



**Hon Sue Ellery MLC
Minister for Education and Training
Leader of the Legislative Council**



Your Ref: Petition No 42 (A676994)
Our Ref: 61-09343
61-09487

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


Dear Mr Swinbourn

Thank you for your letter dated 19 March 2018 regarding Petition No. 42 to reverse the recent reductions to the Boarding Away from Home Allowance (BAHA) and provide equity in education, regardless of the location.

The McGowan Labor Government is committed to providing a high-quality education to all students across Western Australia regardless of location, and this commitment is demonstrated by the significant investment in country schools through a range of election commitments including:

- 147 FTE additional education assistants to support Kindergarten to Year 2 in 124 country schools;
- 50 FTE additional Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers to support Aboriginal students in 51 country schools in 2018, and in 74 country schools in 2019;
- 10 new Independent Learning Coordinator teachers for Year 11 and 12 students enrolled in 10 country senior high schools and studying courses through the School of Isolated and Distance Education;
- eight new Regional Learning Specialist teachers to visit country schools to provide specialist classes for Year 11 and 12 students; and
- 15.9 FTE additional teachers to support students and mentor teachers in 93 country schools.

As the Minister for Education and Training, I recognise the additional challenges students experience living in a regional location and appreciate that it is not always possible, or in the best interest of the child, to attend the nearest country school. Therefore, the Department of Education offers a number of options for regional students to receive a high-quality education in an environment that best suits their needs and circumstances.

One option available to students, and outlined in the petition, is for the student to board at a school, residential college or agricultural college. This option often results in parents/guardians being responsible for the additional cost of the associated boarding fees, therefore, to provide financial support to these families, the State Government offers BAHA through the Department to eligible parents/guardians. BAHA consists of four allowance types:

- Isolated Children – parent/guardian with students boarding to attend school and receiving the Commonwealth Government Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) or the Department of Human Services (Centrelink) Second Home Allowance.
- Students in Respite – the student is boarding away from home for health-related conditions and the parent/guardian receives AIC for short-term boarding. Payment is based on the number of days in boarding, but must be for periods of 20 days or greater over the year.
- Agricultural College Special Subsidy –parents/guardians with secondary students attending and boarding at an agricultural college and not in receipt of either a Youth Allowance, Abstudy boarding or the AIC.
- Gifted and Talented Program – parents/guardians with secondary students enrolled in gifted and talented programs at public schools and boarding at City Beach Residential College and not in receipt of either a Youth Allowance, Abstudy boarding or the AIC.

As noted above, in addition to BAHA, the Commonwealth Government provides financial assistance to assist with the additional costs associated with boarding fees and living away from home. In 2018, students eligible for the Commonwealth AIC can receive up to \$10 615 per year made up of two parts - \$8 249 as the basic component and \$2 366 for the additional component, which is subject to parental income and actual boarding costs.

Prior to 2009, BAHA was solely funded by the consolidated account; however, as outlined by submissions in the petition, the Barnett Liberal National Government allocated additional fixed-term Royalties for Regions (RfR) funding to provide an additional \$785 per annum in BAHA supplementation from the 2009 school year. Unfortunately, the continuation of this additional RfR funding had only been partially incorporated into the State's finances, with the former Government only provisionally allocating funds up to 2018-19.

Given the current financial challenges faced by the State, a comprehensive review of RfR programs was completed and, regrettably, it was determined that continuation of the RfR supplement was not viable and could not be sustained. The BAHA funding from the consolidated account remains unchanged.

Contrary to the submissions in the petition, the reduction to the BAHA will not occur immediately, with the \$785 reduction occurring over a five-year period (2018 to 2022) to minimise the impact on regional families. The scheduled BAHA amounts during the phased reduction period are outlined in the below table:

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$
Boarding Away from Home Allowance	2 105	1 948	1 791	1 634	1 477	1 320
Per annum reduction		-157	-157	-157	-157	-157

The State Government also significantly subsidises the boarding fees for public residential colleges and agricultural colleges to minimise the financial impost on regional families, ensuring this educational option remains affordable for regional students. Currently, the State Government funds on average between 50 and 55% of the costs to operate boarding facilities at the public residential and agricultural colleges. This level of subsidisation is set to continue with recent fee increases being limited to Consumer Price Index inflation rates. The 2018 boarding fees are between \$8 536 to \$13 900 per annum.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments towards the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs' preliminary inquiry into this matter.

Yours sincerely



**SUE ELLERY MLC
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

9 APR 2018