

To: Hon Matthew Swinbourn MLC, Chair of The Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs.

Submission re: Petition No. 048 – In relation to the closure of the Bridgetown Camp School.



Dear Committee Members:

Re: The importance of affordable school camps for disadvantaged families. Throughout the 1960's and 70's the now called Department of Education (DoE) showed amazing foresight by progressively procuring predominately disused government facilities, such as the "old hospital" in Bridgetown, and transforming them into educational Camp Schools. The aim was to strategically locate Camp Schools in all major regions so that the educational opportunities within each region of this vast state could be showcased. Such a spread would also ensure that all schools would have reasonable access to a DoE run camp. By 1980, with the exception of the Wheat-belt region, this was achieved.

DoE deemed residential Camp School experiences so important that student fees throughout the 1980's were in the vicinity of \$6 per full day for meals and accommodation and all visiting teachers were free of charge. Camp Schools had long waiting lists and bookings had to be prioritised primarily according to Government V Non-Government. Student fees have now risen to \$45.30 per day and teachers pay \$58.60, and schools report that this is an amount most parents from lower-middle socio-economic areas can cope with, just. The management of the Bridgetown Camp School (BCS) has prioritised keeping the cost of camp school run activities as low and affordable as possible. Activities such as canoeing, mountain biking and teamwork activities are set at \$3 per child per activity. Most private camps would charge between \$10 and \$25 for similar activities.

Schools are still, by far the major users of DoE Camp Schools. At the BCS, as an example, 90% of user groups in 2017 were schools. All of these schools are subsidised to attend a DoE camp, a subsidy that has suddenly been deemed too much for our state budget to afford. It begs the question, "How much was the government prepared to subsidise Camp Schools?" Camp School Annual Reports do not specify a "Deficit Target" i.e. there is no performance indicator (PI) for an accepted Operational Deficit. It appears that DoE have not previously determined an acceptable Operating Debt and that Camp School management have been "flying blind" in this regard. The Minister for Education tabled in parliament in March of this year that the Operating Deficit for the BCS ranged between \$434,934 and \$709,271 over the past five year period, yet the BCS 2017 Annual Report indicated a Nett Operating Cost of \$299,233. Then in April the Minister for Education tabled Total Expenditure for the BCS as between \$707,703 and \$1,078,374 for the same five-year period. The Minister did outline how the Operating Deficit was derived from Total Expenditure, but her explanation was very difficult to interpret even by those who are familiar with the DoE's School Resourcing System. An itemised list detailing exactly how this expenditure figure was derived would simplify this process. Some confusion may stem from DoE's School Resourcing System records including Locally Raised Funds as expenditure. Locally Raised Funds include revenue (fees) collected from user groups and monies collected from schools then paid out to external providers as part of the camps One Stop Payment Invoice System. Locally Raised funds are in fact revenue and should be deducted from Total Expenditure. In accounting terms, Cash and Salary carryover and money put into Reserve Funds should also be deducted. Neither should money spent from Reserve Funds be counted, for example on Building Fabric and Infrastructure, as these are not a one year funding allocation, rather they are funds that have been accumulated over numerous years for development projects. I urge The Standing Committee to scrutinise the Minister for Education's figures more closely.

Re: That the camp school residential facility provides unique opportunities for personal growth and social development. Good teachers recognise the enormous benefits associated with Camp Schools. They must, why else would they leave the comfort of their own home, take on extra responsibilities and work longer hours for no more pay. Teachers, across the state, recognise that DoE Camp Schools help establish the "building blocks" for achievement of core objectives of the curriculum. At the BCS students: challenge themselves physically through activities such as climbing walls, bushwalking, canoeing, and mountain biking; learn leadership and social skills by being engaged in team building activities; learn life skills, like how to make a bed, wash a dish, set a table, and keep their belongings tidy and dorms clean; learn the importance of eating and sleeping well, keeping hydrated, being sun smart and good hygiene practices; explore values, rights and responsibilities, and develop a greater ethical understanding and learn to manage their emotions by living with others in the confines of a residential facility for a week; build resilience and self-reliance through living away from home and by overcoming homesickness; practice sustainable living and connect with nature through recycling and feeding chickens and worm farms, tending to vegetable gardens and picking fruit from the permaculture orchard; and, learn specific skills like how to tie a knot, splice rope, read a map and compass, juggle, play a drum, pinch a clay pot, boot-scoot, and milk a cow.

Good teachers also recognise that the "temporary community" formed whilst on camp allows both the teacher and the student to see each other in a different way and for them to form or strengthen teacher – student relationships that are known to be so vital for ongoing personal, social and academic achievement.

The value of camps such as the one in Bridgetown would be severely compromised if taken out of DoE hands and if no longer managed by a teacher who has a proven history of delivering high quality client services. The current government subsidy ensures that standards are maintained and integrity upheld in all service delivery and operations at the BCS. The food service as an example, which accounts for around 60% of the annual cash budget, is generous and caters for all the special dietary health requirements of children on camp, including those with ethical and religious dietary needs. The risk of handing the camp over to an alternate provider is that they would in all likelihood have to provide services that at best break even or at worse make a profit. This would undoubtedly compromise service delivery and/or result in increased fees.

Re: That there are no other comparative facilities or services to replace the camp school experience.

Whilst the Minister of Education has referred to Camp Schools as camp sites, in reality parents and schools are comforted in the fact that they are sending their children to DoE administered Camp Schools. Being Camp Schools, parents and teachers have the confidence, same as with their school, that the Camp School that they attend will adhere to all governing practices as set by DoE. Surely in this day and age, with the stressors and concerns of teachers and parents for the safety of their students and children, Camp Schools are best vested under the auspices of DoE. We do not want to fragment the Camp Schools Network by transferring them over to multiple operators, including private, church or independent schools. The risk is that there will be a lack of conformity and monitoring of their practices. As a DoE school, Camp Schools ensure all staff are accredited with WWCC, DOE Screening and all comprehensive on line training. This training includes Child Protection and Abuse Prevention, Aboriginal Cultural Appreciation, Occupational Safety and Health and Excursions Policy. These services will not be available to a non-DoE private operator and therefore place attending school students at risk. The existing model of Camp Schools ensures the safety of students. Non-government operators have considerable more freedom to do as they want, but this comes with increased risk!

The sudden nature of the announcement to either close camp schools or to make them available to others is too big a shock to both the public and private sector to handle at this time. Neither sector was prepared for the announcement. The camping sector in general does not have the capacity to absorb six camp schools at once. DoE may well have been better advised that if they wanted to rid themselves of camp schools to do so gradually, over a phased period of time to give the market place time to adjust.

The DoE Camp School Network has been rigorously reviewed numerous times in the past. Each time they were considered valued assets to the states camping and educational community. The current decision to close DoE Camp Schools, however, came "out of the blue", with no known review and no consultation with either camp school management, private operators, peak representative bodies nor most importantly user schools.

Options exist to help make camp schools become more efficient and more viable if that was deemed necessary. Options such as: slight increase in fees; certain belt tightening measures; private sponsorship; and increased cooperative partnerships with other government and non government agencies such as those involved in mental health. It seems as though none of these have been considered.

Re: The negative economic impact on the local area. BCS as a DoE camp operates predominately for schools and does not seek to compete within the community for private and community groups or to use its subsidised rates to a market advantage. Whilst the BCS does support large community events if non-school groups enquire they are encouraged to first seek accommodation within the community using local tourism businesses. Non-government operators are not bound by the same ethics and will seek to compete for non-school groups. This will have a detrimental effect on local accommodation and catering businesses. Should the Camp School close, the annual budget of \$786,209 will be lost to the local economy each year.

We hope that you will take these matters into consideration and recommend to the Legislative Council that the decision to close or privatise the camp schools should be reversed.

Yours sincerely,
Joanne Moore



(Petition Holder: Joanne Peta Moore of 42 Yarri Brow, Kangaroo Gully 6255)

27/04/2018

Please note: This complaint has not been taken to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administrative Investigations (Ombudsman).