

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Dunkeld — 16 May 2006

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Mr B. Ryan, senior education officer, Grampians region, Department of Education and Training (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome. I have a brief statement to read before we begin: under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act this committee is empowered to take all evidence at these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings 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. I also wish to advise that 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.

Welcome and thank you for coming along today. Could you please take the oath or affirmation and state your full name and address and the name of the organisation you are representing and your capacity in this organisation.

Mr RYAN — Brendan Ryan, senior education officer in the Grampians region. I live in [ADDRESS REMOVED]Horsham. In a sense I am representing two groups: the education department and I am a member of the Central Grampians LLEN. I have been on the Central Grampians LLEN since it was initiated; in fact, I was the original chairperson of that group. David Wheaton, its chief executive officer, is present here this morning. Did I cover everything?

The CHAIR — Yes, that is perfect. Your evidence will be taken down and become public evidence in due course. We will probably have some questions for you following this.

Dr NAPHTHINE — Also I think it is important to note that for a number of years Brendan was principal of Lake Bolac Secondary College — you cannot get more rural than that.

Mr RYAN — To answer your questions to the previous group, I was born and bred in inner Melbourne — North Melbourne — was appointed to Horsham in 1972 and indicated that I would be back to Melbourne one year later. Thirty-four years later I am still in the Wimmera, I have not moved anywhere. I certainly believe that the lifestyle that is available in the Wimmera is unequalled anywhere else — it is a magnificent area to live in.

Another issue you raised with the previous group — I am sorry I could not hear all of what was being said — I make the point that I have a son who completed his degree at Ballarat University. I have a daughter currently at Charles Sturt University in Albury and I have a son currently at Deakin University in Geelong. You can see that our family has a strong commitment to rural universities and rural educational opportunities. I believe, and I will speak about it briefly, that the marketing of those universities needs to improve. I have spoken with Ballarat University about this issue on a number of occasions. Just as a matter of interest, we recently prepared a marketing document for the central network of schools. I am happy to table that and provide it to the committee, because I believe a lot of work needs to be put into the marketing of the universities.

I have a submission here. I started teaching in Horsham and then I moved to Stawell. I have had principals positions at Murtoa, Goroke, Lake Bolas as Denis indicated, and subsequently at Ararat; now I am working in the region. I have spent my whole career working in various schools within the Grampians region. In the handout I have provided to you my territory is basically the green territory on the coloured map, which is the third of the slides there. That involves 31 schools through the Pyrenees, Ararat, Stawell and through to the Grampians. Of those 31 schools, 18 currently have student populations of less than 40 students.

You will see in the handout that I have run off a copy of the changes in the demographics of the state. I make the comment there that we have experienced a significant decline in student populations, and I will give you some examples. By the way, all of these schools had over 300 students in recent years. The enrolment at Rainbow Secondary College at the start of this year is 76 students in the school in total. The primary school is down to 54 students. Hopetoun Secondary College has 130 students, and once again it had over 300 students not so far back.

Beaufort Secondary College is another school that had over 300 students and currently has 140 students. Lake Bolac — my former school — Denis would be aware that I was there only six or seven years ago and we had 330 students when I was there and the current enrolment is 211. There has been a massive decline in enrolments right across the region.

I also want to draw your attention to some of the contextual issues. That is on the fourth of the slides I have prepared for you. Our region has the highest level of deferments in the whole state, and there are issues associated with that — 20 per cent plus deferments. I believe that relates to a number of issues regarding access, travelling

away from home and security issues. We have a high level of unemployment, particularly in the Ballarat area. Poor retention rates — our retention rates are among the lowest in the state. I think when those figures are published you will find that the Grampians retention rates will be in the mid-60s.

We have the lowest take-up of TAFE courses in the state as far as the region is concerned. The spine is down the highway — Stawell, Ararat, Horsham, Ballarat — but off the highway there is no take-up at all of courses. I was listening to the radio on the way down and there has been a 20 per cent decline in TAFE courses statewide; I think there is an issue there. We have the lowest level of post-secondary qualifications per head of population in the state. That is in terms of people in our region having qualifications past secondary level. I think that is an important issue which the committee needs to recognise.

Our non-completion rates are serious, and there is a skill shortage. I read with interest in yesterday's *Wimmera Mail-Times* that there is an inquiry going on at the moment concerning skill shortages and once again it is listed in some detail there the fact that we have high unemployment and yet we have serious skill shortages at the same time. Those things seem to be incompatible to me.

Dr NAPTHINE — And low TAFE enrolments at the same time.

Mr RYAN — Exactly. I am happy to table that item.

In terms of the issues, I think the young ones who spoke before me addressed the issue of connectedness. I must say that when I arrived in the room and looked at the committee of inquiry, I thought it resembled the inquiry into country football.

Dr NAPTHINE — It is the same group; you were there.

Mr RYAN — It is the same group? I thought it resembled that group. You will see that one of my slides, which I also presented previously, shows the demise of country football clubs and the relationship between the connectedness in the community to country football clubs. The young ones, I think, spoke about that already this morning and the fact that you only have to visit some of these towns where the football and netball clubs have disappeared to see that that community has been decimated.

A good example in our area is Patchewollock. Have you been up to Patchewollock lately to see what has happened there? The school is about to close down, it has five students. But the start of that decline was the demise of football and netball — the sporting community. That provides the social fabric of those communities. I am glad this group strongly supported the football and netball communities, and on behalf of the VCFL I am pleased to thank you for the support that has been provided to the clubs throughout Victoria, because it has certainly been appreciated and much needed. I think connectedness has been the key issue.

Transportation is also a major issue for us in the Wimmera. Once again, this is probably not a new topic for you. There are students throughout the Grampians region who travel miles and miles to access courses of study with their schools, particularly in the VET area. There has been an attempt to develop partnerships. In the Wimmera the local councils are supporting the buses that are providing VET transport. We have parents making contributions, we have schools and the department. There is a partnership going on there. But it cannot be sustained on the current model, and it is certainly restricting access to courses.

I have mentioned isolation there. I have already mentioned the fact that we have a lot of schools with very small populations, small cohorts at the moment and their ability to maintain a curriculum is difficult in those circumstances.

I think I have touched on sport and cultural experiences. I refer to information technology and communication. In the Wimmera we successfully submitted an application, through the Leading Schools Fund project, for a virtual classroom component, where we are to link the schools through videoconferencing equipment. The aim of that is to link the schools in terms of course delivery. Quite a number of deficiencies have been identified in that because they have become so small it has been difficult for the schools to deliver a curriculum and maintain a curriculum which meets the needs of the students. I think that is an area that more work can be put into, as far as making sure that reliable communication technology is in place.

There is the pathways access — and I will talk about this in more detail; you are probably more interested in some solutions to these issues — and an infrastructure issue there as well relating to technical training. Some of those issues have been addressed. I have also made reference to professional supervision — that is on the next page — because unfortunately in recent times I have had difficulty retaining some young professionals in our area. It is caused by the fact that we have not been able to provide satisfactory professional supervision for those people — psychologists, social workers, speech pathologists, and young ones coming out of university. We have been able to attract, in some cases, new professionals into our area, but they have stayed only for 12 months and left because they felt isolated and there has not been the professional supervision available first-hand.

I have noted ‘housing’ there. You would be aware that in a number of the small local communities education housing is no longer available to staff. In a number of instances, dare I say it, some of those residences are now in very poor condition and there is really a need for investment there. In recent days I had the experience of some young ones from Melbourne making inquiries about a principal’s job in my area. The first question they asked was whether there was suitable housing available to them in the area. It was pointed out what is available as far as the principal’s residence is concerned, and accordingly they decided not to apply, because the condition of the housing is dreadful, and it has deteriorated over a period of time. Obviously opportunities have been taken to sell off that housing. I keep looking over my shoulder and wondering who is listening to what I am saying here.

As to educational choice, it is once again on personal experience. We have had trouble getting doctors into the Wimmera area. An issue that has been identified by a number of doctors is educational choice — where can they send their children? That relates to private schooling compared to public schooling and the opportunities for their children.

The last issue I have mentioned is that of individual learning plans, and I will take that up in a moment. A lot more effort needs to be put into developing individual learning plans for students. As I said, on the one hand we have unemployment, and on the other hand we have a skill shortage. Where is the advice? Are we pointing the young ones in the right direction in terms of keeping them in our local community?

I will move on to some suggestions regarding how we can improve the situation for young people to retain them in the local area. I have put the heading ‘Transformation’ on my submission. At the moment I continue to have concerns that from a government point of view there is a tendency to adopt a silo approach to some of these issues and that we have different departments working in different areas. And on the issue of joined-up government, I am not sure that it has really come together adequately.

In the education system we see the Department of Human Services working in one area or the transport department doing something else. At the moment I do not see a genuine collaboration of the range of government agencies working together and working in the same direction. I have to say the idea of establishing the western Victorian managers group was a good initiative; I think there is more communication between the government agencies and local government in western Victoria as a result of the development of that initiative. But I think a lot more needs to be done.

I refer to the section headed ‘Directions’. In terms of expectations and lifting the bar, I have already made the point that I think marketing in the country regions — and obviously I am particularly talking about the Grampians region — is important in terms of increasing people’s aspirations and developing a culture that they are living in a good community, that there are positive outcomes and that there are a lot of opportunities involved with living in the Grampians region. That is about providing informed advice and counselling for the young people in our area in terms of their career aspirations, and working together in collaboration with the local government, state government and various government agencies.

Unfortunately I think there has been a tendency for schools to concentrate on the mainstream. I think that has been forced on schools to some extent because of the small cohorts in various schools. For instance, I think there needs to be a greater emphasis on the arts areas — dance, drama, painting — those areas which have been neglected to some extent because of the small cohorts. Languages education has also been on the wane in recent times because of the difficulty in getting language teachers and having some coherency between the primary schools and secondary schools as far as delivering language education is concerned.

I have also made mention of registered training organisations and cost in administration of programs for young people, and this relates to long distance of travel but also the cost of accessing VET programs. I think the fact that

students are having to be charged in a number of instances to access programs is a deterrent to continuing on their career pathways. Some examples are students from Ararat going to Horsham on a bus to access a hairdressing course; building and construction students also going on a bus to Horsham because of timetable issues. I am aware of families that live at Nullawil whose children go to school at Birchip, so they transport them there, then from Birchip to Warracknabeal and then from there to Horsham to access a program on a Wednesday. That obviously is a two-way trip. You can imagine how much time and commitment is involved with that sort of delivery mode. Clearly it is not satisfactory.

Regarding innovations, there needs to be credit transfer between the school and TAFE systems and the recognition of prior learning. That way some of these courses can be reduced in length. They also provide access for young people in our communities.

Regarding resource allocations, I will come back to that but clearly there is a need to generate more expenditure particularly in the technical development area, the practical capacity area of schools.

Regarding cooperation and competition, I believe to a large extent we have endeavoured to develop a cooperative climate in our country centres. The competition between private and public schooling has created issues and diverted resources away from improving course access. If we had been able to develop a more cooperative approach, the amount of money spent on advertising and promotion et cetera might have been better redirected into providing better access for students as far as courses are concerned.

The CHAIR — We are running out of time.

Mr RYAN — I will skip over a couple of things and mention retention rates. I made some comments about the importance of the land and industry connections with the school and sharing expertise and making sure student welfare is satisfactory. The second point I have made is about information technology and reliable communication systems and people being able to work in remote centres and having reliable communications with the larger centres.

The third item is managing individual pathways. I am of the opinion that a lot more work needs to go into MIPs where there is a truly integrated approach within the classroom. We need to have people solely devoted to careers advice in the school. We have bottom-line budgeting in schools, and there is pressure on the principals to spread the money across a range of opportunities. There is a significant turnover of personnel in that area. We need to make sure there is accurate advice, that staff are given sufficient time and that there are individual learning planes for each student in place. There need to be strong connections with the various agencies that support youth.

The last item I have mentioned, no. 4, is youth options guarantee. This program was initiated in our region by our regional director, Malcolm Millar. It looks at putting together a partnerships initiative group which looks at facilitating post-school outcomes for students, making sure there is a strengthening of the cross-sectoral links and partnerships available in our area. In other words, it is to make sure the students do not slip through the cracks, so to speak, are given accurate advice and are provided with a sound career path which will keep them within our community.

The CHAIR — Thank you for your presentation and for the amount of work you have put into the submission for us. Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.