



Parliamentary National Party of Australia (WA)

Our Ref: 180412/AW

Hon Matthew Swinbourn MLC
Chairman
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs
Postal address: Parliament House 14 Harvest Terrace I West Perth WA 6005
Email: env@parliament.wa.gov.au

Dear Mr Swinbourn,

PETITION NO 059 – CLOSURE OF REGIONAL SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL OF THE AIR

I refer to your letter dated 11 April 2018 and thank you and the committee for the opportunity to make a submission as the principle petitioner. Please note, this matter has not been presented to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations (Ombudsman).

The petition calls for the McGowan Government to reverse a range of cuts to regional education that were announced in the lead up to Christmas last year. Some of these cuts have since been reversed, namely Northam Residential College and The Schools of the Air.

Members of the Committee would be aware of the ongoing community anger that exists in respect to the closure of Moora Residential College and the closure/privatisation of the camp schools. It appears many have underestimated the resilience of the regional community, the extent the issue has gone viral, and the community's intent to continue their campaign.

Moora Residential College (formally St James Residential College) is the only residential facility located between Perth and Geraldton. It is conveniently located next to Central Midlands Senior High school, which is the only senior high school between Perth and Geraldton.

There is an ongoing concern that the closure of this facility will have a profound educational, economic, social and regional development impacts, affecting not only the students and families directly impacted by the closure, but the teaching staff, students and curriculum at Central Midlands Senior High School as well as surrounding businesses and the local community as a whole.

In fact, the local economic impact was recently canvassed by respected economic consultants Lucid Economics, who concluded that:

Combined the two rounds of economic impacts directly associated with the closure of the College will lead to an annual reduction of \$2.0 million in local GRP and 19 jobs (directly and indirectly), which equates to 1.0% of the Shire's GRP and 1.6% of total employment in the Shire. More concerning to local businesses would be the expected annual loss of \$2.3 million in local expenditure or turnover in the economy, stemming from the closure of the College.

This direct economic impact of Moora Residential College is only one factor that needs to be considered, and the report highlights the self-reinforcing cycle of economic erosion, which is a “cycle that has led to the demise of many small towns across Australia” (Lucid Economics 2018, page iv).

By far the most alarming potential impact of the Moora Residential College closing would be the closure’s ability to spark the beginning of a vicious, self-reinforcing cycle of decline. If the College is closed, then the High School will lose funding. Combined with other expected funding losses, the ability of the High School to appropriately cater to Year 11 and Year 12 students will be significantly decreased. This decreased ability may cause families to move away from the area to access another offering, which will reduce funding for the schools further. This further decrease in funding may cause additional families to leave, which reduces school funding and the available expenditure in the economy further, putting additional pressure on the businesses and families that have remained.

Lucid Economics also suggest that the closure of Moora Residential College will place pressure on house prices and drive down business confidence, impacting on both the long term viability of many business and the availability of services. All these factors will impact on the town’s ability to attract new residents, workers and businesses, place pressure on local sporting clubs and community organisations who are largely reliant on volunteers and members, and reduce the availability of young people for apprenticeships within the local community.

Similarly, there are concerns that the closure of camp schools will have a considerable impact on the local economy as these facilities are operated by locals and use local suppliers. The camp schools also play a role in promoting regional awareness, by exposing visitors to the local industry, such as food production in the South West camps and mining industry in Dampier, as well as the surrounding and interconnected natural and cultural environment.

If camp schools are to be privatised as flagged as an option by this State Government, there is a very real risk that access fees will rise sharply, making them unaffordable for low income earners. Despite being regarded by this government as “not a core business of education”, camp schools enrich the educational and learning experiences of students through activities not available in the classroom. By doing so, they form a key part of the student learning experience, particularly in developing student’s teamwork, interpersonal and leadership skills. It is therefore imperative that students across Western Australia have affordable access to these facilities.

Given the importance of these institutions to the regional community, it is imperative that we have a complete understanding of the social, economic, educational and regional development impacts associated with these closures. I suggest a parliamentary inquiry is the mechanism to deliver a balanced assessment.

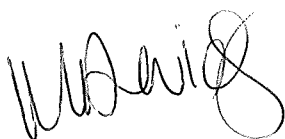
I strongly encourage Members of the Committee to consider the value of a parliamentary inquiry in giving the community an avenue to express their concerns, and in delivering a balanced assessment of the impact of these closures. Some priority issues include:

- How has the government adequately assessed the social, economic, educational and regional development impacts before making this decision? If so, was it adequate and will this be released to the public?
- To what extent has there been on-the-ground consultation with impacted communities?
- Are there risk management plans in place to mitigate any negative social, economic, education or regional development concerns?
- Has an up-to-date and independent assessment of Moora Residential College been undertaken? What is the actual cost of undertaken essential maintenance?
- How will the government ensure the camp schools remain affordable?
- How did the government determine camp schools were not the “core business of education”?

I strongly encourage Members of Committee to consider the level of public interest that this matter has garnered so far, and consider the importance of making informed decisions in this space. It is imperative that the community believe there has been an adequate assessment of the economic, social, educational and regional development impacts and the appropriateness of risk management plans being devised.

I would suggest that a favourable response to this request for a parliamentary inquiry would be greatly received by impacted communities.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mia Davies', written in a cursive style.

Hon Mia Davies MLA
LEADER

10 MAY 2018