



31 August 2009

Committee Secretary
Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam

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

This response is presented by the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA). The AISSA represents the interests of 96 schools with an enrolment in excess of 42,300. Fourteen schools are eligible for Australian Government *Country Areas Programme* funding and 812 students board in metropolitan Independent boarding schools.

The AISSA has contributed to the response provided to the Inquiry by the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA). The AISSA raises the following further issues based on feedback from its member schools.

Access to Services

Member schools in rural and remote areas indicate that they face particular issues as a result of their location in accessing a range of services, including allied health services such as occupational therapy and speech therapy, mental health services, such as those offered by CAMHS (State Government service) including psychiatrists and counsellors and professional development. In instances where services, for example speech therapy and occupational therapy, which support students with special needs and mental health issues, are unavailable locally, they must be accessed from metropolitan areas. The necessity to access these services from metropolitan areas can result in a substantial additional cost which places an inequitable burden on schools and families and infrequent use of the services.

Member schools indicated that accessing professional development to ensure teachers remain current in best teaching practice provides particular challenges and additional costs. While schools can use funding from Government programmes, for example *Country Areas Programme*, for TRT replacement, there can be difficulties in access to, and the availability of, skilled TRT replacements, particularly in small communities. Schools in rural and remote areas can also face additional costs in sending teachers to professional development in metropolitan areas including transport, meal allowances and accommodation. While

technologies such as web conferencing are available inequitable access to broadband technologies in some areas limits the ability of schools to utilise these technologies.

The AISSA considers that professional development for teachers from rural and remote areas should be given a priority in relevant Commonwealth funded programs.

Non-Government schools also experience inequities in regard to access to student bus transport. Under current State Government arrangements South Australian Non-Government students have a right to use a government department bus for travel if they 'reside 5kms or more by the shortest most practicable route from the nearest appropriate government school'. (Travel must be to that government school.)

The AISSA considers that this criteria should be amended to allow travel on a government department bus if they reside 5kms or more by the shortest most practical route from their Non-Government school of choice and travel allowed to their school.

Access to adequate bus services also places an inequitable burden on schools and parents in rural and remote areas supporting students participating in Australian Government *VET in Schools* programs. In some cases students undertaking *VET in Schools* must rely for transport on bus services provided by the school in order to access training in other areas limiting their choice of programs. As noted above issues relating to broadband access in some areas again limit the opportunities of students to undertake training via technologies such as web conferencing.

Changes in Compulsory Education Age

The South Australian State Government recently introduced the *Education (Compulsory Education Age) Amendment Act 2007*. This Act amends the South Australian *Education Act 1972* by inserting a 'Compulsory Education Age' category which will require all 16 year olds to be enrolled and participate in an 'approved learning program' until they turn 17 years, or have achieved a qualification, or been granted an exemption.

The need to be in approved accredited learning programs places a particular burden on students in rural and remote areas, particularly those located in lower socio-economic areas including areas subject to exceptional circumstance declarations as a result of severe drought. In these areas there are a significant number of students wishing to access either VET training and/or school-based new apprenticeships in their local area and there is a need for subsidised assistance to adequately support these students.

In addition, some regions do not offer viable employment opportunities in areas such as school-based apprenticeships limiting the choice of students and their ability to stay in their local community. **The AISSA raises the question as to what Government measures (State and Commonwealth) have been implemented to ensure local training places are available in order to ensure that students can remain in their local areas and continue contributing to their community.**

Attraction and Retention of Teachers

Member schools in regional and remote areas indicated that they experience significant difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers. This situation can have a particular impact in

the senior secondary years as teachers often need to be able to teach across a range of subject areas.

In addition, small numbers of students in the senior secondary years can also impact on the range of subjects which can be offered at the local level limiting choice for these students if they wish to remain studying in their local community.

GST on Boarding food

Currently school boarding food is subject to GST. AISSA member schools consider boarding house meals that would otherwise be provided by the student's family in a home setting should be GST-free. It is the AISSA's understanding that food provided by hospitals, retirement villages and age care facilities is GST-free. However, under current arrangements boarding schools are being treated in a similar way to commercial businesses rather than as not-for-profit entities providing an essential service to families and students. Member schools also report that the compliance requirements in calculating the GST on meals provided in boarding facilities are complex and time consuming.

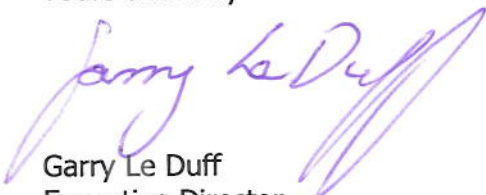
The application of GST on boarding school food penalises the efforts of rural taxpayers to provide for their children's education, in circumstances where parents already bear substantial financial burden through the cost of accommodation and education of their children in boarding school facilities.

The significant majority of students attending boarding schools are from rural and isolated regions across Australia. In many regions they currently face considerable stress from the impact of long-term drought. The removal of the GST on boarding food would enable schools to reduce the cost of educating children from rural and isolated families.

Concluding Comments

It is clear that communities in rural and remote areas continue to face a range of challenges including inequitable access to services, such as allied health and mental health services, professional development for teachers and access to accredited training programs such as *VET in Schools* and *Australian School-Based New Apprenticeships*. Further consideration should be given by governments (State and Commonwealth) to a range of strategies that could be incorporated into Commonwealth funded policy initiatives.

Yours sincerely



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Executive Director