



## Parliamentary National Party of Australia (WA)

Our ref: 171219/AW

Hon Matthew Swinbourn MLC  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6005

via email: [env@parliament.wa.gov.au](mailto:env@parliament.wa.gov.au)

Dear Hon Matthew Swinbourn

### **Petition No. 042 – Boarding Away from Home Allowance**

I write in support of an inquiry into the Boarding Away from Home Allowance (BAHA) by the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs.

The BAHA is an annual allowance paid to geographically isolated families to assist with boarding costs associated with sending their primary or secondary school aged children to an appropriate school.

The State Government's BAHA payment is paid in conjunction with the Federal Government's Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) and/or the Second Home Allowance, which exist in recognition of the disadvantages faced by regional families accessing appropriate primary or secondary education.

In 2010, BAHA payments were increased by \$785 per student to \$2,105. In the 2017/18 Budget, these payments were cut by \$628 to \$1,477. It is my understanding that it is the first time since the introduction of the scheme that a Government has reduced the allowance.

As the principle petitioner, I and those that signed the petition do not believe the full ramifications of the decision to reduce the allowance were considered prior to the decision being made.

The Premier's response to a line of questioning in relation to this issue during last year's Budget Estimates process in Parliament compounded our concerns. When asked if he understood that the allowance was only available to those families that had *no local choice* he replied "*there is not an unlimited amount of money, I grew up in a regional community and I did not go off to boarding school*". Only families where no appropriate schooling option exists within their local community or educational catchment can apply to receive the BAHA.

Access to education in rural and remote communities - across the spectrum of primary, secondary and tertiary - is a significant factor in why people leave or are reluctant to relocate to regional areas. The Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development's *Living in the Regions 2016* survey found there continues to be a significant "willingness to relocate if required to pursue

better schooling options for their children" (page 24) – indicating that education options are a key determinant in the successful development of our regional communities.

In addition, the highly respected Wheatbelt Men's Health service have reported families living separating to access educational opportunities. Anecdotally, in the Wheatbelt, it is not uncommon for mothers to choose to relocate to Perth with the children to attend schools, leaving their partners to manage the farm or business. This isolation is having a significant impact on mental wellbeing, in addition to the financial stress caused. Removal of a financial support for those that *must* send their children to major regional centres (State Residential Colleges) or further afield to Perth adds to this distress.

It's also important to see the cut to BAHA payments in context with the impact of the State Government's other cuts to regional education. The closure of many services, which add to the viability of a community and support local employment opportunities, significantly impacts regional, rural and remote students and their after-school opportunities. The State Government's decision to cut the BAHA placed in context with the decision to close the Moora Residential College will have a compounding effect on those families and communities impacted.

It has been suggested that the Government believed the BAHA was an allowance that was not needed, that it was skewed toward supporting wealthy families who did not need taxpayer support. If this is the view of the current Government then they have received poor advice or have chosen to ignore the fact that in 2016, only 26 per cent of students supported by BAHA attended the top elite private schools in Perth. This was compared with some 51 per cent of students who attended regional schools (including private and religious) and some 44 per cent who specifically attended State regional schools and utilised the State residential colleges (LC Estimates and Financial Operations Committee 2017).

I strongly encourage the Committee to consider the impact of the decision, what effect these cuts will have on regional families and regional development outcomes and how this funding cut sits in the context of the impact of other cuts to regional education (such as the closure of Moora Residential College). I ask that any inquiry takes into consideration that some families have no choice but to send their children away to complete their education and this brings with it a financial and emotion burden. The BAHA assists in reducing the burden and is a tangible example of a State Government recognising that Western Australia is a vast State and that not everyone is afforded the same opportunity in life. Our geography makes the delivery of some services and infrastructure challenging and this allowance, increased by every Government gradually over the years, has been an acknowledgement of these challenges.

Please note, these issues have not been taken to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations (Ombudsman).

Yours sincerely



Hon Mia Davies MLA  
**LEADER**

31 JAN 2018