

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Subcommittee

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Alexandra — 12 April 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman
Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic
Research Officer: Dr P. Chen

Witnesses

Ms K. Leadbeater, 2005 school captain (affirmed); and
Mr J. O'Meara, principal (sworn), Yea High School.

The CHAIR — Welcome. Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence of these hearings on oath and affirmation. I wish to advise witnesses that all evidence taken by this committee including submissions is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, granted immunity from judicial review. Any comments made by witnesses outside the committee hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent, hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Before we begin, please take your oath or affirmation and then provide your full name and address and the name of the organisation you are representing today. This evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. If you could provide us with your information and statements, we will have some questions for you following that.

Mr O'MEARA — I am happy to do that. I am going to be fairly brief, because I think we perhaps just need a bit of a chat. When I read the first point in your terms of reference I thought, 'I am guilty as charged'. We do make a massive effort to get kids to pathways that probably are not in Yea initially. Probably about 66 per cent of our kids coming out of year 12 will be going to places other than Yea to continue their education. We have formed a partnership with RMIT University which means they can sort of zip into the university or the TAFE courses it offers. It is a very comprehensive institution, as you are probably well aware.

The remaining third tend to pick up traineeships or apprenticeships which again are outside the boundaries of Yea. So young people at Yea High School, particularly if they are doing the top end of the school, are more than likely going to head out, which I suppose means I am guilty as charged, as I said before.

The other issue that I suppose comes out of that is how do you get youngsters back. There are certainly limited employment opportunities in Yea. There is a burgeoning sort of touristy town starting to happen — certainly in the time I have been there, and I have been there about 14 years. There is a lot of work around hospitality now and servicing the tourism industry there. We do have youngsters who train at TAFE and come back and get involved with that. Some get involved with retail, but the town is not massive, as people would be well aware, and so the economic base is small.

The other issue for me as the principal of the high school is: where are those couples, who are in their late 20s perhaps, having kids and coming into our area? Again you do not really see that much. We bus kids in from the urban fringe from Kinglake, where Kate is from, and we could probably bus more in if the government let us, but I suppose that amongst all that the issue is that certainly with the bottom end of our shire, Murrindindi, the policies that are pursued are more to say to those kids who are of high-school age in particular, 'Your future lies in Melbourne, so go to the schools that are downtown'. That probably sets up a culture of leaving that part of the shire. It is less of an issue in Yea. There are some youngsters who go to private schools and there are some who pursue technical education, which is more available in Seymour.

The other thing I would very quickly raise are the issues around how can we get youngsters to return or people to come back. You probably heard from David Hall that he has been very much involved in the idea of building communities and building resilience, making connections, forming partnerships. We have certainly been involved with that too, so I guess we are almost a paradox. We have got a lot of programs which drive very deeply into our community. We have got the Advance project, which is year 9 kids working with volunteer groups, forming partnerships and really understanding how their community works and how people value the sort of voluntary work that perhaps was not valued previously by those youngsters.

We have got the Personal Pathway Challenge program at year 10 where we say to students, 'We are going to throw the timetable out on a Wednesday. We want you to figure out what you want to do'. Some will go over to the TAFE in Seymour and pick up Cert 1 or Cert 2 qualifications; we will have others who will do work experience and others who will pursue VCE studies. I suppose there is a range of ways we are trying to build links to the community and get students to value what is there, but the issue then becomes: where does your future lie? Unfortunately the economic reality of Yea it is that it probably does not lie, in the immediate, in Yea itself, so that is a concern. I am not sure how we can do anything other than, I suppose, leave good memories of what a small rural community is like and they might at some point decide: yes, my future might lie back there.

I did include in my submission to you a very short article by John Halsey. I do not know whether you are familiar with him or not, but he talks about rejigging how we deliver education in particular in small rural communities and about the raw ingredients of education, which are basically the timetable and transport. There are a couple of other things too, in terms of maybe there are spaces that are available because the community has declined a bit, and we looked at some of those issues as well.

There might be options, if you are really scoping out, of perhaps students not necessarily having to go and do their first year of training or TAFE away from the local community. Maybe the use of the high school could be looked at a bit more closely, so it is not just open from, say, 8.30 a.m. until 4 o'clock at night, but maybe it is scoped out a bit more to produce different outcomes for kids in different areas. But that is really a tough one. You are not going to solve that immediately, I would say, and there are funding issues around that. We do very well with a very limited budget, but in order to be able to, say, deliver TAFE subjects in my instance — I am a small school; my resources are good for high school students and high school classes, but if you want a commercial-grade kitchen or really good quality automotive facilities, we are struggling. Even in IT we struggle, would be the other thing I would throw on the table.

Mr INGRAM — Are you primarily talking about the VET courses there?

Mr O'MEARA — No. I would probably be thinking about even first year uni perhaps, but the problem is that the market is so thin. We are only talking about a very small number of kids. In a good year I will have about 35 kids in year 12, so it is not a critical mass of students. Obviously the economies of scale swing to bigger places. The other option might be to look at Seymour as a hub. I think I have said enough now, Ben, so I will keep quiet.

The CHAIR — No worries. We will hand over to Kate.

Ms LEADBEATER — There are probably just a couple of things that I want to say to start off with. As Mr O'Meara said, I live in Kinglake, so for me and for all the kids in Kinglake the reality is you have to leave your town at year 7. We have got three primary schools and no high school, so you have got all those kids leaving their rural community to go to Yea or Whittlesea or Diamond Valley. Leaving is the culture; that is what you are doing, and that is what you have to do.

Mr INGRAM — Kate, what is a population of Kinglake?

Ms LEADBEATER — I am not sure of exact numbers. Probably you may be looking at 2000 or 3000.

The CHAIR — They like to talk about from Flowerdale to Toolangi when they talk about Kinglake.

Ms LEADBEATER — So it is kind of hard to gauge.

The CHAIR — Which is around about 4500 people, I think, or something along those lines.

Mr INGRAM — I am sorry to cut in.

Ms LEADBEATER — Yes. You have got the three primary schools, and then you have got kids going to maybe 12 different high schools, bussing out and stuff like that. The kids are there, but they have to leave, and that is just the way it is. The other thing is that once you start to do that, once you leave to go to school, you create your own community elsewhere. I live in Kinglake, but Yea is kind of like my home. Your friends are there, you are involved in activities there, and so it is hard to kind of get a grasp on where your community is, because you belong to a whole lot of different places.

The other thing is that I think as students if we stay we may be viewed on the part of the community as failure — I am not really sure. Often if you go to study or travel or get a job, that is something to be celebrated, but if you stay in your community, then that is maybe not seen as the best option or the best use of your skills or time. So when you are faced with the choice, obviously that is maybe not going to sway you one way or the other, but that is certainly there when you are thinking about what you are going to do and what people are going to think and all that sort of stuff. That is another issue as well, I think. They are probably the two main points that I wanted to make, but I am happy — —

Mr McQUILTEN — How far is Kinglake from Yea?

Ms LEADBEATER — I travelled on the bus. We were on there for about an hour and 20 minutes one way, which is not the most direct route — it is 45 minutes on the highway — but we did a few kind of twists and turns; that was the route that we were taking. Kids do head off in all different directions for varying lengths and what have you, but that was what we were faced with. So once you do that, you build networks and all that kind of stuff in the place that you are going to, because you spend so much time there and it really becomes the place that you are most of the time.

Mr INGRAM — Has any data been collected on the school-leaving rate from Kinglake compared to surrounding towns as to whether school completion rates are the same because of that distance and lack of a secondary school in the local area?

Mr O'MEARA — The data has not been dissected to that level, but it would be fair to say that quite a few parents would prefer to have their children in a smaller rural environment for their secondary education than perhaps the other ones that are on offer. That is sort of a personal preference that sometimes parents express to me. Certainly from the point of view of travel time, it is a significant commitment that those youngsters make.

Mr INGRAM — It is interesting. At Lakes Entrance there was only a junior secondary — it did not have years 11 and 12 — and the data from there was very clear. There was a very high school-leaving rate at year 10 in that community because they did not have the school in the local area. It is a similar-sized town, so I was just wondering whether — —

Mr O'MEARA — I guess there is a bit of a culture with the previous principal and myself: basically you do not leave Yea High School until you have got somewhere to go. We do not have kids sitting down watching the midday movie; they are engaged with their studies. The thing that I will perhaps just mention in passing is that we also run an outreach project as part of our school operation called the AYCE project. It picks up on youngsters who perhaps have fallen through the cracks, have not been engaged with school, maybe have never been in a school — we do have some home-schooled students as well. There is that project that maybe we might use to adjust things for the students who perhaps are wobbling a bit.

The CHAIR — Kate, with your peers, their career choices and the things they are talking about at the moment, are they looking at careers in the future that may bring them back to the area? If they are looking at university or even a trade, are they looking at getting trades and qualifications that maybe one day they could actually bring back so that they could live in Yea or Kinglake and have their families?

Ms LEADBEATER — I think often when you get to year 12 and you go away and stuff, it is not that you do not like the town that you grew up in, but you feel like maybe you have done your time, and maybe you will move on to a different town. I am not saying that no-one is thinking about coming back, and certainly some people have stayed, but generally I think you move through high school, you finish that and you are sort of done in Yea or you are done in Kinglake, so you go off to university and you get your skills. Often maybe you feel like the skills that you have got would not be used to their fullest potential if you came back. Like, if you go off and get some sort of computing degree you are not going to come back to Yea and be able to use that the best way you could if you went somewhere else.

Maybe if you were doing teaching or nursing or some of those kinds of skills, then people would be more kind of open to coming back and being able to share that with the community, but I think often people feel that they have done their Yea thing or they have done their Kinglake thing, so now they need to take the things that they have learnt, get their new skills and take them to a place where they can really use them and feel that they can kind of meet their fullest potential. Yes, some people probably do come back, maybe in the fullness of time, not straightaway, because I think that people like to get out and do different things. They have done the country; they go and do the city for a while; they might go and travel.

There are a lot of things that my friends are going to do and experience, and I do not think in the near future that includes coming back to where they started from, for no other reason than they have done that and just feel like they need to do something else. They do not feel like they could do their best if they were to come back. They would not be able to use their skills or get the jobs they would be able to get elsewhere or access the resources and services they might be able to get hold of elsewhere.

The CHAIR — Are you encouraged to think about ideas, whether it be business opportunities or gaps within your communities, that perhaps you would be able to fill? Of those who do not want to go on to university is there that kind of an obvious and open pathway presented to you?

Ms LEADBEATER — Probably not. I think you either go on to study or if you are not going to study you have probably already finished up and you have not made it to year 12. You might have done an apprenticeship or training, in which case you probably are staying because you are getting those skills locally. If you get to the VCE level, you are going on to study, and therefore that is your next logical step. So there really probably is not any kind of emphasis on other opportunities — not in a bad way. There is just a natural progression in the way that you will move. It is just what you know; it is what people before you have done and what people after you will do. You are not looking forward to anything else if that is the path you are on. That is what you feel like you need to do, and you are not worried about trying to search out other options. You are just doing this.

Mr INGRAM — I would like to turn the first question around and instead of talking about retaining young people ask whether you see any real barriers to young people in rural areas actually going to university.

Mr O'MEARA — We talked about that in the car on the way over.

Mr INGRAM — Is there any way the government can break that down and make it easier for young people to get the qualifications and achieve greater academic standards?

Mr O'MEARA — There are a couple of cultural things around that. I have made the point in the submission that often the youngsters who get the offer from university are the first people in their families to go to university. So there is a kind of 'Good heavens above, I have made it, but what does it really mean?'. There is a bit of an information time — it means you are going to have to leave home, more than likely, and you are going to have to figure out where to live. You have to grapple with being in the city. There are quite significant costs involved in all that, and some families do not have the financial resources to do that.

Sometimes, if you look at our data, there would be quite a few kids who would say they will defer. There is a strategy they can pursue to get a government payment to assist them down the track a little way once they have gone through some hoops. That is certainly one thing that would be an issue. There is virtually no way you could stay in Yea and do university I would not think. I know a couple of youngsters who tried to go up and down to various places in Melbourne, but you just cannot sustain it. I think one of the interesting areas that might open up study would be the improvement of IT. Even within the work we do at the local high schools, videoconferencing is starting to become a significant part of curriculum delivery. Perhaps that could be scoped out to university or TAFE studies.

The only thing I would add to that, though, is that our experience at Yea has been that with AYCE we deliver partly through remote access technology, we deliver partly face to face and we also source part of the program as well. There is a judicious mix, which keeps kids connected. If you are doing it on your own without a lot of support young persons tend to get disheartened or perhaps they really have not got the contact that keeps them focused on what they are doing. There is a bit of work to be done around the best way to deliver through that mode. But I see that as a real possibility.

Ms LEADBEATER — The entire scenario that Mr O'Meara just painted is the one I face. I have deferred this year. I am the first one to actually finish year 12 and go to university in my family. Next year I will have to move or figure out if I am going to move or stay. In Kinglake there is maybe the chance of travelling down. It is hard to decide. It is the information: what are we going to do now? Who is going to help us out? How are we going to do it on our own? Do we do it on our own? Do we move or don't we move? How does it all work? It is hard.

Mr INGRAM — The main decision is that cost of accommodation?

Ms LEADBEATER — Yes, the money is a big thing. It is hard to work out how you are going to make that happen. I have taken this year off to figure that out. I did not feel how I think you need to feel and I also needed to make some money. That is why I have done this. And I think that is true for a lot of rural kids. All my friends who have gone to university this year have had to move. There are all now trying to find new jobs and make new friends. One of them has said, 'I do not understand why I should have to do this when city kids can stay at home. They do not have to move, and they still have all their friends. It is easier for them'. Now they have figured it out

and they are doing fine and it is great, but at the start there was that kind of, not resentment, but they did not understand why it had to be that much harder for them.

Mr INGRAM — So in that year of deferring what job opportunities are there so you can earn money to put aside to assist you in going to university?

Ms LEADBEATER — I have had to move outside my community. I have gone to Whittlesea, and I am working in Yea one day a week. I am not working in my community. I have had to move outside of that because there were no opportunities for me.

The CHAIR — Briefly on learning from a distance, are there any experiences you know of learning online for university or anything like that in Yea?

Mr O'MEARA — It is an area I am not really highly familiar with. I know of some people in Yea who are pursuing university qualifications through a mixture of remote access technology and doing some seminar work where they go to university. It is a cocktail of arrangements. There are a couple of people in Yea who do that. They are doing quite well. We supervise the examinations for them, so that is how I know about it. It is something we need to pursue. Can we keep people connected in their community because they do not have the cost issues then at such a significant level? If you are doing a university or TAFE course where there are times when you need to be there doing things, one could do that. But there may also be times when you could work at home in your own environment and still be kicking goals and getting good outcomes.

The CHAIR — Kate, do you see that as an option or would you like to go to uni to be part of the whole atmosphere? I know I did.

Ms LEADBEATER — It certainly is an attraction. I think you probably have to weigh that up against all the things staying at home meant — you did not have to worry about moving and all those kinds of things. It would probably be a personal choice. I would probably still want to go because I think I have done my country time now and it is time for me to go and do another thing. That is not to say it is going to be easy. The whole moving to Melbourne thing is certainly going to be a challenge, but while there are some people who would maybe see staying as their preference, there are also some people who really feel it is their time to go.

Mr O'MEARA — If I can just add to that, I think that is true. It might be that higher level degrees are the ones and that style of thing where you are not so keen to be partying every day in a university setting. You want to stay connected to your community and you are picking up skills without having the hassle of being in Melbourne or wherever it might be. There is certainly scope to look at that and put it more firmly on the table.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. You will receive copies of the transcript in one or two weeks time and you can correct typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew.