

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Bairnsdale— 23 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

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Research Officers: Dr Peter Chen, Ms C. Tischler

Witnesses

Mr D Hawkey, Workways/Pathways Project, Workways Bairnsdale (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome David. 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 witnesses that any comments made outside the committee hearings 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.

Could you provide your full name and address and the name of the organization you are representing, if you are representing an organization.

Mr HAWKEY — My name is David Hawkey, I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Bairnsdale and I am an interested citizen of Bairnsdale.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much David. Your evidence will become public in due course, so if you could please provide us with your statement for about 10 minutes and we will have some time for questions after that.

Mr HAWKEY — First of all I am representing both my wife Lorna, and myself. Lorna cannot be here today because she is on her way to Queensland to an international conference with three of our local Koori young people. We have both been teachers for over 35 years. We both finished up as Principals of schools before we left the system. Since that time we worked with the Jobs Pathway program, which is the school to work area of expertise that we have and that is the area that I am going to talk on today.

We conducted the Jobs Pathway program for seven or eight years in East Gippsland in the seven colleges. We work with 300 young people a year in those colleges. I also manage the program in 35 colleges at offices in Wangaratta, Wodonga and Echuca, as well as in Bairnsdale. So we had had a feeling for school to work transition over a fairly wide area. Currently Lorna is still working in that field. She is working with the Changing Lanes, which is an alternative secondary setting in Bairnsdale and she is also working with the IVLOIS program which is the indigenous school to work transition program.

My work these days is confined to as a volunteer and I work with a range of Rotary programs. The comments I make today are probably from attitudes and opinions gained. They are not necessarily based on statistics. It was interesting to listen to people from Mallacoota today. I have lived in Mallacoota for 10 years and at the time it was the seventies and eighties it was 1,000 people in the town, it was our policy really to promote the outside world to young people in Mallacoota with the assumption that most of them would have to leave that area. It is interesting that quite a few of those young people have found their way down to the Bairnsdale area.

But the same sort of promotion was done in the Jobs Pathway program in places like Swifts Creek and Cann River, because young people at Swifts Creek and Cann River regardless of what we might like to think about them staying there, because we just did not have the positions, the work was not there, so we were working against their interest if we tried to retain them in area. So I am saying this is relative. Bairnsdale is a different area, not the same to the one's I mentioned.

The young people we work with, Jobs Pathway, were not those that aspire to the university education, they were young people who either wanted to leave school or had already left school. They ranged in age from about 14 to about 18 or 19. They had generally, many of them, if not most, had low self esteem for a range of reasons which were social and so on, but as far as the one's that we were interested in they were not helped by the current emphasis on academic rather than practical education. I think the statement I heard a politician say that the universities promoted the idea that you are a dill if you do not have a degree has not worked very well in country areas. Most of the work in country areas is of a practical nature and university degrees, although now more in use, there are more jobs available, in an area like Bairnsdale, most jobs do not require a degree.

There is an emphasis on practical education later on at secondary school but it probably needs to be earlier. There is a lot of good work being done of course to combat much of that and challenge the local LLEN where I think good work is done. It was still amazing for us to find when we were working with young people the lack of knowledge they had of what work was available in the local areas was quite incredible and that has even become more so now because we have larger businesses coming into the town, Patties has expanded, and places like this and larger and there is a greater range of work available. Yet there is not necessarily that knowledge in the schools.

In this presentation, we have concentrated on terms of reference of 1 and 3 rather than 2, because we think they are the areas we know more about. The factors influencing young people to stay in rural areas are firstly economic and you heard mention of that. We knew that the young country people could get work in the city. It was relatively easy, people from Orbst, young people from Orbst guaranteed work in the city, but they could not survive. So economic reasons are good reasons why people are staying in rural areas.

Transport, I thought that was an excellent presentation earlier. I will not say any more than that except in an area like Bairnsdale, transport is an issue around the town. There are other issues, getting out of town to go to training programs, but the issue going from one end of Bairnsdale to the other, is there. Possibly a generation or two ago it may not have been there, people would have ridden bikes, but young people these days are being carried to school and everywhere else by car virtually since birth, so there is a different attitude of getting around.

Young people will stay here because of their support networks and that has been mentioned before of course. There is a negative reason why young people stay in rural areas which needs to be addressed. That is, the young people who are opting out. A large number of young people who are disconnected from their local schools and communities and they elect to stay here because it is probably easier, they can survive there. I would quote the fact that when the Changing Lanes program the alternative secondary college program was started, they were recruiting from a list of 150 young people who were not in either school training or employment in Bairnsdale. I think that is a significant number of young people. They are staying in rural areas, but not necessarily for the right reasons.

Of course, suitable job opportunities are another reason why they do not leave. The factors influencing young people to leave we found are training opportunities was one of them. I think mention has been made of that if you want to get young people into a group training program, the kids have to go to Sale from Bairnsdale, that means they have to either stay over there or travel down there. Some of them like to travel further and do it somewhere else which gets them out of the area. Training facilities are in the larger cities and the centres and that is of course, a difficult one to overcome.

A lack of knowledge of what jobs are available and they believe that more opportunities are readily available in the cities. A lack of work in their chosen field and unable to be flexible in their chosen field of work. They do go away for specialised fields of study or opportunity, like sport and the arts, which is apart from the one's doing the tertiary education. Jobs in the country generally pay less, and they are looking for a greater dollar. Most strategies and recommendations a lot of this we believe a lot of work can be done at school. Localised career education, ensuring that young people do know what is available in their local area. That may mean that the status of careers teachers and people working with young people in careers, needs to rise. Local budgets in schools means that there is often changes being made to staffing and the careers teacher is often at the end of the line. So you find that career teachers are generally overworked. There is a high stress rate generally in the sort of work that they are doing and a lot of it is administrative and it might be that they need assistance to do what they are doing.

Many of the successful careers teachers achieve their success at the expense of our own free time, and I quote the teacher working in Orbst does a fantastic job, personally insulted if his kids do not do something meaningful when they leave the school. But he does a lot of his work at night. We believe that meaningful managed individual pathways – meaningful MIPS programs should be operating in schools. That probably links to the fact that there needs to be time for one to one case management of young people in the way that the Jobs Pathway program was conducted but schools are unable to do that under the present conditions.

The presence of local industries in schools, and this is starting to happen. There is a lot of local industry people are now taking part in programs in schools. Practical subjects available at the earliest year levels we believe is essential. The present programs tend to start at years 11 and 12 where VET programs start, they might start year 10, but often they do not for timetabling reasons and those sorts of things. Training has been discussed, and it is difficult to be accessible, transport also. There are some positives in industrial involvement in schools. There is one, last year there were eight school leavers starting apprenticeships in Cranes Asphalt in Bairnsdale Road Services, and that is as a result of direct involvement by them. The second one is that the last two career expos that were held in East Gippsland were based on hands on industries and well supported by a large number of industries where young people could actually do hands on work and could have a feel for different things that were happening in industries.

School based apprenticeships we believe are very important and are underrated. In the country we believe they need to be promoted because where a small employer could not have a full time apprentice, they could perhaps maintain a day or two a week apprentice, which is a different thing. Recreation has been mentioned before and of

course, that is part of the reason why young people do not stay. We want young people to feel that it is cool to live in the country, that they can do things in the country that are exciting. Often the thought is that you go to the city to do exciting things, but we need to promote the country.

Part-time work is another we believe important issue. We believe that young people who do part-time work find it easier to get employment and particularly, employment in the local area. They are known, they have a work ethic and it is an excellent opportunity for schools to become involved in school based apprenticeships and turn these part-time jobs into something that could be accredited program as well. Some schools are doing this very successfully, Mansfield is one of them.

The last thing I would like to say is that I think the government bodies need to lead by example, if we are going to retain young people in rural areas we need governments at the three levels, the government bodies to all be involved in training young people, giving work experience, work placement apprenticeships, school based apprenticeships or whatever, which has not always been easy in current times. I thank you very much.

The CHAIR — Thank you David for putting this together, there are some great recommendations there.

Mr MITCHELL — I would just like your opinion, are young people do you think, respected in the communities?

Mr HAWKEY — It is difficult to say, in some areas yes, in some areas no. We have a large indigenous number of young people who I would say no, there would be a negative reaction in the community towards those young people.

Mr MITCHELL — Is that a stereo type issue?

Mr HAWKEY — Yes, it is but a lot of it is for very real reasons and there are lots of people working on that, as it is an issue. There are magnificent young people who are doing great things in our community and they are well respected and they do get opportunities to show that. To show you an example, we have just got a young girl who is going to London as a result of her going to a Science forum in Canberra.

Mr INGRAM — Are young people encouraged to take up leadership roles in the community?

Mr HAWKEY — I think so, it is not easy. It is not easy to always make that work. The experience from the organizations that I am involved in I would say yes.

Mr INGRAM — Probably more so here than a lot of other areas from the evidence we have got. The 150 young people to choose from in Changing Lanes, clearly they are young people who have been disenfranchised from the education system and probably do not see that the education that they were getting would necessarily get them into an employment opportunity. I would like you to make brief comments on whether that has been turned around and whether we are actually doing enough to get those people back connected with the education system, the training system so that there is a pathway into employment?

Mr HAWKEY — Yes, it is a very interesting program that is taking place at the moment. This is going to be a privately owned school that is being planned at the moment to run this. It is actually going to be funded by Workways and it is being staffed and run under the auspices of a secondary college. It is difficult to maintain teachers who can handle these young people for a start. We have a brilliant person at the moment running it, and it really relies on him at the moment. My concern is that without the right staff it will not survive. They are going to overcome their building problems in time but there is a lot of work to do. We find that these young people have simple things like not knowing how to eat when they are out. There are all sorts of issues there that have to be dealt with. It is a long road and we found the other day, that almost all of the young people had a parent who had died. It is common thing amongst them.

Mr INGRAM — That's Changing Lanes, specifically?

Mr HAWKEY — Yes.

Mr INGRAM — Looking at the education system, we have seen more recently the Australian Technical College announcement that they will be coming to East Gippsland, governments have re-introduced VCAL type programs in to schools and you see that large number of students who have not necessarily been picked up by the

education system and have fallen through the cracks. Do you think that is an acknowledgement that the system was not actually catering for those who were not academically minded and do you think we have actually got the solutions now so that they will be re-engaged or put in directions where they will be made or developed to a stage where they are employable when they leave school or training?

Mr HAWKEY — No I do not think the solutions are there because the experience that we had by the time the young people are 15, the kids we are working with, wanted to leave school, but by the age of 15 they had not had the chance to do VCAL. Now our aim was to try and hold them on, hold them at school until they got that opportunity but they need an earlier opportunity to do practical subjects. It might be that they need an alternative type of school, not based on say, the four walls and classroom, academic type of school that we have now. It might be that there is something that needs to be created at a lower age group.

The CHAIR — David, thank you very much you will receive a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time, and you may correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witness withdrew.