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5 August 2009

Your Reference:
Our Reference:

The Secretary
Senate Rural & Regional Affairs & Transport
Reference Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee

RE: Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities – Submission from North Burnett Regional Council

North Burnett Regional Council, encompassing the communities of Biggenden, Gayndah, Mt Perry, Mundubbera, Eidsvold and Monto, in the Wide Bay Burnett Region in Queensland, is significantly affected by the lack of access to secondary and tertiary educational opportunities. Council wishes to raise these issues with the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee with regard to the current Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities.

The issue of secondary education provision is of critical importance to the North Burnett Region.

One of the most pressing priorities in the North Burnett Region is the access to senior (Years 11 and 12) education in Mundubbera. This is an issue which has been flagged by the community regularly, over many years, particularly to local and state governments.

We see there as being two very important components or effects on the community and the dynamics of the region as a whole:

- Young people do not have access to what is considered, in the vast majority of communities of this size (and smaller), basic education to Year 12.
- Businesses, including Council, are having difficulty attracting skilled and semi-skilled staff to apply for vacant positions in Mundubbera. We are aware of numerous instances whereby potential applicants for positions have expressed an interest but not proceeded once they have become aware that their children will not have access to what we, and obviously they, consider to be basic education facilities.

Mundubbera is a community of just in excess of 2,000 people. It is a centre of agricultural production (predominantly beef and citrus) with a reasonably stable economy despite the effects of drought and global economic conditions.

Up until, and including, the 2001 census, Mundubbera had been experiencing steady growth. Local Government Statistics indicated projected growth of 19% over the next 25 years – the only town in the North Burnett with projected population growth.

The 2006 census indicated a population of 2117, which is a decline of 13% and completely against the trend while other communities in the Region, of similar size (Monto and Gayndah), experienced a reasonably stable population trend.

According to the Mundubbera Parents and Citizen's Association, who undertook an analysis in 2007, there were (at that time) 43 towns in Queensland with a population of 1400 to 3000 people. Mundubbera sits in the median of that range. Two of these towns had no schools (as they are located close to major centres), 27 had P-12 facilities and only four (4) towns of a similar size were lacking in Years 11 and 12 facilities. These are Mundubbera, Woodford, Palm Island and Yarrabah.

According to the Department of Education's website (again, in 2007) an average of 34 students were enrolled in Year 10 over the three years from 2005 with an approximate reduction in numbers of 10% per year from Years 8 to 10. The number of Mundubbera students continuing to senior schooling is approximately half of the number of Year 10 enrolments at the school.

In Council's view, there are at least four possible reasons for this drastic reduction between Year 10 and Year 11:

- a) the availability of jobs in the Region (fruit picking and associated labour means that unemployment is very low in the North Burnett Region)
- b) the barrier placed in front of those students in terms of time and distance. While Gayndah State High School is only 40 minutes driving time, the school bus takes over an hour with regular stops. Added to this time constraint is the distance taken by many students to get to the bus – sometimes requiring parents to drive up to 200kms per day to drop off and pick up their children from a central point.
- c) the exodus of students to private boarding schools
- d) The exodus of families seeking equitable education opportunities for their children, who do not wish to send their children to boarding school.

Of greater concern is Education Queensland's stated aim of moving to a middle schooling model. This will mean that Year 10 will also be removed from a 'high top' school such as Mundubbera, further exacerbating the social and economic effects listed below. Given the transition to middle schooling, families are now starting to send their children to boarding school in Year 9, in readiness for independent school middle schooling programs, or are leaving the community earlier in order to live and work in a community where their children can stay at home through their middle and senior schooling. The local public school is seeing a reduction in numbers accordingly.

Considerable attention is required on behalf of all levels of government to find solutions for access to secondary education in rural communities such as the North Burnett Region.

Social Effects:

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

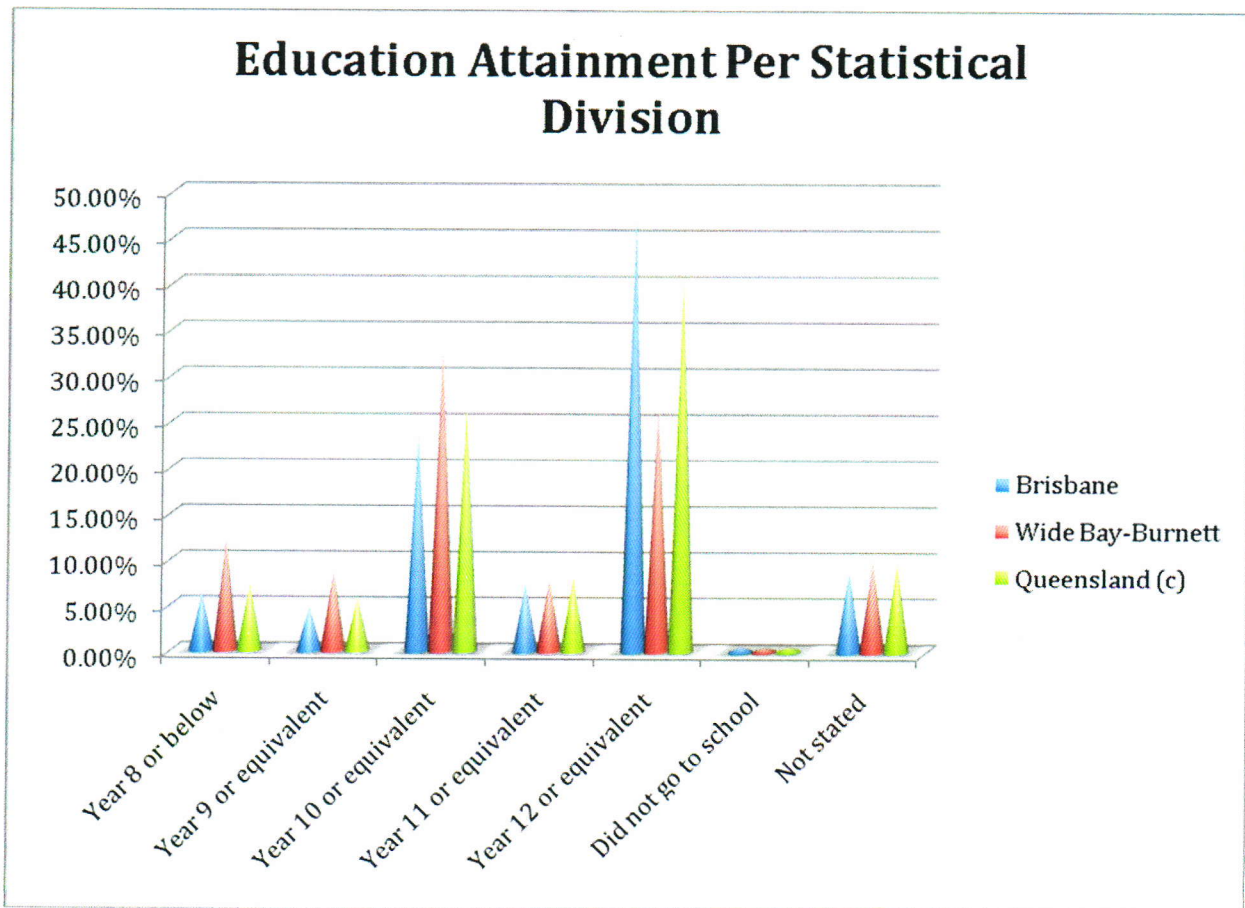
It has been noted, anecdotally, that many young people tend to drop out of senior secondary schooling due to the time and geographic constraints placed in front of them in getting to school. This additional time takes them away from work on their parents' rural properties and/or affects sporting and/or community commitments. This effect should not be under-estimated in terms of the educational outcomes for young people in the North Burnett Region and the economic impacts associated with below average levels of education.

Economic Effects:

The Wide Bay Burnett Regional Organisation of Councils commissioned research by the National Institute for Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) in 2006, entitled *Wide Bay-Burnett region: Demographic and economic change – a perspective and prospective analysis* which indicated that higher levels of productivity need to be stimulated in the region to reverse the significantly ageing population trends and unsatisfactory associated economic forecasts. A number of opportunities were outlined in this paper, including the attraction and retention of young people through the development of higher-skilled (higher paid) jobs. These jobs come with education requirements.

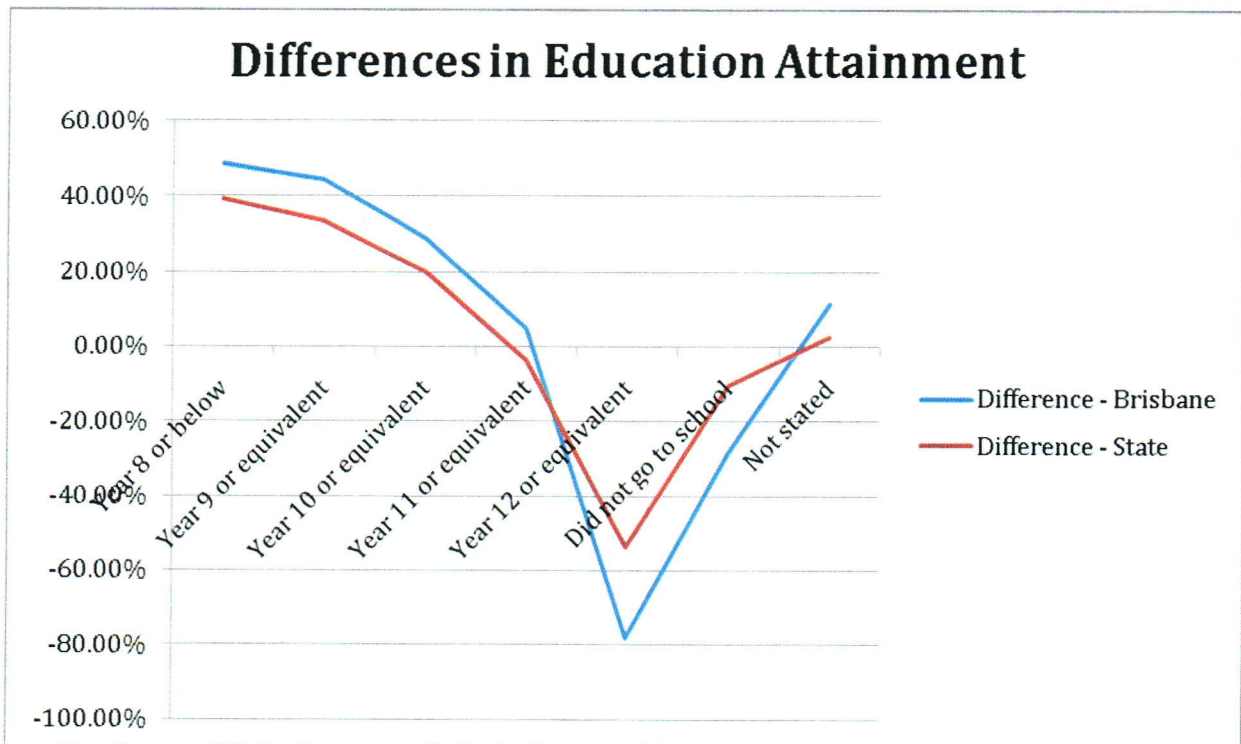
The levels of school education attainment can be measured and show major discrepancies when viewed against Brisbane and Queensland data.

The Queensland Office of Economic and Statistical Research states that the education levels in the Wide Bay Burnett Statistical Division (of which the North Burnett is a part) are drastically lower than Brisbane and State levels as indicated in the graph below (Education Attainment Per Statistical Division).



This graph shows that the Wide Bay Burnett has significantly more people leaving school up to Year 10 or equivalent and, conversely, significantly less people completing Year 12 than Brisbane or the State.

The statistics can be represented in the percentage difference between Wide Bay Burnett and its metropolitan counterparts (Brisbane) and the total State figures.



This graph shows that 28.95% more Brisbane people achieved a Year 10 or equivalent education; as did 20.01% more people across the State. Conversely, 78.19% fewer people completed Year 12 or equivalent in the Wide Bay Burnett compared to Brisbane statistics. The Wide Bay Burnett had 53.67% fewer people attend Year 12 or equivalent compared to the Queensland statistics. Therefore, it can be seen that the broader Wide Bay Burnett Region drastically underperforms in terms of levels of school education attained in comparison with Brisbane and the State. Clearly, some measures need to be put in place to research the causes of, and to address, this major inequity.

North Burnett Regional Council sees that the inequity is caused by both infrastructure (access to education) and economic (lack of industry diversity) factors. Regardless, it is a significant issue in terms of the future directions for the Region.

Council concurs with the findings of the NIEIR report (available in full at www.wbbroc.org.au) and is actively putting measures in place to attract and retain a highly skilled workforce. Council has recently ratified its Economic Development Plan entitled **North Burnett Region: A Centre for Rural Innovation** which has been developed in order to promote a more diverse economy and support entrepreneurs and innovators within industry. The Plan also aims to attract external investment and industries into the region over time. This Economic Development Plan has been based on extensive community consultation and the issue of access to education, particularly in the Mundubbera community, was raised as a significant economic barrier. It stands to reason that if the Region is to focus on innovation, access to highly skilled professionals and access to the expertise within regional universities and other tertiary institutions, is paramount.

There are countless stories of professional people with children leaving the community of Mundubbera during a child's Year 10 education to ensure continuity into Years 11 and 12 in another centre (usually outside of the North Burnett). A significant number of long-term families from the Region send their children to boarding school, which creates a social constraint in the region.

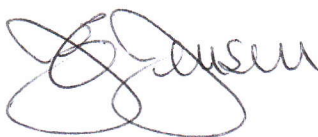
Finally, it is important to mention the significant role that teachers, as professionals, play in the community. They bring professional incomes to the region, as well as numerous skills and talents which they share with communities, usually in a voluntary capacity. A reduction in numbers will see an associated reduction in staff at schools in the Region which will have tangible economic and social impacts on the Region.

The lack of senior schooling in Mundubbera is having tangible negative social and economic effects on this region. Council would be more than happy to provide additional information or could facilitate discussions with relevant stakeholders in the North Burnett Region, particularly in Mundubbera, in future should you so desire.

Please contact me directly on 0458 696 272 should you wish to discuss this submission further.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to submit on this vital issue for the North Burnett Region and we look forward to seeing positive outcomes from the Inquiry in due course.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Cr Joy Jensen". The signature is stylized with large, overlapping loops.

Cr Joy Jensen
Mayor