would otherwise stay in local communities if they were able to access this allowance, simply move from the community to larger areas to educate their children. I feel this is apparent in many western communities.

I feel the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria for independent Youth Allowance will have a devastating impact on rural students wishing to attend university or post secondary education. Once again these changes impact more significantly on rural students. The cost of attending university or similar is huge, as well as tuition, students and their families have to contend with the huge cost of moving, living and accommodation costs. In a family such as ours where we would possibly have three children attending tertiary education at once it will be impossible for us to assist them with out gaining this independent allowance. If students are forced to take two years of from studying to qualify for independent status many would

make the decision not to attend post secondary studies. This would create an even further divide between country and city students. Country students would not be able to study part time, work and live at home as do many students living in metropolitan areas. Again this situation will greatly affect our family.

The proposed new changes will apparently make it easier to access Youth Allowance through centrelink by means testing. We are self employed farmers. Our dealings with centrelink and applying for allowances have always been very difficult due to the difficulties of determining incomes and assets and establishing eligibility is a paperwork nightmare at times. As anyone knows farm incomes have been very low over the last ten years. You may have one good year and then they would cut off Youth Allowance. Will they take in to account averages for income over several years?

In summary, I feel there are many ways country youth are disadvantaged. These proposed changes and lack of long term and short term measures to assist rural students are extremely concerning. I sincerely hope the government will listen to and address the concerns of country students and their families

Yours sincerely

Narelle Whittaker