

BUSH CHILDRENS EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF NSW Inc.

**SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE
RURAL AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS AND TRANSPORT
REFERENCE COMMITTEE**

AUGUST 2009



**Bush Children's
Education
Foundation**

Under the patronage of
Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC
Governor of NSW

**Bush Children's Education
Foundation of NSW Inc.**

ABN 74 263 035 680

Postal Address

PO Box 138
Lindfield NSW 2070

Phone (02) 9416 4630

Fax (02) 9416 1316

Email info@bcef.org.au

Web www.bcef.org.au

7 August 2009

To the members of the Senate Committee- Rural and Regional Affairs Transport

Dear Senators ,


The *Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW Inc* thanks the Senate Committee for Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport for the opportunity to put forward a submission in relation to the inquiry into *Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Opportunities*.

In particular this Foundation will provide data, observations, and opinions relating to its core business namely to provide accommodation subsidies for students from remote areas of NSW so that they are not deprived of a regular schooling due to isolation or a lack of financial resources. To this end the Foundation, a registered charity since 1965 has been a provider of bursaries to enable children of school age to attend hostels, country boarding schools including agricultural boarding schools or be in private board with access to a regional high school. It originally operated at a time when no government allowances were available and today helps to bridge the gap to make regular schooling a reality relying entirely on public donations to fund its work. Recently its focus included post secondary isolated students in response to signs of hardship from that sector.

This submission will address sections a, b, e, f, in varying degrees of detail and will argue that while government provisions for access to schooling have greatly improved, there is an inability on the part of isolated, remote area parents to bridge the gap between government assistance programs and the fees charged by non-government school providers to whom they are obligated due to a lack of accessible alternate facilities. The BCEF has assisted over 2,000 students from NSW and the adjacent border areas of Queensland, South Australia and Victoria to receive face to face teaching and learning and daily interaction with peers. Within the last 4 years it has moved to assist tertiary students at a regional multi-campus university. This year it has introduced an academic scholarship scheme for isolated 11/12 students who otherwise may have abandoned schooling. This program known as "Thru- to -Uni" includes a "Start-up" grant applicable on entry to any University in Australia.

A representative of this Foundation would be willing to appear in person at the inquiry if required.

Yours sincerely,


Cliff Cowdroy
Chairman- on behalf of the Foundation

Directors

Clifford R Cowdroy BA, CT, MACE, AAVAA (Chairman)

Malcolm Elmslie BSc, BBus, JP

Hon Duncan Gay MLC

Belinda M Howell BA(Hons), MBA, GAICD

Douglas C Stewart LLB

Peter W Warne FCA, JP

Mary Whalley

Trevor G Whalley MSc, MRACI

Margaret R A Wick BA, DipEd, JP

INTRODUCTION

The Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW was established by the Royal Flying Doctor, Broken Hill, Dr Charles Huxtable M.C et al, under a Deed of Trust authorised by the Chief Justice, Sir Leslie Herron C.M.G in August 1965.

Since that time it has granted means-tested bursaries to over 2,000 isolated, remote area students to help finance the fees incurred in boarding away-from-home at hostels and regional boarding schools. The Foundation operates as a registered charity under the Charitable Fund Raising Act. It is also endorsed for charity tax concessions by the Australian Taxation Office including DGR status. (Donor Gift Recipient)

In 2006 the Foundation was granted Incorporation under the approval of the NSW Attorney General the Hon. Robert (Bob) Debus MLC and operates under the Rules of Association with a board of nine Directors, hitherto Trustees, none of whom receive emoluments.

Current Directors are drawn from regional/ rural backgrounds and include representation from the legal, education and teaching professions, the NSW Parliament, farming, grazing and commerce sectors. The Foundation's revenue is entirely dependent upon donations from the public and a number of corporate bodies.

In the 2008-09 financial year it offered 81 bursaries of various types covering junior & senior secondary students including a very small number of university scholarships.

Major Abbreviations (used in this document)

- BCEF - Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW Inc.
- AIC - Assistance for Isolated Children (Federal Government allowance)
- LAFHA - Living Away From Home Allowance (NSW State Government)
- BSIS - Boarding Scholarships for Isolated Students (NSW State Government)
- SES - Socio-Economic Status

Responses to Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities

TERM OF REFERENCE : (a) (b) (e) (f)

- a. the financial impact on rural and regional students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE :

OVERVIEW

The financial impact on regional and rural students who are attending metropolitan secondary schools, universities or TAFE colleges is enormous. It provides a strong deterrent to those students who may otherwise wish to attend a metropolitan institution. The large cost involved in sending students to a metropolitan school, university or TAFE college means that students are often denied a real choice in their education opportunities.

Background

The BCEF confines comment to secondary students from rural and remote areas of the state of NSW and its adjacent borders who may attend metropolitan schools in the following categories namely

- a school with special status as designated by the DET /NSW for
Physical Education and Sport
Performing Arts
Literature and Languages
Agricultural Boarding School
The Conservatorium of Music
- a non - government registered boarding school
to perpetuate a family tradition, religion or specific culture
to take up the award of a Year 7-12 full- fee scholarship
to take advantage of special indigenous student enrolment
- Students still adopting the "*country cousin syndrome*" that is
Boarding with a relative (s) in the metropolitan area & attending
a local high school for a variety of reasons, including family care,
medical condition, custody issues.

Secondary Schools

Few students have sought financial assistance through the BCEF to attend a metropolitan school with some exceptions. The cost of educating a student at a metropolitan non - government school is much higher when compared with a similar regional boarding school and for most students prohibitive before any reductions or allowances are considered.

School Location	Tuition	Boarding	Combined
NSW	Yrs 7-10	Yrs 7-10	
Central West School	\$ 13,760	\$14,900	\$28,660
Metropolitan School	\$ 24,412	\$18,740	\$43,152

2.

Access is therefore extremely limited. There is only 1 government boarding school in metropolitan Sydney; its boarding fees are \$8,800 making it a viable option for isolated rural students if eligible for the full AIC allowance and supplement. Low SES families however are unable to contemplate sending a child to a metropolitan non-government boarding school. Even in a rural / regional context this gap between allowances and fees is seemingly insurmountable in contemplating the decision to send a child away to school. The BCEF with its accommodation and school-based bursaries goes some way in assisting to bridge the gap. We would like to do more to facilitate the most economically deprived families but are wholly dependent on individual and some corporate donors for our funds.

Instances have arisen where rural/ regional students have sought placement in government metropolitan schools because of a special acknowledged gift or talent. While a place might be available at a specialist government school the place is unlikely to have been taken up because of the difficulties in locating suitable accommodation. Access to non-government boarding schools in the metropolitan area is generally confined to scholarship winners and special indigenous provisions, the exception being rural/ regional families who can afford the fee structures of these schools. The BCEF confines its bursaries to the most needy (means test applies) and our donors would question with askance the award of bursaries for those seeking enrolment in metropolitan boarding schools.

The BCEF suggests that any future government initiatives to assist rural & regional secondary students attending metropolitan schools in terms of allowances should focus and positively discriminate in favour of the most isolated, remote areas students. Our reasoning for this rests on the belief and understanding that rural/ regional secondary students have good access to quality schools in rural regional NSW thus diminishing the case of those who wish to study in metropolitan areas except under special circumstances. The situation is different for remote area students who of necessity must leave home and attend a boarding school. The prospect causes stress to remote area families and their secondary aged children.

Tertiary

In the past the Foundation has supported TAFE students enrolled in Adelaide institutions and currently supports a small number of students at a regional university.

The BCEF acknowledges the Federal Government initiatives for 2010 relating to the Student Start-up Scholarships, Relocation Scholarships and more changed provisions for Youth Allowance. It questions why a student would wish to undertake a TAFE course or first degree at a metropolitan centre if the same offering were available in a rural regional institution closer to home particularly in the light of the cost differential.

Rural and Regional areas need skilled tradespeople, allied health workers and professionals who empathise with rural community needs. Rather than provide additional support that may encourage a drift to the metropolitan cities i.e.the megalopolis comprising Sydney, Wollongong Newcastle, allowances should be designed to retain rural/regional area students in a rural context. The BCEF is encouraged by successful candidates for our university scholarships who identify closely with this concept of giving back their acquired knowledge and skills to the people of rural regional NSW in their careers.

3.

We do however acknowledge the needs of students having to move to a metropolitan university through special intervarsity agreements; one example being the transfer of a graduating first degree student from a regional university to take up a reserved place in medicine in a metropolitan counterpart. Although Youth Allowance and ABSTUDY grants are distributed on an equitable basis regardless of the location of study, we will assert that Isolated, remote area students in particular need access to the *independent allowance* without the application of current requirements.

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4.

b. the education alternatives for rural and regional students wanting to study in regional areas;

OVERVIEW

There are many education alternatives for rural and regional day students wanting to study in Regional areas. However the opportunities for isolated students are far more constrained in terms of cost and access. Indeed changes in hostel availability and the extremely limited number of places at rural regional government boarding schools mean that often the only alternatives are enrolment in non - government boarding schools or Distance Education.

Background

Face –to- face schooling alternatives for rural, regional secondary students comprise

- Central schools - Yr 7-10 or 7-12
- High schools - Government & Non- Government
- “*Second Home*” - local high school
- Hostel - local high school
- Schools -weekly boarding only
- Boarding schools

In terms of access to secondary schools we believe that NSW is well served to cater for a variety of needs particularly for rural and regional students but not those from isolated areas. Students residing in major regional areas have a range of high schools both government and non-government boarding and non-boarding available to them as day students whereas in smaller towns the Central School caters for students from Years K- 6 and 7-10 or Y7-12 depending upon size. For some of the latter there are value added benefits if the school is listed on the Country Area Program (CAP) a fund administered by the State of NSW. Where the curriculum offering is restricted courses offered through TAFE with interactive classroom facilities operated through the Open Training Education Network (OTEN) located in Sydney. This facility is also available to full time Distance Education students supported by CD's Videos, DVDs, paper based curriculum materials and some lessons delivered via satellite. The Distance Education option is available to isolated students K-12 by the NSW Department of Education and Training. It is regarded as a class leading education division and produces outstanding curriculum materials specifically designed for Distance Education students. These were developed by the *Learning Materials Production Centre*. A heightened demand for such resources for use in other teaching contexts has led to a re-structuring of the division as a curriculum learning innovation centre enabling regular schools to purchase teaching kits & multi faceted materials reflecting the latest approaches to learning and curriculum change.

Choices for isolated students and their families

Families who are designated as *isolated* according to Government's AIC criteria have choices in sending their child away for secondary schooling. Apart from enrolling at a community hostel and the local high school some opt to establish a “*second home*” in a town to access a secondary school. Students may elect to board with relative or family nominated person in a town with a secondary education facility. A preferred option has been enrolment in a boarding school.

5.

Notwithstanding the range of accommodation alternatives for rural & regional secondary aged students there are issues which influence rural/remote families in their desire to make an informed decision for the schooling of their children. Though not exclusive they can be defined as follows:

- (1) Drought factors
- (2) Distance Education – advantages / disadvantages
- (3) School term Hostels – a diminished option
- (4) Boarding schools – affordability
- (5) Financial issues

The effects of drought.

“Country life is falling apart and whole communities are displaying disillusionment and are in dire financial circumstances... Commodity prices are also down.”¹

The effects and crushing blow of unrelenting drought conditions has led to despair in families whose children because of distance live too far from a school to attend on a daily basis.

As a consequence the BCEF from 2006 resolved to fund all applicants for bursaries whose family farms were EC declared. Some students who are eligible for AIC take the Distance Education option. This avoids families having to face the financial uncertainty or impossibility of sending a child “*away to school*”. Others we believe close the farm gate and move into town, seek some compensatory work and enrol their children in a town school. This may also apply to families allied to the farming sector including transport contractors, farm workers, dam sinkers and their families who have been financially affected by drought. Another category relates to show & circus people who no longer enrol their children in hostels while they work the circuit; in some instances the town infrastructure is not there anymore to warrant their performances. The BCEF has supported continuously up to 30 such children per year in this category. In 2008, there were no bursaries applied for, or awarded.

Distance Education

In remote communities Distance Education is an attractive proposition for the primary years but it seemingly becomes less so for secondary schooling. Peer contact through sport & games, identifying with teachers and experiencing daily face-to-face teaching become compelling reasons why parents seek face-to-face teaching and learning in a school community context. In Distance Education the supervision of student learning programs becomes much more exacting. It may be that one or both parents in a farming partnership are unable to allocate sufficient supervisory time or they may lack the specific knowledge base for regular guidance and tutelage to even contemplate placing a secondary aged child full-time with this delivery mode.

¹ Alston (Dr) M & Kent J. *Impact of drought on secondary education access in..rural/ remote areas, CSU 2006*

Demise of the Hostel System

Isolated students have traditionally had access to a regional **school-term hostel** linked to the local high school where boarding fees range from around \$6,500 to \$8,800.per annum. This boarding component is manageable for isolated families eligible for AIC & LAFA. This system worked well if there was strong co-operation between hostel and high school the one gaining tutors for homework supervision a higher staffing ratio due to the hostel enrolments.

Nevertheless the system has been in terminal decline possibly due to rural decline occasioned by drought and changed farming practices. Towns where hostels have operated include Tibbooburra, Walgett, Bourke, Cobar, Forbes, Broken Hill (BCA). The two remaining hostels at Broken Hill and Dubbo are both full to capacity in 2009

Other contributing factors which may account for the demise of hostels include:

- the inability to attract hostel supervisors because of a reluctance to undertake new compulsory training requirements.
- poor financial management and accountability
- duty –of-care issues leading to lack of parent confidence
- inadequacy of funding to upgrade facilities
- parent perceptions concerning the performance of local high school
- falling student population in the drawing areas of hostels including the withdrawal of patronage by circus and “*showies*” -*show people*.

Boarding school

In these circumstances parent choice is narrowed to a selection from rural / regional boarding schools located to the NW, West, SW of the Dividing Range. The ranking in the following table reflects the fee structure:

Boarding School Type	#	Boarding Fees \$	Tuition Fees \$	Total p/a \$
Rural/ Regional 2009				
Agricultural High Schools (2) +		8 242	350	8 592
Catholic High- weekly boarding *		6 452	3 379	9 831
Catholic Boarding School		13 648	3 481	17 129
Anglican Boarding School		14 900	10 550	25 450
Uniting/ Presbyt. Boarding School		15 660	14 200	29 860

There is a good mix of co-educational schools available

+ BSIS scholarships (Boarding Scholarships for Isolated Students) offered by NSW Govt. valued at \$4,000 pa.

*weekly boarders travel to their home town for week - ends.

7.

Financial Issues

Most applicants for our boarding bursaries are already recipients of the maximum government allowances available. There are various scholarships offered by the schools themselves, usually half board and / or half tuition fees and reduced fees for siblings. Through the auspices of the *Isolated Children's Parents' Association* (ICPA) parents can negotiate fee reductions as a private arrangement with selected schools. Schools have built up their scholarship programs over time to assist in their viability and assist certain students in the case of emerging or unexpected hardship.

The BCEF provides accommodation bursaries each year to those deemed most needy in terms of family socio- economic status. The successful students include those from a range of occupations. (see attachment Annual Report extracts) Families must first qualify for the AIC allowance through Centrelink and /or the State LAFHA payment both of which have means testing and isolation/ remoteness factors in the criteria.

The adequacy of these allowances and client confusion over differing criteria will be addressed in the following pages.

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8.

(e) the adequacy of government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary and post secondary study

OVERVIEW

It is the BCEF's contention that current government measures to provide for students who are required to leave home for secondary and post secondary study are inadequate. In respect of secondary students, current government allowances do not sufficiently cover non-boarding school costs in situations where families have no alternative boarding access; nor are there sufficient government boarding schools. In terms of post secondary provisions the conditions required to access the Youth Allowance are too restrictive and deficient to encourage and support isolated student entry into university .

Background

Within the context described above there are often stresses and barriers placed in the way of families endeavouring to determine a clear pathway for their children through secondary education proceeding to tertiary studies. To the forefront are considerations relating to allowances, income assistance for senior students and the likelihood of a career which will lead to financial independence. This is especially so for farming families where traditionally some children returned to work the farm. In many cases the farm has been reduced in size or can no longer sustain multiple members of one family. Generational inheritance is a fading phenomenon and many young people wish to lift their career horizons as a result of schooling with an expectation of ultimately returning to work in a rural environment.

Government Assistance for Isolated Students (Secondary)

For isolated secondary students the key issue is adequacy of allowances for boarding: There are many factors governing choice of boarding institution with parents generally eschewing hostels and private board in favour of 24/7 supervision and pastoral care offered in boarding schools. There is no doubt that *Assistance to Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance* has been a significant benefit for isolated students. A maximum of \$9 085 is available made up of a basic \$6 824 non means tested and \$2,261 supplement provided that family assessed income does not exceed \$32,800. Eligibility for a portion of the supplement ceases at an income level of \$41,843.

An additional NSW State Government allowance known as LAFHA is also available to students of families whose principal place of residence is in NSW. It is valued at \$1227 basic and Year 11/12 supplement of \$288- a maximum of \$1515. In both cases an isolation test applied but the criteria is different and causes confusion and anxiety.

For some students the annual boarding fees could be offset by a maximum combined government assistance allowance of \$10,600. While it covers the cost of boarding fees in hostels and Agricultural High Schools, it does not cover other hidden expenses such as elective subjects, laundry, sports uniforms, school organized week-end travel, excursions visiting performers. Given that there is an unwritten expectation that parents contribute notionally towards their child's secondary "board & keep" (*estimate of \$100 p/w*) it could be assumed that the AIC and LAFHA allowances are adequate to more than adequate.

Access to hostel and government boarding schools where lower fee structures apply, is Extremely limited; there are only 3 government boarding schools and 2 hostels for the whole of the state of NSW. Of the former 2 offer co-education boarding facilities. BCEF contends that there are insufficient government boarding schools thus forcing parents of very limited means into the non-government sector by necessity.

Post Secondary – Youth Allowance

BCEF responds with particular reference to isolated/ remote area students. The importance of receiving Youth Allowance cannot be underestimated because apart from the income support it is the key to obtaining the new *Relocation and Start-up Scholarships*.

Many immediate post secondary students receive deferment of an university place so they can meet the pre-requisites for Youth Allowance. Previously they tended to work for 12 months, before taking up a designated university place. In their 1st semester they were also in part-time work to comply with the rule of working for 18 months in order to become eligible for the *Independent* category of Youth Allowance. Students could usually juggle this situation in order to earn the equivalent of \$19,532 (2009). The new requirement of working 30 hours per week for 18 months during a 2 year period will be particularly burdensome for isolated students, some reasons being :

- the possibility of a lack of available work in rural towns where “ out of town” students compete with townfolk for jobs
- the likelihood of farm work has diminished due to drought
- Universities generally defer places for a maximum of 12 months
- Motivation for the next learning phase in a student’s life may be dampened

The BCEF welcomes and acknowledges the lifting of the family income test to \$42,559 for the *Dependent* category which aligns with the eligibility for AIC . Nevertheless the perceived inordinate strain put on post secondary students and their families in such that the BCEF advocates that post secondary students with remote area classification (ex AIC) be granted the *Independent* Youth Allowance if they must live away from home without the work conditions applying.

The Foundation welcomes the Federal Government’s “Start-Up “Scholarships. In 2009 BCEF introduced a new scholarship program entitled “Thru –to- Uni” for a very limited number of high academic achieving isolated students in Year 11/12 with aspirations to attend university. Recognising the critical need to assist first year university students, the BCEF introduced the program to assist in meeting boarding and tuition fees together with a guaranteed “Start-Up” grant on attaining an UAI placement in any university. Each scholarship is valued at up to \$5,000 and designed to specifically assist those who otherwise may be “ pulled out ‘ of senior schools because of family financial constraints.

It also funds 3 students at Charles Sturt University with 3 year scholarships contingent on performance at credit level. It looks forward to continuing to relieve stress and support post secondary students and alleviate any of the guilt they may bear for placing their families under financial stress while living away from home.

10.

In terms of improving accessibility to secondary and post secondary opportunities for isolated, remote area students the BCEF would advocate :

- Raising the level of assistance offered by AIC allowance to isolated families who having been rejected for a place at a government boarding school or hostel must enrol at a non-government school where tuition fees apply.

This might be effected by offering scholarships at the same value as the NSW Government's **Boarding Scholarships for Isolated Students (BSIS)** valued currently at \$4,000 per annum.

- Coming to a common definition of *isolation* and *remoteness* with regard to aspects of the criteria for AIC (Federal) and LAFA (State)
- Raising the value of these allowances to reflect more adequately the "extras" that parents are required to pay. The extra funding could to some degree offset tuition fees in the non - government sector and in government boarding schools and hostels be allocated for legitimate extra curricula and living costs.
- For senior secondary students (Year11/12) taking up the dependent Youth Allowance, soften the family assets test after the deduction of the 75 % value of home and business so that net assets could be raised from the \$547,000 cut off.
- Raising the combined family income threshold to \$60,000 .
- Reducing the age eligibility for dependent Youth Allowance / Abstudy to 15 years.
- Consideration of allowing Dependent Youth Allowance recipients access to the basic AIC for the senior years of schooling (Years 11/12). At present a Successful applicant can obtain one or the other.
- Paying the periodic payments of allowances whilst enrolled as a boarder direct to the boarding institution. This would obviate the need for such institutions from continually " chasing " up fees and give the Government a vehicle through which other actuarial data might be obtained .

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(f) the educational needs of rural and regional students**OVERVIEW**

BCEF maintains that under present policies and programs the educational needs of some but not all rural and regional students are being met. Students are at risk in terms of the limited service on offer for more isolated students and the restricted choices available to those who must live away from home at both secondary and tertiary levels.

Background

The BCEF charter in its original form attested to by the Attorney General stated that: *“ no child in outback NSW be deprived the right of a normal schooling because of isolation or economic circumstance ”*.

As a charity it provided assistance when none was forthcoming from government agencies. Now amended and signed off by the Attorney General (NSW) it reads in part in relation to its core function: *“ ..the facilitation of education of children from remote areas of New South Wales (through) the provision of accommodation subsidies for living away from home during school terms..& ...“the provision of bursaries to subsidize to subsidize school based expenses”*.

For us those needs are being met in part, as the Foundation is solely dependent on individual donors and a small number of corporate donors.

Apart from the considerations concerning the raising of the AIC allowance (secondary) the needs for isolated students of secondary and tertiary age are seen to be:

- (i) the provision of sufficient income support to be able to leave home and study at TAFE, University or other relevant tertiary institutions
- (ii) the facilitation of transport to enable ease of movement between schools, regional centres and metropolitan areas both while at school and beyond.
- (iii) the development of a climate and currency to instill a willingness to succeed where aspirations by geographical area vary but can be raised by motivating school initiatives supported through special the programs such as the current *Country Area Program* which could embrace more schools for the funding of special initiatives.
- (iv) Highlighting the importance of mentoring in positive ways for future careers which may not always be present in the culture of the outback through on site visits of inspirational people and focused work experiences in the senior years. Career education is then not been presented in a “secondhand mode” one step removed from reality.

12.

- (v) More innovative incentive schemes to attract younger graduate teachers to serve in rural and remote areas.
- (v) Where students are failing in literacy and innumeracy increase the number of itinerant specialist teachers so that effective one- to - one time is achieved on a regular basis.

Attachment : BCEF Annual Report 2008 Extract: Occupations and Income- Applicant Families:

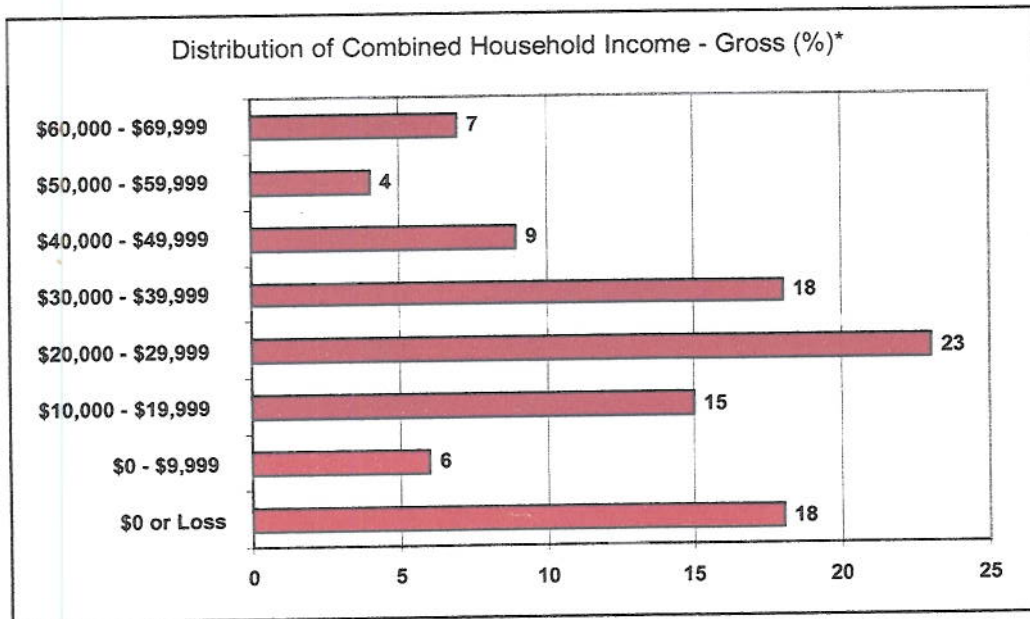
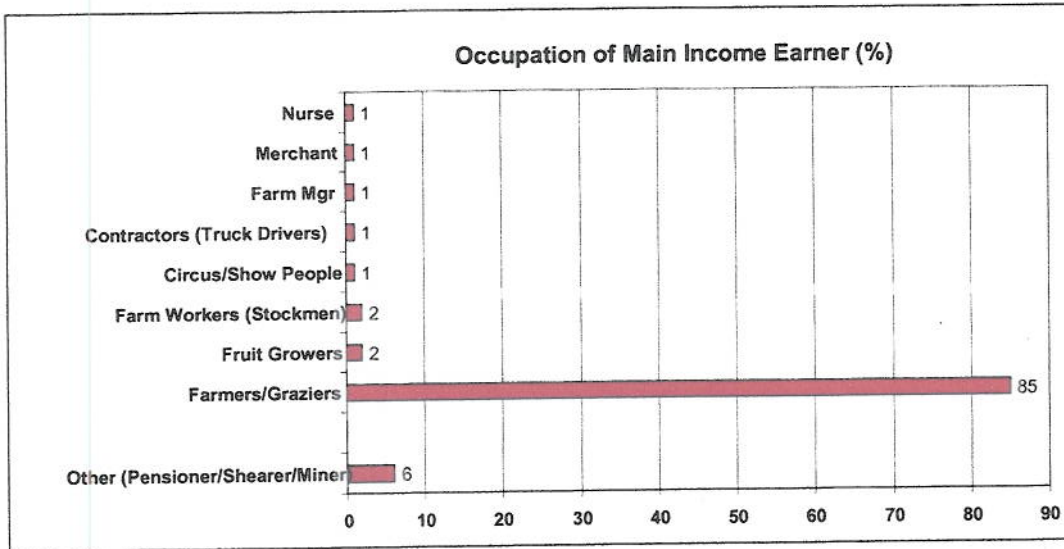
- Family income distribution (%): bursars 2008
- Occupational distribution (%): bursar families 2008

Acknowledged: *Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education- July 2009*
Annual Report extract: Bush Children's Education Foundation of NSW Inc.
"Impact of drought on secondary education access in rural /remote areas"
Alston M & Kent J.CSU, 2006

EXTRACT

BUSH CHILDRENS EDUCATION FOUNDATION OF NSW Inc.

Annual Report 2008



*By comparison:

ABS Nat Income Data (Household) 2005-06: Mean Household Income \$67,860;

ABS Nat Income Data (Individual) Mean Individual Income \$56,756 (as reported 05/07)