RURAL AND REGIONAL COMMITTEE

Inquiry into extent and nature of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria

Mildura — 2 March 2010

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Mr R. Broadhead, executive officer, Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network.
The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Ron. We appreciate your making your time available to the Rural and Regional Committee for our inquiry into the extent and nature of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria. The Rural and Regional Committee has seven members, five of whom are here today. All evidence given today will be captured by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege, but any comments made outside the precinct are not covered by parliamentary privilege.

Before you start, if you would be kind enough to give us your full name and address and the name of the organisation that you are representing. Then it is over to you, Ron, for your presentation, followed by some questions.

Mr BROADHEAD — Thank you, Damian, and thank you for the opportunity to present to your inquiry. My name is Ron Broadhead. I am the executive officer of the Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network, one of the 31 LLENs across Victoria. I understand that you would be familiar with the LLENs and the role that we play in building partnerships in our local communities.

I have a document, which is not our final submission; it is just some summary notes that I wish to draw attention to and because it has some figures I thought I would distribute that. We will submit our final submission to you by the due date.

Firstly, thank you for coming to Mildura and seeking the input of the members of our community into the very important issue of disadvantage and inequity in our regional-rural communities that make up Victoria. I specifically want to address:

(c) Identify the key factors of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria, such as access to education, health care, employment opportunities, housing affordability and transport.

Obviously, in my organisation approach is really about education so my focus will mainly be on that area, although all the other aspects do impact on education.

Firstly, I point out that there is a significant amount of work on the extent of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional communities, and I point you towards some reports that are significant. There is a report by Professor Tony Vinson called Unequal in Life: the distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales in which he examined the social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales, and he identified a multiple social disadvantage across this region.

Secondly, Mildura Rural City Council has now published two reports, the latest being the Mildura Social Indicators 2008 which informs the council’s efforts to build a strong and healthy community and still identifies a number of indicators of social disadvantage and inequity.

There is also economic disadvantage prevalent in our community. The impact of drought, lack of water in our catchment zones, world commodity prices and the global financial crisis all significantly impact on the economy in our region. You can see that there are a number of social and economic factors that impact on the people in our community.

Then I want to explore how this social and economic disadvantage impacts on education, training and employment of young people in the Northern Mallee LLEN region, which is defined as the Mildura Rural City Council LGA, plus Robinvale, which makes up our LLEN region. Firstly, it impacts on our retention rates.

The CHAIR — Where would Ouyen fit in that region?

Mr BROADHEAD — Ouyen is within ours, so it captures Murrayville, Ouyen, Werrimull and Robinvale, and then all of the Mildura city area. Firstly, it impacts on retention rates. Later you will see some figures on what this impact is about. In this region the retention rates of schools — and I will put some data in my final submission — varies considerably between schools. It is a factor that we have young people not completing their secondary schooling, which is the factor I am trying to point out.

I move on to attainment and completion. The Victorian government has the objective of 90 per cent of young people completing year 12 or its equivalent, and in Victoria that means a certificate II, by 2010.
The 2006 ABS data for the Mildura Rural City Council LGA area indicates that 65.8 per cent of 20 to 24 year olds have completed year 12 or its equivalent. I think the government target is at about age 19, so if we capture those who have turned 19, 20 to 24, it shows us about 65 per cent of young people in this region have completed year 12 or its equivalent. It is about 25 per cent below what the government’s target is, and that is obviously a factor of concern.

The next part I focus on is the destinations. What are our young people doing if they are not going on to further education and training; where do they actually end up? On Track is the Victorian government system which has been in operation for, I think, five to six years now. It follows up students in the April after they complete year 12. We all get this data and it is split into LLEN regions. I have selected some data here to illustrate the destinations of young people in our region.

Firstly, if we look at year 12 completers in 2008, that is young people in this region who completed year 12 in 2008, there were 448, of which 366 were contacted. This is a sample size of 81 per cent, which is a fairly good sample size.

The destinations of those young people in the LLEN region, compared to Victoria, shows that fewer of our students go on to university; more of our students deferred from university or TAFE than is the case for Victoria; fewer go on to certificate IV, diploma, advanced diploma; more go into traineeships such as certificate II in retail, certificate II in hospitality; more go into full-time employment; significantly more go into part-time employment; and more are looking for work.

The picture from our year 12 completers is of not going on to further education and training, it is going into some training in terms of traineeships, but if you look at the last three categories, full-time and part-time employment and looking for work, significantly more of our young people are taking that destination rather than further education and training. This is where the social economic impact does affect our young people in terms of their desire, aspiration or capacity by way of income support from their families to undertake further education.

I move on to point B, what about early school leavers who left school before completing year 12 in 2008? Here the sample size potentially is 250, of which 110 were interviewed. Fewer took up apprenticeships than in the rest of Victoria; more took up traineeships; less took up full-time employment; and more took up part-time employment.

You can see that part-time employment is a stronger destination for our younger people and whilst that may lead to full-time employment, our observation and anecdotal evidence is that young people who have part-time employment at school opt for or are sometimes offered some more hours to work and so finish off school and take up part-time employment with a view to entering the workforce. That may not necessarily be the best option for that young person. It may not lead to progression within that employment and it may lead to further unemployment down the track when the economy tightens and the casuals are the first to be put off.

Moving on to point C, the On Track data also gives us some qualitative analysis about why students do not go on to further study. Again, taking those 2008 school leavers who did not go on to study the following year, when asked the question — and there could be multiple responses to this so they could have responded with more than one answer — the top three reasons for not being in educational training and not deferring are: financial pressure on the family, considering differences between our LLEN and Victoria, those are almost double; would have to leave home, a significant factor in preventing young people from aspiring to go on; and the course was not offered locally.

When those who did defer entry to university or TAFE were asked the reasons why they deferred, 73.9 per cent said they wanted to qualify for the youth allowance, financial pressure on the family and they would have to leave home.

This paints a picture that young people in our region are impacted by the social disadvantage and inequity existing in this community, overlaid by the economic factors I outlined earlier. For some time this has time impacted on their aspirations and therefore the destinations of young people in our community.

I move on to disengagement. It is very difficult to get hard data on the numbers that disengage but we believe that most of the figures we see, particularly from ABS, are probably understated. Nonetheless, the figures we
have, I have submitted to you. In those charts, the column graphs illustrate the degree of engagement in Mildura for young people 15 to 19, Loddon-Mallee and Victoria, and the degree of disengagement.

You will see that the percentages engaged in Mildura is less than Loddon-Mallee and far less than Victoria. The percentage disengaged is far greater in Mildura than Loddon-Mallee or for Victoria. We have an issue with young people disengaging altogether, not going on to education, not going on to training and not going into employment.

I move on: all of this brings us to the point about aspirations and I note the work that your committee has done before in its report in the inquiry into geographical differences.

The CHAIR — That was not the same committee.

Mr BROADHEAD — Okay, one of the parliamentary committees highlighted in its report, about aspirations, and they picked up the cumulative effect of social disadvantage, inequity, economic disadvantage and lack of role models in our community, with a community that has a lower level of qualifications than the rest of the state, tends to be a self-fulling prophecy for many young people.

The solution to that is a whole-of-government community education and training commitment to young people which includes significant improvements that can be made to aspirational levels over time, and I will detail those a little later.

If I can move on to term of reference (g), and I will not go through a lot of detail; you can read them as we go. It states that it is about examining current government responses to rural and regional disadvantage. I believe the Victorian government’s education and training policies, the blueprint and the Wannik strategies are generally sound, and focus on trying to address educational disadvantage in particular at the preschool and prep levels. It is important we start this work very early on in young people’s education rather than compounding disadvantage as it goes along.

I would also like to draw attention to the good work of the Loddon Mallee regional office, DEECD, the two regional network leaders here for the Sunraysia and Mallee networks, and local schools that have been working collaboratively with the NMLLEN on a number of projects and initiatives that we believe will have an impact on completion and retention rates. The COAG national partnerships are also a framework within which the Victorian government is utilising federal cooperation to move in the right direction.

In particular I would like to acknowledge the initiative between the Australian and Victorian governments in the School Business Community Partnership Broker program which the LLEN network will be involved in, and also the new Youth Connections program. I believe both programs will move towards getting cooperation at a local level to address disengagement, retention and aspirations. The impending endorsement and release of the vulnerable youth framework by the Victorian government will be absolutely crucial to organisations as a guide to addressing social disadvantage and inequity.

In one sense, being from a small rural region we see that many of the pilot programs tend to focus on Geelong, Bendigo and Ballarat and that the smaller LLENs regions such as ours do not always get a chance to try some of the new initiatives such as the youth transitions support initiative. I am sure smaller and more far-distant rural LLENs would welcome more pilot projects being made available to them.

Term of reference (h) is to identify priorities for action by government to tackle key rural and regional disadvantage. I commend the report of the Education and Training Committee and its recommendations. I believe they go to the heart of many of the issues, and I urge the government to support the recommendations and their implementation.

On another level I believe the Victorian government and its regional economic development, particularly its venture with the federal government in Regional Development Australia, is vital to creating future employment opportunities for this region.

I draw your attention to the Mildura Development Corporation’s economic profile and plan for this community, and I urge the government to look closely at the documentation particularly in the ways it can support the growth industries of our region including solar power generation, mineral sands mining, the transport industry
and infrastructure development, the airport development here, sustainable agriculture and horticulture and food and beverage manufacturing as the way forward for this region, because the more jobs we create the more sustained employment is available, and therefore the opportunities for our young people are enhanced.

The last term of reference is about examining measures taken at local level to combat problems of hardship and disadvantage. It is here I wish to demonstrate two major initiatives that the LLENs is undertaking in partnership with communities, schools and local government.

The first is the Mildura region trade training centres in schools consortium which was formed of 12 schools across all sectors — government, Catholic and independent — to develop an innovative model of providing improved access to vocational education and training in schools for young people in this region.

Unfortunately our application in round 2 was unsuccessful, but the consortium is committed to resubmitting in round 3. If successful, the outcomes of this particular project will be multiple. They will address retention, they will address re-engagement, they will significantly address participation by indigenous young people in education and training and lead to improvements and significant outcomes in our region.

Some of the innovative things about this project are that it introduces better facilities and equipment at years 10, 11 and 12, but where we also need to target is down at years 7, 8 and 9 and even into primary school. In 2008 we conducted a survey of 1400 students in years 7, 8 and 9 in the region. When asked the question, ‘Do you want to do a VET course, or do you know about VET’, 70 per cent indicated they did not know what a VET course was — and they are in years 7, 8 and 9.

Yet later in the survey 75 per cent of the students said, ‘We would love to do a VET-type course in years 10, 11 and 12. There is a latent demand waiting to be tapped, and the secret is to tap it much earlier. Years 7, 8 and 9 are when they should be doing taster programs.

We asked, ‘Who provides you with guidance about careers? Who are the most important people”, the reply was firstly, the home-room teacher, secondly the careers teacher, thirdly a peer and fourthly a parent’. And yet when we asked schools, ‘How many of your home-room teachers in years 7, 8 and 9 have been in industry or out to look at careers options’ there were very few. Most of the effort is at the top end of a school with careers teachers, and where they are doing a really good job, but we also need to build and develop that interest and understanding and commitment to education and training in years 7, 8 and 9.

That is very much what the focus of the trade training centre is about. The Northern Mallee LLEN and the consortium seek the Victorian government’s support for our round 3 application which will go in by June as a major local initiative to improve the retention and attainment rates of local schools.

Our other major project of regional youth commitment is very similar to the Better Youth Services pilot that is around and which you may be aware of. We have joined with the city council, schools and community agencies to develop a joined-up approach to services. When we mapped the number of funded programs for young people in this region I think we got to 45 and were still counting — that is, funded programs outside of schooling that are designed to assist young people from mentoring to accommodation to health, mental health and suicide prevention.

What we have seen is that all of the programs have significant potential, but we have to join up everybody — schools, community agencies and local government — so we can get more effective service delivery, better communication from service providers to schools and vice versa and so we can stop young people falling through the gaps that happens in regional and rural communities.

If we can bring off this joined-up approach, it will mean a significant change for our region because we will have all the players working collaboratively to look after the needs of young people. If we can pull that off together with the trade training centre then I believe the community will take a giant step forward towards its goal which is to have a liveable, healthy community where young people see they have a future. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much, Ron. It is a brilliant document that goes straight to the point.

Mr NARDELLA — One of the points you made in your presentation, which was very good — in fact, excellent — is that part of the disincentive is people having to leave home because courses are not offered
locally and the financial pressures on families. The number of courses available here certainly at the higher education level is quite limited. I understand you were a director at La Trobe University’s Mildura campus for a while. Is there some way of utilising the facilities on the campus here to link in not only with La Trobe University, distance education and Open Universities Australia so people can do courses locally — the lecture might be at the Clayton campus of Monash University, or it might be at Melbourne University or elsewhere — so people have those opportunities locally?

One of the things that universities complain to me about is that they have got these sunk assets, and people do not want to come here for their law courses in Melbourne or Monash at Clayton or at Deakin at Geelong. How can we actually bring education here rather than taking the kids from here to the city?

Mr BROADHEAD — Don, yes, there are a couple of points there. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the excellent work that both La Trobe University and Sunraysia Institute of TAFE and the other RTOs, MADEC and SMGT, do in this region in providing training. We are very lucky to have those resources here.

Mr NARDELLA — I was not being critical of that.

Mr BROADHEAD — The answer to your question is yes. There are more opportunities for closer collaboration and joint approaches, just as you described. There is a very good working relationship between La Trobe and TAFE in terms of sharing facilities and in articulation of TAFE courses into La Trobe courses.

But what you described is another field in which I think universities, particularly those that have external studies components — Charles Sturt University, Deakin University et cetera, and there are others — could utilise the existing facilities basically as study centres for students who are studying externally to come in and have tutorial support. La Trobe has a very good ICT connection where there is videoconferencing which could be used to support face-to-face videoconferencing or group-to-one videoconferencing. I guess I would support your suggestion that there is still capacity and potential to develop those types of arrangements.

Mr NARDELLA — We were up in Donald and Warracknabeal a couple of weeks ago, and they have joined up — and you talked about this as well — the various schools. For example, if they are running maths A at this school, then the other students at the other schools can then be in the same classroom through videoconferencing. That stuff certainly is achievable in our lifetime with current technology.

But is there a role, for example of doing Open Learning Australia university courses? A lot of the problem is finding the time and sitting down and actually doing the work — and I tried to do it at Deakin University many decades ago — but also it is being with other people trying to do the same things. A lot of it is about being connected and talking to people doing courses and having that type of experience.

Is there a role, for example, for La Trobe University to say, ‘We are going to start running those study sessions where people doing Open Universities Australia courses, regardless of what course they are doing — because if they have to do reading — can actually come together. It is from 7 till 9. They will sit down in a classroom, they will have a cup of coffee and do that type of stuff and have part of that experience without having to go into …’. Is there some type of model that may be of some use to people?

Mr BROADHEAD — Don, what you have just described is a model, and it is worth investigating and pursuing, because I think for external studies students particularly when they start a course, that first contact prior to starting the course is so important — workshops on study skills, meeting other students who are in a similar position and taking the next step forward, just to be part of a group of people who are going on the journey helps you share and develop that sort of collegiate study support. There are a number of things that could be achieved by developing a mechanism you just described. Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — Thank you for that. I note the two initiatives at the back of the paper that your organisation is undertaking. As I said earlier, I am also quite concerned about the number of young people that we have here who are not engaged, who at 17 to 24-years-old have gone through the cracks, so to speak. Given your organisation is fairly close to that cohort and their friends et cetera, I really want to know what those young people are actually doing at the moment, because no-one can give us any answers on that.

The CHAIR — Are you are talking about 17 to 24-year-olds?
Ms TIERNEY — Yes, and then there is the 420. It is those under 17 and the cohort over as well, because
they are quite fluid. I am interested in what they are doing and some of the things you think that we all could be
thinking about to get them re-engaged.

Mr BROADHEAD — In terms of numbers there was a document provided by the Loddon Mallee regional
office of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in collaboration with the LLENs.
That is based on 2006 census data, so it is now four years out of date, but they are the latest figures that we can
get. It is very difficult to measure disengaged young people, because they do not say, ‘Hi, I am disengaged.
Count me’.

Ms TIERNEY — Exactly.

Mr BROADHEAD — It is by deduction, by taking the numbers of young people in the census count,
deducting the number of school, deducting the number at training and educational organisation, deducting the
number who are employed and by subtraction you end up with a rounding figure. The figures we have been
working on for 2006 in this LLEN region are 316 in the age of 15 to 19 and another 506 in the age of 20 to 24.
That makes 822 disengaged young people according to the census, but we know that the census is not
completely accurate in that aspect. We have anecdotal reports that people do not record that they are not
engaged when it gets to the census night. It is an imperfect measure, but that is the best we have got at this point.
Does that answer your question?

Ms TIERNEY — Yes.

Mr BROADHEAD — The second part of your question was what we can do about getting young people
re-engaged. In essence the first thing we have to be doing is putting significant energy into keeping kids
engaged and not letting them become disengaged, to let that pool get bigger. There is a lot of work happening
about retaining kids at school going on at the moment. That is step 1.

Step 2: the Youth Connections program being rolled out in partnership between Australia and Victorian
governments is about working very closely with the schools but also being out there in the community — at the
skateboard park, at the post office corners and we are using the networks that are out there — to find the
disengaged young people.

At Red Cliffs there is a youth centre being run by an organisation that has something in the order of 160 youth
appear there, of which about 40 to 60 are disengaged. There is an avenue by which we need to build a
partnership with them. When those young people are confident to take the next step, that there is a door open for
them to go through and receive assistance to get back in. I think it is using your community organisations to
access those young people.

I am also a great believer in the regional communities and the value of sport as a connecter of young people.
You may well have heard of examples of a soccer team with indigenous young people and a person who goes
around and provides uniforms and picks the young kids up. It has made a difference to connecting those kids
into a sport.

Once they are connected into a sport, they are mixing with kids who are going to school and then they start to
make that transition, but it needs to be followed through. There are many good initiatives, but they just need to
be connected and they need to be followed through and not just run for a short period of time and then dropped.
I just think this is what as a whole the community is getting. Community agencies, state government, local
government, federal government, sporting organisations around the table, all working in the one direction and
swapping and working ideas and following kids through to the next destination is that safety net that will
hopefully pick up many of those young kids that are out there not engaged.

The CHAIR — Ron, I am surprised that there are 12 local schools in the region. Can you just name them off
the top of your head?

Mr BROADHEAD — In the consortium?

The CHAIR — Yes.
Mr BROADHEAD — The consortium consists of Mildura Senior College — Mildura Senior College is a year 11–12 senior college. The feeder schools to it are Chafer, Irymple and Merbein secondary colleges, years 7 to 10. Then there is Mildura Special School, which is a government school for intellectually disabled children. Then we go to the Red Cliffs Secondary College, years 7 to 12, Werrimull P–12 College and Coomealla High School in NSW — because it is a federal program we are able to have New South Wales in and that it an across-state-border issue which is good.

Then there is the Two Rivers Community College for Kooris followed by the non-government sector which is St Joseph’s College, a Catholic school for years 7 to 12. We have Trinity Lutheran College for years 7 to 10 and Henderson College which is also for years 7 to 10.

The schools that are not part of the consortium at this stage are Robinvale, Ouyen and Murrayville. They were invited to be part of the consortium but they are not part of it at this stage because they are going through P–12 reorganisation. They want to get those things embedded and operating and then they will look at coming into the consortium. The consortium has made them an offer and once we get up and running, if their students want to join this program years down the track, they are welcome to join us.

The CHAIR — Were you given specific reasons as to why your application was unsuccessful?

Mr BROADHEAD — Just a lack of funds.

The CHAIR — I imagine your nearest trade centre is going to be Bendigo.

Mr BROADHEAD — It would appear from the quality of our application that it was a significantly researched and well-prepared document. The Victorian authorities that read it said it was an outstanding application. We learnt from the Bendigo application in Round one and what they did, and we improved on that.

We engaged Buchan Consulting to provide independent advice on its development so we believe we had an outstanding application. I guess in the end there was only a certain amount of money the federal government had to go around. Forty per cent of the funds went to New South Wales, 19 per cent went to Victoria. In dollar terms about $65 million went to Victoria, $148 million to New South Wales. I guess there was seen to be a greater need in New South Wales in that round but, hopefully, in the next round we might be a beneficiary.

Mr VOGELS — Regarding your last point, I am trying to get my head around it. Are there too many organisations and agencies involved in all of this? It sounds as though there are so many doors that it is like a maze. Do young people who have been disengaged know where to go? You said there are a myriad support agencies; that is too many. Can you bring them — —

Mr BROADHEAD — I am not advocating shutting some of them down because they all provide important services. We need to get them cooperating and working together. They all do very good work and they are recognised.

The Northern Mallee Primary Care Partnership is an example of those health and community care services working very constructively together. We need a major interface between schools and all of those outside agencies to build a partnership that will provide that information so that schools know which agencies can help and in turn agencies know what schools are doing because a disengaged young person might be referred to a specific agency such as MASP, which is the Mildura Accommodation Support Program, and they may also need some educational help. They need to know which school, which training option or which educational option is best. It is a two-way flow of information, and that is what we are going to try and achieve.

Mr VOGELS — That sounds fantastic. If someone is disengaged, they need to be sent to the right school or the right TAFE or whatever because if they go the wrong way, they will probably say it is too hard.

Mr BROADHEAD — And we have got to get some commitment to youth that adopts the principle that there is no wrong door. If a young person comes through my door and does not need my service that I am going to help them find the right service and not say, ‘Go away’.

Mr VOGELS — Like a GP who can refer on to a surgeon or whatever.

Mr BROADHEAD — Yes. Could I just add one little point?
The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr BROADHEAD — One of the secrets to this is that whilst all of those agencies are working there is a degree of churn of workers — people get promotion, people move on. For this project to be successful you have to keep it alive, as of today, so that when I ring the next time and that person has moved on, then I have still got the right person. Often staff in schools say, ‘I rang up but that person shifted into work to elsewhere’ or, ‘They have got another position’ and they do not know who to go to next. We have got to make sure that everyone is keeping their contact lists up to date. That is just one simple step.

Ms DARVENIZA — It is a perennial problem everywhere — keeping up to date the lists of who is the appropriate person dealing with the matter.

Thank you very much for this submission. It is really succinct and set out very clearly. You deal with exactly what the problems are as you see them. Also, you tell us the sorts of things that the government is doing that you believe are assisting and are working. It is always really helpful if we have got an idea of what it is we are doing well that is making a difference.

I am really interested in your comments about gaining access to the pilot programs and you talked a little about that. What could you do to bring your pilot project here and what have you got to offer that would perhaps attract one of these pilot projects that happen in one of the bigger centres?

Mr BROADHEAD — One example I can give is the regional youth commitment project. That is a LLENs-based project but we have joined up with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and responded to Magistrate Spooner. I do not know if you have been made aware of Magistrate Spooner who visited this region and identified the fact that there were too many young people appearing in court. She contacted the education department’s regional director, Ron Lake, and he has one of his principals working on that. We have joined our two programs together.

To answer your question, we are implementing the better youth services pilot but without any funding. If we were able to get funding from the Department of Planning and Community Development to resource a project officer we could bring the people together but the next step is delivering the partnership. Our role is to bring the partnership together but the partnership has to then run. Having funding for someone to be a project officer to put all the agencies together and start to do the things that we identify need to be done is where pilot funding would be most useful. That is one example.

Ms DARVENIZA — Thanks for that. I have a couple of other questions. In your submission, under the heading ‘Examine measures taken at local level to combat problems of hardship and disadvantage’, which is really very good, you talk about the taster for the year 7, 8 and 9. How would that work? That makes good sense but can you just tell us for the record how that would work?

Mr BROADHEAD — The application will be for around $12.8 million. If successful we will have two major centres, one built at the Mildura Senior College and one built at St Joseph’s focusing on the areas of engineering, building construction, electro-technology — the fourth one escapes me — and then hairdressing; these two major centres.

Some of the funds will be dispersed to the schools to upgrade their existing technology centres with new equipment. What will happen is that years 7, 8 and 9 students will be able to access programs in their own school and there will be opportunities throughout the year to do the taster programs at those two major sites, one at the senior college and one at St Joseph’s.

One of the significant hurdles we have overcome is that schools have agreed to align their timetables so that throughout the week, Monday to Friday, all those students in the schools who want to do VET engineering can be released on Monday to go to that centre and on Tuesday — —

Ms DARVENIZA — The same as they would if they were going to the TAFE?

Mr BROADHEAD — Yes. Part of the reason that TAFE supports this is because it is now being done with a much younger age group whereas TAFE tends to focus on children from 16 upwards. We are now dealing with 10, 11, 12-year-olds.
Ms DARVENIZA — Much younger children?

Mr BROADHEAD — The opportunity to go into workshops and have experienced and qualified people showing them some of the things that engineering, electrotechnology and those trades are doing gives them a bit of a feel of, ‘That is what I want to do’. That is where a number of young people at the moment do not quite have a focus. They think, ‘If university is not for me, what is there?’ This will hopefully fill that void.

I also need to point out that this is not about the old ‘off to trade or off to university’ approach. What it does is keep young people at school to year 12. There are now examples where students applying to university to do an engineering degree are taking English, maths methods, specialist maths, physics, VET engineering and VET electrotechnology because you now get a scored assessment for those VET subjects so it is also a university option.

Ms DARVENIZA — So you are not restricting yourself. It really is just a taster, it is not actually doing any components of the course that can be recognised. It really is just having a look in a very supervised way to see what can be done.

Can you, very briefly, tell us a little more about the Regional Youth Commitment? It looks like a very interesting community project that is operating.

Mr BROADHEAD — It is the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development program and has been rolled out through the regional offices. We are working with the Loddon-Mallee regional office based in Bendigo. Each LLEN is responsible in its local area to roll out the Regional Youth Commitment.

It has got two components. One is a commitment by organisations to sign up to work collaboratively together for the benefit of youth. That is the easy part, because everyone wants to do that. The next bit is how do we bring about a whole-of-community approach to identify where the gaps are; how is the delivery of services working; are there ineffective services; how can they be improved so that the young person is in the centre of that whole-of-community, whole-of-government approach, here in our region? That is, in essence, building a partnership with all the schools, state government departments, Centrelink, federal government departments, and then the mass Mallee Family Cares — —

Ms DARVENIZA — NGOs.

Mr BROADHEAD — All of those — health and community organisations, *Mental Health Authority, Victoria Police — need to be around the table at certain points of the year because we will be gathering data from schools and the youth connections about where the young people are finding the holes.

Then we bring that back to the CEOs of these organisations, saying, ‘This is what we are finding out with young people. How can we fix the gaps and improve the service delivery, as a total service delivery?’.

Ms DARVENIZA — Thank you very much.

The CHAIR — One more question: what is your view on skate parks?

Mr BROADHEAD — I believe they serve a purpose. Our LLEN assisted the city council last year during national youth week when there was a grind. We had some of our staff there working with the council, working with young people, because it is an area where people congregate, and if you are going to have a conversation with those people, you have got to go where they are.

They serve a purpose, and we have to learn that they exist and serve a purpose and try to make some proactive connections with young people who need assistance, that go there.

Mr NARDELLA — To add to that: I talked about David McNulty previously, and that is the type of stuff that David would do in the UK; he would go where people liked. You do not expect people to come to you, but you go where people like. His workers would talk to them and engage. It is like the skate parks: where else would you engage with young people who have disengaged.

Mr BROADHEAD — Outside the Merbein post office there is a group of people we know, and the schools are working with them on how we connect back with them and find out what their needs are.
There is one other initiative, and I will be very brief. I think it was an initiative, announced about three months ago, the Department of Human Services are looking at a pilot program to have appropriately qualified people work with families in need; families that have multiple issues within the family. It is about working with those families to overcome some of those difficulties they are facing. It might be mental health, drugs, domestic violence or whatever.

Programs that can reach out and connect with those families that are having such a bad time, in dealing with many issues, which means that the education of their son or daughter falls down to about 10, 11 or 12 on their priority list because there are so many difficult issues. Those types of things need to be given a good chance to work, because I believe that is the next part of the link in working with the families these children come from and working with school communities to have pathways back.

I know there is a lot of work happening in the schools about changing the culture of how they do that. That is the right direction in which to go.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your time and an outstanding presentation, the committee appreciates it. We will have copies of the transcript available for you.

Mr BROADHEAD — Good luck for the rest of your time in Mildura.

Witness withdrew.