

CORRECTED VERSION

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities

Yarram — 24 May 2006

Members

Mr B. P. Hardman

Mr R. G. Mitchell

Mr C. Ingram

Mr J. M. McQuilten

Chair: Mr B. P. Hardman

Deputy Chair: Mr C. Ingram

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms L. Topic

Research Officers: Dr P. Chen, Ms C. Tischler

Witnesses

Mr T Harrington, Principal, Yarram Secondary College (sworn),

Ms B McKenzie, Yarram Secondary College (sworn),

Mr T McQueen, School Captain, Yarram Secondary College (affirmed),

Mr C Christon, Student Representative Council, Yarram Secondary College (affirmed),

Ms E Hirt, Teacher, Yarram Secondary College (sworn) and,

Ms N Johnston, Secondary School Nurse, Yarram Secondary College (sworn).

The CHAIR — Welcome everyone. I have a brief statement to read before we begin. Thank you for joining us today. 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, and 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's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including an Independent member. We are hearing evidence today on the inquiry into retaining young people in rural towns and communities.

Could you please give us your full name and address and the name of the organization you represent today, position within that organization and take the oath or affirmation.

Mr HARRINGTON — Terry Harrington, Principal of Yarram Secondary College, I live in Foster.

Mr McQUEEN — Tom McQueen, School Captain at Yarram Secondary College and member of the SRC.

Mr CHRISTON — Cameron Christon, I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Parkside and I am the secretary of the SRC at Yarram Secondary College.

Ms McKENZIE — Bridget McKenzie, I am a physical education teacher at Yarram Secondary College and the coordinator of the SRC, I live [ADDRESS REMOVED] Leongatha.

Ms HIRT — My name is Eva Hirt I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Yarram and I am a teacher at Yarram Secondary College, and I am the integration coordinator and coordinator of VCAL.

MS JOHNSTON — I am Narice Johnston I live at [ADDRESS REMOVED] Devon North and I am secondary school nurse at Yarram Secondary College.

The CHAIR — If you would please give us your evidence Terry would you like to start and after the submissions we will have questions.

Mr HARRINGTON — Yes, I do not mind starting. Some of the data that we commonly experience through our school is for instance, probably about a quarter of our students end up going on to university, about a quarter go on to TAFE, we have about 30% going straight into employment, from about year 10 or 11 on and there is about 10% or 20% people who we think float around somewhere in the system unattached. It is obviously our job to try and attach all of those kids, and find pathways for each individual student which is a huge ask for a secondary college.

Certainly one of the issues that I have seen time and time again over a number of years are students from an area such as this and I live at Foster and it is the same situation there, of the expense of students having to go away and leaving I guess their rich community, their family, their friends and having to reattach themselves somewhere, that is a huge ask. It is an issue for the dollars as well as that fracturing of relationships and when you think of kids staying in a local community being able to do that, I think of all the Melbourne kids who can sit down there and retain all those relationships and family and everything else, live in their community, and still go on to tertiary. That is a huge difference gap between them and not just university but TAFE or other employment that they might have to go off and do, the same issue arises.

We have very poor transport here, as students outside of the place, so they cannot live here and go on public transport to universities, let alone TAFE on a daily basis. So that fracturing of the community is a huge issue and access to transport, living here you just cannot do it. Work opportunities we think it is a big area in terms of apprenticeships. We have lots of kids who would love to go on to apprenticeship kinds of areas of work and I believe there is a lot of towns people who would be willingly employable but there seems to be some problems with that whole set up of youth employment and maybe training employers and attaching them to work situations and keeping that ongoing and the whole of the bundle for apprenticeships and young people getting jobs in the communities, I think is a real issue. It is something that we could work on.

We have a LLENs group which you are probably aware of, it is based in Bairnsdale, so we do not see them much, there is nothing here. They do work a bit with us and they probably do as good as they can, but at a distance from us. We do not see much within our own community here that can really help and that is one other area I would like to briefly mention is the leadership of the rural communities is really lacking. There is not enough glue to hold us together. Once upon a time we might have had a shire here for instance and that held people together a lot more in the community, we do not have that now. So we have a situation where the leaders are the people, maybe they are principals of schools and other people in the community who are already overworked and everything else. We need some kind of system to be able to grow a community and lead it into the directions it could be going there, so that is another area. I do not want to take up everyone's time, so I might just pass on.

Mr McQUEEN — Well the reason we think people leave the area is everyone wants to broaden their experiences, broaden the horizons, have a look at what is available, because for Yarram there is not a lot of opportunities. I will not say that people are pushed into university, but if they want to do that if they want to move on and look at educational opportunities, then they have to leave Yarram. That is the general feeling especially in our year, and our age group and some cannot economically afford to travel to Melbourne to learn and educate themselves in Melbourne.

Mr CHRISTON — Some of it has to do with people who have been here for eight or nine years of their life not everybody is going to stay here, not a lot of it is to do with the jobs are here the family is here, they want to get out kind of thing. I know I will be leaving when I am 18 to 19 to pursue something with the military and that is something I always wanted to do and along with my brother he will probably want to do that too. People will still just want to get out. We could get more jobs and stuff but I know that I want to get out.

Mr McQUEEN — But if you look at in the sense that people do return because they feel that after you go out and have a look around you might see that that is the place for me after I leave school. Then you realise Yarram does have a lot to offer especially family lives, you might feel it is cheaper to come back and raise a family here and it is a good community, it is nice and close knit and you can really work together and that sort of environment is the perfect thing for something like that, so I think you are going to see a lot of people returning back to the community especially later in life. Once they have experienced out in Melbourne and things like that.

Mr CHRISTON — Yes and if their family is here I suppose they are always going to be tied. There is also the cost of housing and living for around here, and prices are going up at the moment, which could have a bit to do with people moving elsewhere to where living is cheaper. Again like what Terry said, public transport is an issue getting to places like there is a university in Churchill where a lot of people chose to go because it is close to here, but they might go and live in Morwell or somewhere because they may not have their licence or it might be hard to drive over every day.

Mr McQUEEN — So the strategy to fix that would be to put in some public transport that could take you from Yarram over there, something like that, it would help because travel is a big issue.

Mr CHRISTON — I think that would keep a few more people in, yes.

Mr INGRAM — The timing of that transport would need to tie in with the university or jobs or training or other opportunities.

The CHAIR — What about social and recreational opportunities on your Friday nights and your weekends, is that the type of public transport that you think is also important as far as young people is concerned?

Mr McQUEEN — That would be a good thing I suppose because in Yarram there is not a lot of things, and that is a lot of the reasons the kids move away too, they want to have a look at other things they can do socially because in Yarram there is not a lot of that. We have FReeZA and stuff like that, which are great for the community. It might be once you experience those kind of things they come back later for family but transport for social activities and socialise, that would be a good thing.

Mr HARRINTON — That is probably an issue for younger teachers coming to the school too, I would include in this category and it is hard to retain them, and Bridget you might like to talk to.

Ms McKENZIE — I would love to see transport between Leongatha and here that is not at 6 o'clock in the morning. I just wanted to touch on what the students were saying and that is only what I am going to touch on. I

am a country girl that left for the bright lights and returned to raise my family and now that I have four young rural Victorians I actually want to see them leave. I want them to leave so I think the same reasons I chose to raise them in the country are the same reasons that I am kind of wanting them to go. Because it is secure, because it is isolated, because they are all the things we love about a small town are the kind of things you want your kids to get away from, knowing that you think you have done the right thing and they will choose to reside rurally whether that is in your home town or otherwise later on.

As a teacher, I think rural educators have an added responsibility maybe to our metropolitan peers. We have to look after not only their academic welfare because we all know that country kids do not score as well on enter scores as metropolitan kids. We have to be the person – and Eva will talk about this a little later – vocationally we have to be the person who makes those links in our small town for their vocational outcomes. One other thing is their cultural development that I think that particularly as rural teachers, they are not going to the Comedy Festival with their parents. They are not going to the museum or the art gallery every weekend, or even once on school holidays. They are just not having access and opportunity to those cultural things so it is our responsibility to do that.

I think Dean mentioned the VRAP program which is an exceptional program and I know it came under funding last year when I was running it, but it is an exceptional access program for young rural kids to look at that vocational stuff. Anything else, any other strategies, I think it was government services maintained because they attract employees to the region, to our town. Also access and equity for existing residents issues, adopting not just an economic perspective to maintenance and government services in rural towns.

Ms HIRT — My problem with kids I have been dealing with is probably lack of apprenticeships in the Yarram community. I know a lot of trades people would like to put more apprentices on but there is not the work. There are peaks, it goes up and down and there is just not that continual work. I have lived in Yarram for 25 years and when I first came here there were things like the SEC, Telstra, other government organizations that put apprentices on, so that has declined. We have got a shire but it is the Shire of Wellington, so it is centralised in Sale, but that again there were quite a few different jobs that went with the shire and not only apprenticeships, but there were a lot of professional people in the town. So we had engineers, town planners, health surveyors, and no longer are they here, it is gone.

Mr INGRAM — Council amalgamation has been a good thing, has it not?

Mr MITCHELL — Almost as good as the sell off of the SEC and Telstra.

Ms HIRT — So they are the sort of problems I deal with daily. Lack of public transport is a big problem for these kids to access things in other areas. I have seen some of the, particularly girls – and I have not got statistics, but an increase in teenage pregnancies because some the kids feel what do you do, and there is no way out. At least having that they feel a bit important or better. So they have been my main observations and I have got a son now who has finished his teaching and I know that there are financial problems with having kids living away from home, but he has come back to Yarram for his teaching, but I do not think he will stay around for a huge amount of time, save some money – just because there is not the young people or depth of professional people in the area. Unless you are in the education field or health there is not a lot.

The CHAIR — Eva, with the VCAL?

Ms HIRT — I am PRECAL actually. A bit of program we started, kids in year 9 and 10 we put them on a special program. It includes a lot of life skill things and work experience.

Mr INGRAM — Is that because you are acknowledging that the VCAL starts too late for a lot of these young people for the interaction, they are missing out on, if you like, like the train or the school bus?

Ms HIRT — Yes.

Mr HARRINGTON — These were also kids that were not adapting to classrooms all that well and rather than make them, or push them into that kind of experience, we give them a bit of time out of the traditional classroom to work on special programs.

The CHAIR — Have you put the program together yourself?

Ms HIRT — Yes.

The CHAIR — Can you tell us a bit more about it, if that is okay, it is just for our benefits?

Ms HIRT — The program I have got, kids with either learning problems or social problems, we do life skills, English and Maths. They have got a little business enterprise so they do – it is called Job Juice instead Boost Juice – through the canteen sell sort of juices and soups. They are kids that sometimes do not get fed properly at home and it is a way that you can introduce this nutrition in an unobtrusive sort of way. They work at a place the Mens Shed on Friday which is an excellent venue. They go down there and make things, there is a supervisor, an integration aide goes down and works with some of them. They work in a workshop environment with some of the old trades people in the area, but we have only got funding for that for another 10 weeks and that will then shut down.

They go out on work experience where we can fit them in to different places in the community, we do a lot of work experience training, so that they know they have to be on time, and all the things we take for granted, these kids have got to be taught. They have got another catering program they actually put on a breakfast for Principals at Gippsland. So when we have a project like that we work for a few weeks beforehand to organize what we are going to do, what we need to buy and whatever. They have a vegetable garden and they work in that and they have also work in the school nursery, we have got a nursery, so we sell trees to Land Care and different garden people.

The CHAIR — How long has this been running for?

Ms HIRT — I started it last year, it was just frustration because a lot of the kids were past integration kids, the language disorder program went, or things happened there. A lot of these kids were floating they were not kids who were going to do VCE and a lot of the English and Maths courses were geared into VCE and so I started it off as a desperation measure I suppose.

The CHAIR — It is fantastic stuff, of these students who started this program last year, how many of those do you think have stayed on at school, which otherwise would have left?

Ms HIRT — Probably about 12, they would have left. There are a couple of problems with social problems, some of these kids have gone into the community, VCAL program.

Mr HARRINGTON — I want to mention that as well, as we are running a community VCAL program outside the school, so these kids do not want to come on to school site most of the time, it is a lot easier. We have employed a person this year to run that, and there are probably a dozen kids who attend that on a regular basis and with a lot of life skill kind of stuff, but with a lot of kids that is probably the only connection they make during the day often with anything, so that is pretty tough proof and some kids might float from PRECAL eventually into the community, VCAL or even within the school VCAL. We are finding we need those different kinds of groups.

Ms HIRT — There are a couple of kids that actually have gone to TAFE in the Latrobe Valley and a couple have joined the school based VCAL.

Ms JOHNSTON — I am also somebody who schooled here, went away to Monash Gippsland, became a nurse and travelled around and then came back and settled here and are now working at the school, where I went to school. I have seen big shifts in the way the school environment and the Yarram area, I suppose I have seen the changes. One of the changes that I have seen is when did it become mandatory that kids who went into apprenticeships had to be in year 11, year 12. Where did that shift happen? Now there is also I feel a community perception a lot of parents aspire to having their children in this area to go to university. To get an apprenticeship is sort of frowned upon and seen as a lower thing in many instances. I want to gauge what has happened, where that shift occurred?

A lot of it I imagine is what you mentioned before, is the SEC closing down and things like that, but there has been a big social shift in those ideas. The other thing that I wanted to mention was the decentralisation of a lot of services and they put a Centrelink call office in Traralgon where there is probably more employment opportunities in Traralgon than there in Yarram. Why not put a Centrelink call centre or something like that in a small community where you can bring people in? There are lots of call centres, there are lots of other things that would be valuable that do not necessarily have to be in the city centres, and that is just one idea that I thought.

The CHAIR — Yes, thank you.

Mr MITCHELL — You touched on something that we have heard right across the state and that is that apprenticeships are being looked on as a second class career, there is also a problem when kids go away from a small community to university. They might go to university and it is a massive culture shift and then they come back 12 months later, or 8 months later and the perception around the general community is that they failed and that causes huge self esteem problems. Do you come across that with all the students you have got? How do you address that, I know it is not exactly your role to do it?

MS JOHNSTON — Going back 10 years ago I had a brother that was at Yarram Secondary and that was at the time that the SEC and everything was sold off. His group of friends out of all of them, I think there were five of them, four of them ended up with clinical depression because they had no future, they did not see anything in their future. All of them have gone on to do things perhaps in a different format and they have all got on in life, but the reality was when they went to school, they all had the idea that there would be an apprenticeship for them. That was what they aspired to be and that was 10 years ago and now kids at school, there is a small amount that are wanting to get an apprenticeships and a larger amount that are wanting to aspire to higher levels of education, but not really knowing what they want.

Mr MITCHELL — What they need to do is to see a plumber's pay packet.

Ms JOHNSTON — But then a lot of local industry they cannot afford to put any more apprentices on because they do not have the skilled staff to then be able to put them on. There is a business in Yarram that I know who would probably put on 10 apprentices if they had the trained staff to be able to teach the apprentices. So because of the lack of apprentices 10 years ago, you have got no trained staff now, it is a skill shortage.

Ms McKENZIE — I was just wanting to tie in with the Honourable Robert Mitchell's question. I was a student president of a large university a few years ago, and we had run a specific first year program specifically for that and I think tying in to what Terry was saying that the retention rates for first year university students were shocking but if you broke that cohort down further, it was actually abominable for rural kids. I think it goes to the whole point of they go home, dinner is on the table, someone else is doing their washing, they can do their 20 hours work and not have to keep a house as well and go home for netball on the weekends. I think that is a real issue, they have to work a job because rural families, you might have three kids up there, not everyone can afford a flat to put them all in. It is all those issues, like Tom was also saying, the economics around attending higher education, or an apprenticeship if you want to be a chef or what have you.

Mr INGRAM — That is a common thing that has come across. Tom and Cameron I would like to know, I know Cameron said you would like to go in the military. What courses do you intend to do? Do you intend to get professional training from the military and are those things something you can bring back to this community?

Mr CHRISTON — I was thinking of going through the Australian Defence Force Academy which you come out of that with a degree that would make it a lot easier.

Mr INGRAM — Any idea on a particular degree?

Mr CHRSTON — Engineering maybe, to come out of that and then come out of the military with a degree would make it a lot easier to get a job but I still do not know if I would use it here.

Mr McQUEEN — For me, there is a push towards university, but I do not feel that university is really for me I am not up for that. I would move away first but I think Yarram would be good later on in life to come back and especially family wise raise a family it would be a great thing to do. But at the moment education wise I feel I will move on and look out first and see what is there.

Mr INGRAM — What course are you going to do?

Mr McQUEEN — Animation, or possibly graphic design.

Mr MITCHELL — It is a growth industry.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, and thanks for bringing the young people as well today, it has been very important. You will get a copy of the transcript in about two weeks time, you can correct any typographical errors but not matters of substance.

Witnesses withdrew