

REGIONAL EDUCATION — SOUTH WEST

Statement

HON COL HOLT (South West) [9.48 pm]: I want to rise briefly to talk about one of my favourite subjects—namely, regional education—and a couple of things that are happening within the south west region. I often talk about the gifted and talented education program being expanded into the regions. Next year, finally, the academic stream will go to Bunbury Senior High School, which will be the first high school outside the metropolitan region to take up the GATE program, and that is great news. I think it will give some options to the people in the south west who are looking to educate their children. I have relayed to the house before a story about an emergency doctor who was working at Bunbury regional hospital whose child was identified as academically gifted. That family had to move to Perth so that the child could attend a gifted and talented education school. It was a bit of a tragedy for the Bunbury and south west community at that time for the doctor to have to relocate for those reasons. It is good to see that the GATE program will be established at Bunbury Senior High School next year.

In connection with that expansion of the program, about 12 months ago I was invited to do a tour of a boarding facility at Bunbury TAFE, commonly known locally as Paterson House. It is a 10-unit facility that houses about four people in each unit, so there is the potential for 40 students to be housed in the facility. It needs a bit of refurbishment; it is not being used at the moment. The idea at the time was to upgrade it so that Bunbury TAFE students had a place to stay in Bunbury. They were also in discussion with some of the schools in the area, such as Manea Senior College, about housing school students. The idea was that students could come to Bunbury and go to either TAFE or one of the local high schools. The site has the room for the facility to be expanded and take more students if that were the case. Some of the feedback I have had since then is that TAFE really sees it as an opportunity for TAFE students. They obviously see some issues around mixing school-age students with TAFE students. This got me thinking about what has happened in the south west with the expansion of the GATE program and the educational options for some of those surrounding towns in the catchment area of Bunbury; I think specifically of Boyup Brook, Nannup and Bridgetown, which have high schools that go only to year 10. What happens to those students in years 11 and 12? One option is to jump on a bus every school day and go to Manjimup or Busselton. If someone lives at Boyup Brook, that is quite a bus trip. Alternatively, students could be enrolled in Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School or be sent to private boarding in Bunbury or to another boarding facility in Perth. I do not know whether anyone has sent their child to a private boarding facility lately, but it is fairly expensive.

Some really good models already exist in regional Western Australia where regional residential colleges play a very important role in educational outcomes. I think of Narrogin—which has a natural catchment around some of the wheatbelt parts—Esperance, Merredin, Geraldton and Albany. There are a few other places where kids can be closer to their families; they board during the week and potentially go home for weekends. Parents and friends can visit them during the week and go to sports carnivals; they do not have to travel all the way to Perth to see those sorts of things. If we look at the south west, we see that there is nothing. No opportunities or facilities are provided. Herein lies a great opportunity for the growing region of the south west to look at this as an opportunity to tell those kids, especially around Boyup Brook, Nannup and Bridgetown, that they do not have to go away to Perth to further their education. The south west has grown and matured as a region. We should be able to hold those students in a purpose-built facility. If Paterson House cannot fit the mould, we should be able to establish a purpose-built facility that offers educational and partial care outcomes for those students in the south west.

Discussions to date need to go a lot further. I would like to see a commitment from the Department of Education to at least look at ways of developing a hostel in the south west under the Country High School Hostels Authority banner. I know that royalties for regions has supported the residential colleges in other regions. I see no reason why an application through that process could not get some funding for a residential college in the south west. We need a push from the Department of Education and for the Minister for Education to say, “Here is an opportunity we should expand on.” Given the step has already been taken with the GATE program, which has had a great outcome, why not establish a residential college that also supports educational need?

The PRESIDENT: I have noted the Minister for Mental Health’s keenness to make a contribution. I will consider that at the end of the other contributions if she makes that request.