



EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr MC Bailey MP—Chair
Mr JP Lister MP
Mr N Dametto MP
Mr JP Kelly MP
Mr BA Mickelberg MP
Mr BL O'Rourke MP

Staff present:

Ms B Watson—Committee Secretary
Mr L Melia—Assistant Committee Secretary

PUBLIC BRIEFING—INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) (EXTENSION OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN REMOTE AREAS) AMENDMENT BILL 2023

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

Monday, 4 March 2024

Brisbane

MONDAY, 4 MARCH 2024

The committee met at 11.30 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare this public briefing open. My name is Mark Bailey. I am the member for Miller and chair of the committee. I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Turrbal people, and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging for a culture that goes back more than 60,000 years. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

Welcome, everybody, and thank you for supporting the committee's work. With me here today are: James Lister, member for Southern Downs and deputy chair; Brent Mickelberg, member for Buderim; Nick Dametto, member for Hinchinbrook; Joe Kelly, member for Greenslopes; and Barry O'Rourke, member for Rockhampton.

Today's public briefing forms part of the committee's consideration of the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023. This meeting of the committee is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and subject to the parliament's standing orders and rules. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I do remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. As we are in the chamber today, we will need to press our microphones on when we speak and off again once we finish speaking, although I am sure the member for Traeger is very familiar with that, even though we have a new system in play.

KATTER, Mr Robbie, Member for Traeger, Parliament of Queensland

CHAIR: Welcome. Before I turn to questions from the committee, would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mr Katter: I missed the last sitting week so I have not seen the fancy new audio system. My opening statement today is mostly responding to the submissions made. I have to say that I am bitterly disappointed in a lot of the stakeholders in that it has not been a collective approach to address a problem. There is clearly a problem there of people falling off the wagon who do not fit the services on offer, and all I have heard are some perceived risks that could be there in trying to address that problem rather than how we work through the problem itself. That is very disappointing. Despite words that are said here, we have to work harder for this. Presumably everyone has been working hard in this space for the last 10 or 20 years, but the facts are the facts.

I am only here because I have seen the anguish of the parents and the communities that see this as a problem. I do not go rallying support for this. This is purely an observation that I have made and acted on. It is very frustrating to come here and see stakeholder groups that are doing nothing but trying to pull this apart when I think there are only positives that can come from this.

The number of people accessing LAFHAS, which has had a lot of airtime here, is diminishing because our towns are dying. The pub in Urandangi has just closed. That town has pretty much collapsed. There is no-one there now. We do not know if the pub at Kynuna is going to be rebuilt. The Einasleigh pub, which is the only commercial in town, looks like it could be closed down. We are struggling to keep these places alive. Often the primary producers out of town are all getting LAFHAS but not the people in town—the grader driver, the council worker. They are the people we are focusing on. It is a diminishing number, which is good news for the government because there is not a large quantum of money that needs to be spent here. We are trying to capture those people who are crying out for help and deliver something that in that process I think is a fairly subtle amendment to what we are already doing.

The beauty of this is that it is already being done. It is not radical. It is not that it does not work. It is already being done, but it is unfair that the likes of Julia Creek and Thargomindah have had to pay this out of their ratepayers' bill. With all due respect, they know what is better for the community than anyone here, which is why it is implicit in my bill that it is upon request from the local government. This is not forcing anything on anyone. It has to come as a request from the local government.

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To that point, when the government graciously gave some money to Julia Creek back in 2013-14, or whenever it was when that started for them, it was offered to two other authorities that did not take it up. There were other reasons. I think one of them wanted to keep their independent school propped up so they did not. It still comes down to the autonomy of the local people. They know if there is going to be a compromise of all the LAFHAS schools or if there is a compromise to something else. You have that safety valve in there. At the end of the day, you have Thargomindah and Julia Creek already doing this but they should not have to do this. Queensland's tax revenue is to provide education to all Queenslanders, not just the people in the leafy suburbs or who can afford to send their children to boarding schools. It is for everyone.

A big part that has been missed is that one of the biggest social issues we have in a place like Mount Isa is losing kids from Camooweal and Dajarra from grade 6 onwards. If you are a kid at Dajarra, you have family support while you are living there, but you have to go off to Mount Isa—you might go to Spinifex resi or whatever—to do your ongoing education. That rarely happens. If it does, it provides that disconnect and what can already be a fragile social structure becomes enormously brittle. Camooweal and Dajarra are just a couple of places in my electorate. This actually goes a long way to offering a solution that could address that problem as well.

Another thing that was lost in some of the submissions again was not brought up by me. I attended a community meeting at Ravenswood a few months back and the mines brought this up as an issue. There were some parents there. There was a push locally for it and they were really calling out for it, not knowing that I had been saying anything about this before. They were up me saying, 'You need to deliver this.' The mines said, 'We could attract some families to come from Townsville but they say, "We would but our kids are just into school and if they're only going to be there for three years and then we have to take them back to Townsville, it is not really worth us displacing them by going to live there and moving back to Townsville to follow our kids."' They said that actually happened to them. You multiply that by a number of towns and families—councils trying to get a chief engineer to move out to Georgetown or Karumba—and it becomes very difficult. That is another thing that got lost in it all.

Another one of the comments made was, 'Well, what if you cannot get teachers?' There are many dimensions in responding to that. Just before Christmas I did a tour of a heap of schools, and I have to say that there are some terrific teachers in these remote areas. None of them—not one—has opposed this as a concept. There is nothing but saying, 'God, that would be great.' Quite often it is the parent of the kids—there might be only two or three at the school—who is the teacher's aide at the school. I recently heard a story of a mum who was forced into the position where the kids had to go to the school, and she could have had a job as a teacher's aide but she ended up having to take them home. She had to leave her job, because if you are doing distance education at home you cannot not be at home and leave your kids home by themselves. She had to leave her job and stay at home to educate the kids. If she was paid to do that at the local school—there are many dimensions to saying that there are no teachers or teacher supply.

Another point is that there are already some state schools that are not registered that are doing this through the goodwill of the principal or a teacher. They would say, 'So-and-so is doing high school at home. Come and do your work at the school campus.' They are sitting there at home. Someone made the point before that it is antisocial having older and younger people. Well, it is a bit better than sitting at home by yourself in a remote town. I guess that is why some of them have made that offer. Those are some of the issues, but I will try to address other things in response to questions. Thank you.

Mr LISTER: The Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network were explicit that they were concerned about the impacts on the living away from home allowance but that their position may change if there could be satisfactory assurances that it would not. Can you respond to that?

Mr Katter: Yes. Again, there are many dimensions of how to respond to that. We are talking about a hypothetical. You are saying that if that does come in then maybe that threatens it. Does that mean you do not try to help these kids and these towns? We ignore a solution—a pretty cost-effective solution that is already happening—because it could threaten the opportunities. That is a policy decision by government. If you are going to read the tea-leaves, the government have just increased LAFHAS so it is not like they are in a hurry to get rid of it.

Like I said, the number of people accessing it has been diminishing. I do not know how you would read that as a big threat, other than just creating a hypothetical if you are trying to gather up some negatives to pull this down. One of the comments I had from some in the ICPA was initially, 'Don't you think we need a grader driver in town? If the bloke in town who is our grader driver leaves town to go to Emerald, Rocky or wherever to get his kids educated'—it happens all the time once kids Brisbane

hit high school—‘we lose a grader driver.’ That is why I am so frustrated here. Collectively we are fighting for remote areas to stay alive and everyone is jumping back in their silos saying, ‘You are threatening my funding.’ Can’t we act collectively to address these problems? There would be no greater supporter of getting the LAFHAS back if there was compromise, but there is nothing to suggest there would be any compromise there. You have just had an increase from the government on it. It is not like there is a negative sentiment towards it. I do not understand where that is coming from.

Mr O’ROURKE: With the year 7 to 10 students remaining in those remote areas, how would you see having additional students there impacting on the existing teacher and teacher aides?

Mr Katter: There would be some teachers who would resist it. In the most recent conversations I had with ones in remote schools, they said it would be great because if there is an opportunity for them to get another teacher’s aide in the school they would enjoy that. It is on everyone’s mind. Like the member for Southern Downs said, it is always on our minds, especially in rural areas, that they are going to try to shut schools down—which they did. Gregory state school was shut down during my first term of parliament. Always in the back of your mind you are thinking you have to fight to keep kids in there and numbers up.

I was so resistant in the House. I was one of only two who fought against the transition of year 7 to high school because we pre-empted this. That was the genesis of this. Julia Creek arced up about year 7 being moved into the high school campus. Everyone said, ‘You put the prep on the other end,’ but that still leaves you with the issue of your kids leaving too early. Ever since then it has been high in the consciousness of the teachers themselves, and they are very invested in keeping the school going—keeping the numbers up on day 8 and knowing that it is a fight for survival.

Of course there are going to be issues with procurement, but, I guess by way of analogy, if you had a perfectly elegant solution to deal with youth crime right now you would not not pursue it because you cannot find the police resources right now. That is another challenge. If you are looking at an issue you are faced with, you deal with that and try to address other operational issues as you go. It does not mean you do not consider it in the first place, which is what is being discussed here.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you for coming along today to present to the committee. You may have spoken to this a little earlier. I want you to elaborate on it. Other electorates across Queensland are building in population right now. I have noticed that in your electorate it is dropping—minus 0.9. That is very interesting. There seems to be a feeling in regional Queensland that the state government feels it is easier to provide services in the bigger metropolitan areas than it is to try to attract people to regional areas. Can you speak to how this bill tries to combat that by trying to draw people back to the regions and give families incentives to stay longer?

Mr Katter: Yes. I refer back to the member for Rockhampton’s comments. If people can see the potential to enhance numbers and services at the school then families may say, ‘Crikey, if we can get the kids to stay here until grade 10 then we will make that decision to take the contract extension with the council.’ They may say, ‘We will keep doing the fencing contracting business here for a while because we know we will have a good run at it, but we cannot afford boarding school so we may have to move earlier to Townsville’—or wherever. There is that element of it, but also it is about value-adding to the school environment. Sure, there would be some teachers against that, but I keep defaulting back to the position of parents: if they know there are options for them to stay then there is some chance of us addressing the population decline.

The other point is that your question builds to the point—and it is a similar thing in health and education—that no-one is going out there ‘so let’s just centralise it and make them go to Townsville; we will make the pathway to boarding school easier and try to fix it that way’. That is self-defeating and just keeps making it worse and worse.

For a lot of these little schools, the challenge has always been around asking for it to be a bit bigger than day 8. Say at Burketown, when there is a cyclone the local Indigenous families might just float away for two months and then come back, but you lose your teaching numbers on day 8. There is not the robustness in the system to deal with a lot of that. If you do not have a long-term approach on some of this to try to arrest it and turn it around then it is just going to keep getting worse and exacerbate what is already a very big problem, which is the rural decline or population decline with people moving to the cities.

Mr KELLY: Robbie, I accept your disappointment with the submitters, although they have been pretty clear in their submissions and their statements here today. Elements of their concerns seem to range across, obviously, the LAFHAS issue and also the infrastructure and the human resourcing issues. The bit that is quite compelling for me is the issue around the social and emotional wellbeing

of teenagers and their preference. I know that you understand boarding schools very well, given where you are from. I note that your father was on the board when my parents were principals so your family has a long history there. What has been the motivation for you in bringing this bill? If the stakeholders are lining up against it then who are you bringing this bill for?

Mr Katter: That is a good question. Clearly, I mix with different people to some of these stakeholders because to me it could not be clearer. It is a bit hard to forget conversations you have with a battling mum in Julia Creek. For that mum it was about 11 and 12. There were some kids—and I draw from my own experience in Charters Towers—who did not want to be there. They wanted to be back in Winton, Hughenden, Julia Creek and even Mount Isa, which did not have a private school. It had a public school but not a private school for grades 11 and 12. They did not want to be there. They wanted to be home with their family and that support. They probably acted up accordingly.

Again, I draw on the point of mental health and wellbeing. Some of those kids are being forced to study by themselves at home with the School of the Air curriculum. It is not ideal to be doing that at home when mum and dad are off working. I am sure some kids work through that. It is a great curriculum and it is effective. I should add that this idea originally was an informal consultation between two teachers with over 30 years experience, one in distance education. They said that for the kids you would be targeting here there would be no diminution in the quality of education they would get from the School of the Air, which is recognised by the education system now because it is one of the options available to them. I cannot see how you can say that forcing them back onto a campus in Julia Creek with the little kids is a better outcome than being two blocks up the road at their house by themselves.

There is no perfect scenario or perfect policy, but no-one here has given me a good, clear alternative other than what I am proposing to fix things for this cohort of kids and their parents and families. Everyone is talking about their own interests, but no-one is addressing those people who cannot afford to send their kids to Nudgee or TSS. They cannot even afford to send them to Charters Towers. But it is not just the cost; it is their wellbeing, as you say. They want to keep them close at home because they are not ready to move away. That is where a lot of anguish comes. You moved year 7 so they are leaving in year 6 now. Probably the biggest complaint I hear is: 'It's too early to send our kids away.' Cost is also a very big thing.

We were talking about infrastructure. One of the big impacts on retention was—and I do not have data to back this up but, anecdotally, the Teachers' Union raised this with me—when the Newman government changed the independent public schools. If you were teaching at Mount Isa, you got seven points a year or whatever. You could work up your 38 points and then go back to the green leafy suburbs of Noosa State High or wherever. This government has not changed the system. There have been some alternative programs like Boomerang and others, but none of them are as good as what was there. One hundred and fifty schools have pulled out of that system, so the teacher at Mount Isa or Normanton, who used to have all of these options, now says, 'Well, I can't get back to where I wanted to.' That is a bit of a slow burn, that one. It might take 10 years for the culture to evolve where people will go, 'Mate, don't go out to Normanton. You'll be stuck there or you'll only get back to Emerald or something.' No-one has measured the cost of that, which has been another impact in trying to get teachers out there.

I have met some fantastic teachers. My experience has been that for most of the teachers going out there—most, not all—it is a vocation. They are not trying to build a career or go up the chain in Education Queensland. They are there because they love teaching. They live and breathe it—and they must, because they might be in charge of four kids or something, but they do a great job by and large.

Mr MICKELBERG: Robbie, I asked P&Cs Qld about the impact, positive or otherwise, on the P-6 kids, which are the existing kids in these schools. The response was that they were probably their brothers and sisters in many cases. Can I get your view on the impacts on the existing kids enrolled in the P-6 grades in those schools who would otherwise be at school with kids in grades 7, 8, 9 and 10? I am keen to get your thoughts. It is obviously happening in Julia Creek already so what is your feedback, positive or otherwise?

Mr Katter: I am sure there would be adverse impacts. I am not sure there would be infrastructure there for, say, toilets and bathrooms for another cohort or age group. I am not too sure around that. I would probably draw on the experience of Ravenswood, where most of the kids have to be sent to Charters Towers, which is only an hour and a half up the road. The families were adamant. There were two or three families strongly pushing for this because they desperately want

to keep them, although they acknowledge that they are going to eventually send them to Charters Towers. It was not surprising but it was instructive how strongly they felt about keeping their kids for the next few years, knowing that the older kids would still be mixing with them because they were the same kids at the school.

CHAIR: Robbie, under this bill, how do you see the physicality of the schools? Would there be separate classrooms for years 7 to 10? How would it work? Do you see them as being a broadly mixed class or will there be a separation between the high school and the primary school years if, hypothetically, we did what you want to do in the bill?

Mr Katter: I went somewhere the other day where they were repurposing a room—and probably also at the last couple of schools I have been to. Almost every time you go back they are repurposing—putting in partitions or a divider wall to make that now the library or the AV room. I do not know how they bundle them together but they might say, ‘We are separating years 1, 2 and 3 because we have a larger cohort at the moment in that bracket so we will modify.’ It is already happening a bit now. I am not sure what the optimum composition would be when you do that. Certainly I would be hoping most would be done without building anything new.

I would reiterate that the biggest problem we have is that our populations and school numbers are declining. I do not think there is going to be some big, rapid expansion. The first point we have made in the bill is pretty ambitious—that if there are more than five students then there would be an obligation on the government to deliver normal conventional school classrooms—but with five and under it is not a big number. It is good question. I do not have a good direct answer other than that my experience has been that these schools are small in nature and they have a pretty good ability to modify what they have already for different cohorts and different grades.

CHAIR: Thanks so much, Robbie, for your presentation and answering the questions from the committee.

BARRY, Ms Megan, Deputy Director-General, People, Information and Communication Services, Department of Education

WEBB, Dr Grant, Acting Assistant Director-General, Schools and Student Support, Department of Education

CHAIR: Before we turn to questions from the committee, would you like to make a short opening statement?

Dr Webb: We respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this hearing is taking place, the Yagara and Turrbal peoples, and we both pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. We would like to thank the committee for providing the Department of Education with the opportunity to contribute to its inquiry into the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023.

As you know, the bill seeks to increase access to designated secondary education services in remote Queensland communities. As previously outlined in our written advice in November 2023 and our subsequent response to the public submissions in February 2024, provided to this committee, there are a number of impediments or unintended consequences of the bill as it is currently drafted. These relate to but are not limited to the impacts on existing school networks and services, the staffing of our remote and very remote schools, the ability to provide a wide curriculum offering, cohort sizes, changes to funding allowances, infrastructure and capital works such as we have just heard about with things like additional classrooms and age-appropriate toilets, school transport options and the use of teacher aides under one of the parts of this proposed bill.

Support for rural and remote communities in Queensland is paramount, because approximately 11 per cent of our 1,264 state schools are classified as either remote or very remote under the federal government's classification system, which you have heard lots about today. Together these schools educate just under three per cent of all state school students. The department's Equity and Excellence, realising the potential of every student, sets the Queensland government's vision for a progressive, high-performing education system that realises the potential of every student. Our education strategy aims to reduce barriers for all learners irrespective of their geographical location. We remain committed to supporting students and their families in Queensland's rural and remote areas and we deliver a range of long-term strategies and programs to ensure that children and students have access to a quality education no matter where they live. Such strategies and programs include the State Delivered Kindergarten program; the nationally recognised eKindy program; our seven schools of distance education; the Rural and Remote Education Access Program, or as lots of people know it RREAP; and our student hostel support system, which I have heard people speak about today as well.

Like many speakers today, we acknowledge the challenges some families may face living in geographically isolated areas and the impact that a declining population can have on employment, tourism and the local economy of our small, regional and remote communities. We know that parents value the ability to choose how and when their children will be educated. Our schools have always been the hub of these communities and play a critical role in educating children and young people.

The majority of our students continue to have access to a range of secondary education services. However, for a small number of students where there is not a state school option in years 7 to 10 in their local area they access their secondary education in a variety of ways. They travel to nearby high schools, they enrol at one of our seven schools of distance education that are providing a high-quality educational program, they go to one of the three boarding facilities that we run, they may choose to home-educate their children or they attend one of the hostels that we are part of the funding for. We do provide a range of funding programs to ensure outcomes and opportunities for students in geographically isolated areas.

We have heard a lot about the LAFHAS program today. We have not heard a lot about the School Transport Assistance Scheme, which is administered by one of the other government agencies, or the Rural and Remote Education Access Program. It is the department's view that, should this bill pass in its current form, the eligibility requirements for schools and parents to access this funding may be inadvertently compromised. We know that learning involves strong partnerships with families and communities, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing a love of learning needed for success at school and in life. Our schools are already taking positive steps towards strengthening the partnerships that exist in their communities to connect curriculum and place-based learning. Our remote communities benefit from enhanced technology, enabling new opportunities to start to collaborate and connect within and across schools, government, communities and families to co-design and co-deliver what works best for them.

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Additionally, some of the latest digital innovation in teaching and learning goes beyond the school gates. It is opening doors for students across the state to access learning wherever they are and wherever they need it. One of our other speakers today spoke about the work that we are doing to open the Queensland virtual academy. It is a significant initiative of our Equity and Excellence strategy and will aim to enhance student access to desired learning pathways and courses and connect students to limited learning opportunities.

Our schools are highly committed to their students and the future of the communities they serve. The department will continue to focus on rural and remote communities to ensure children are given a great start and are empowered to embrace the opportunities of new industries, technology and a connected world. The world may be changing, but one thing does remain constant: our shared commitment to ensure that all young people receive the life-changing benefits of a great education. We thank you for your time today and welcome any questions from the committee.

Mr LISTER: Thank you very much for your attendance today. As you probably heard, one of the concerns I have is trying to keep small state schools in my electorate open, and there have been a number closed in my time as the member. Isn't this bill a way to ensure that there is just that little bit more demand to make it just that little less appetising to close a school? If someone in years 7 to 10 wants to join that campus and take the enrolment from, say, 10 to 11 or 10 to 12, I am sure that is something that the people of my electorate would want me to ask.

Dr Webb: I think the answer for that lies in what is proposed in the bill. If the first model proposed in the bill is about extending that school from a P-6 to a P-10, yes, those students can stay and attend the local school. Those students can still now stay in their community and go on distance ed., and distance ed. provides a whole range of wraparound services for those children. If those students stay in that school and we extend that school from a P-6 to a P-10, there are the consequences that you have heard today around staffing, around facilities and around the curriculum offerings.

Model 1 of the bill proposes that the school becomes a P-10 school, so therefore those students would no longer be enrolled in schools of distance education. Therefore, they are not accessing that high-quality or those specialist teachers in English and in science and in geography and in history. Therefore, there are the unintended consequences of the staffing, the facilities and the issues around that. Something that has not been spoken about today is that many of these schools—lots and lots of the schools that are tied up within the bill—are within driving distance of a local high school.

Let us take somewhere like Ilfracombe. I spent many years teaching and living in Longreach. Ilfracombe is one of the schools identified in this bill. Those students have traditionally always driven in to attend Longreach State High School. That gives us a cohort size at Longreach to start offering those specialist subjects in years 7, 8, 9 and 10. If this bill were to pass in its current form and Ilfracombe became a P-10 school and we had seven students choosing to stay in Ilfracombe in years 7, 8, 9 and 10, in terms of the curriculum offerings that we would be able to offer at Ilfracombe it would be challenging for us to offer a broad range of curriculum. We also would start to get involved with things like the people who own the bus transport taking those kids from Ilfracombe into Longreach, and then what is the actual consequence on Longreach State High School when we start not having as many students going to Longreach State High School in terms of curriculum offerings? My colleague might want to speak more about the proposal, but under model A of this bill if we make that school a P-10 our current policy would require us to look at our staffing for that.

Ms Barry: My only addition to that would be really to emphasise the unintended consequences on other schools within the area and the impacts that has on staffing but also on those curriculum offerings, and then you are beginning to impact a broader cohort of students once again.

Mr O'ROURKE: Thank you for being here today. My question is around the LAFHAS funding. How does that actually work? I just do not know any of the detail around that at all.

Dr Webb: There has been a lot of discussion about LAFHAS funding today. With regard to the interaction of that with the bypass funding, if you are a family who lives in a town where there is a P-10 school offering 7, 8, 9 and 10 in your local community but under certain circumstances where there are a very small number of students in that 7 to 10 cohort—and currently the policy is 35—and even though there is the ability to do 7, 8, 9 and 10 at your local school, because the cohort is so small some parents—and we go back to parent choice—say, 'Yes, there's grade 7, 8, 9 and 10. I only have to drive my kids 20 minutes in. I'm happy to do that, but in fact I want to make the choice that for their social and emotional wellbeing and their extension they love PE. They want to go to this school or that school,' if a school is deemed to be bypassable—and, as you have heard today, there are 19 of those currently in our system—then, even though the town has a 7-10, school parents can choose to send their children to boarding school and access LAFHAS.

Let's take somewhere like Ilfracombe. If Ilfracombe under this bill became a P-10 school, it would automatically—maybe the word is not 'automatically' but there is some written advice to suggest that that school would become bypassable and therefore the parents who live in Ilfracombe or outside of Ilfracombe would still be able to get LAFHAS. Our current policy is one that would say we would still have to—for any of the schools that would be caught in this bill and we would be required to offer to year 10; there would not be an automatic bypassable—go through the process. I think some of your other speakers today have said that that is then the connection between bypass and LAFHAS. I am sorry, but it is very complicated. I hope that gives you a sense of where I heard speakers coming from today. It is not an automatic thing that a school becomes a bypass school.

Mr DAMETTO: Dr Webb and Ms Barry, thank you very much for presenting today and giving the department's point of view on a number of the topics raised in the bill. I was very impressed with what you said earlier about the number of options made available to parents and students by the Queensland Department of Education and I think there is a lot to be proud of there. What I believe the member for Traeger seeks to do here is add an option to what is a good range of options available at the moment. I heard you speak earlier about a lot of the negatives of adding that option, but could you speak to maybe what could be a positive to that added option?

Dr Webb: If I may, can you let me know which option you are talking about? There are two options in this bill, and one is that we are making a school a P-10 school or option 2 is providing a learning facility.

Mr DAMETTO: If you could speak to both options perhaps, that would be great.

Dr Webb: In terms of option 1, where some of these very small schools start offering years 7, 8, 9 and 10, I have to be honest: I would find it very hard as a secondary principal. When we start getting into years 7, 8, 9 and 10, it is a very different thing from when I taught in small schools. Putting my preps to year 3 in one classroom is a very different thing from trying to teach years 7, 8, 9 and 10 in one classroom. We start going from generalist subjects such as SOSE into specific things about history and geography, so we would need to absolutely ensure that a school is providing that curriculum for maybe 10 students in years 7, 8, 9 and 10. I am making an assumption there that the bill suggests that that is not 10 students in year 7 and in year 8 and in year 9; it is 10 students across years 7 to 10. I will get Megan to speak about this, but you have heard a lot about the teacher shortage, and offering a fulsome curriculum to 10 students across four year levels would be very difficult.

In terms of the learning facility, I absolutely acknowledge and have heard a lot today about Julia Creek. It was a point in time when we looked for a local solution to a contextual problem. I understand that I have heard some people speak today about the benefits of students not being at home doing distance ed.—they would come together—but I would still have to go back to the impost of those older students being in a primary school. I take the point that sometimes those older students might be brothers and sisters; however, we would have to consider our teacher aides and our current policy around the role of teacher aides not being teachers.

Megan will talk about this, too, I am sure, but for our small school principals it is a hard gig and we are then asking them to also think about being the supervisor in some sort of model of maybe 10 students. We have heard today a little bit about the fact that it could give employment for somebody. What we have seen in Julia Creek—and certainly in Thargomindah at the moment—is that the fluctuating numbers are problematic there, so they are the sorts of concerns that I have. I will hand to Megan to talk broadly about our workforce.

Ms Barry: As Dr Webb was saying, in our very small schools there would be an impact on our principals and our teaching principals in particular. They are not only delivering curriculum but also running the school and doing the budgets. They are very busy roles. Not only that, they are our leaders in our community. That comes with additional expectations as well. We do hold concerns about the impact of the additional load from introducing students in years 7 to 10 into that mix.

Earlier the member asked about some of the possibilities. I think we talked a little bit about choice. Certainly, looking at and exploring different models always offers different choice. The way that this bill is currently drafted does not actually really reflect choice; it talks about 'must'. It says that once you have more than five a school 'must' be determined to be P-10. It does not talk about whether it could be in very unique or exceptional circumstances—similar to what the Julia Creek model was initially set up to be.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you very much. You may have given us an opportunity to move an amendment.

Mr KELLY: Thank you for your presentation this morning. Have you had many requests from families for the establishment of P-10 schools? Is that something you would have access to?

Dr Webb: Certainly over a number of years—not recently—some schools that are currently a P-6 school—in the old days it would have been a 1-7 school—have requested consultation when they have started to think about the opportunities to increase to year 10. Under section 13 of the Education (General Provisions) Act, the minister already has the right to determine that a school become a P-10 school. We can take this on notice, but to my knowledge certainly not recently have those requests come in from any schools—and none have been granted. The majority of schools that are P-6 have always been P-6.

I would be happy to take that on notice, but it is not something that I could say we get all the time. The majority of parents that I speak to know that their local school is a P-6. They know that after they finish at that P-6 they are either going to do the bus, go to boarding school, go to a hostel or go on distance education. That would be the situation, I think, at the moment.

Mr KELLY: Has the department done any financial modelling based on the success of the bill? If it were to go through, what would be the financial impacts?

Dr Webb: We have not done extensive modelling because so many schools are caught in the bill in that sense. We have not done that extensive modelling because some schools might need additional facilities; some schools would not need additional facilities. The bill also has two different programs to it. My understanding from reading the bill is that if one parent in that local government area asked the local government to make a case to the minister that it became a P-10 school because there will be more than five students intending to enrol—once again, we would have to then start looking at that school. We would be starting to talk about the number of teachers we would need for that school, because once we get into year 7 we are getting into the secondary curriculum and our modelling would be about specialist teachers. We would also start to have to get into things such as science labs, home economics labs and manual arts facilities. For part 1 of the bill, which requires the minister to look at extending the school from a P-6 to a P-10, it would be very contextualised about staffing, the amount of teacher aides, the facilities, the toilets—all of those things.

Mr KELLY: In relation to the teaching staff, it would seem to me that most high school teachers are specialist teachers rather than generalist educators. Would you almost need a different skill set of teachers if you were going to have a generalist kind of teacher supporting kids across a whole range of different, broad subject areas at a high school level?

Ms Barry: Yes, that is right. The specialisation that comes as the curriculum deepens is the support that is offered at those secondary levels. Certainly at a primary level they are more generalist in their teaching. Again, there are specialties within there as well, particularly those early years—those under-8s—and then really the middle schooling years. Our models would indicate at this stage that, even if we were to have a very small cohort of students allocated to those schools, we would be looking at an additional six teachers to support those students.

Mr KELLY: The member for Traeger mentioned the potential impacts on kids going away at a young age. What does the department do to support a student in a situation where the family or the student may not be ready to travel away to school?

Dr Webb: One thing that I do not think I have heard a lot here today is that, with year 7 going into secondary many years ago and with the introduction of prep and our change to age, students going at the end of year 6 are the same age as students who used to go at the end of year 7. Today somebody talked about the six years in primary school. Prep is part of primary school; therefore, students have done seven years in primary school. Students who are going away—I think one of the other speakers said this—are 12, and half the cohort will turn 13 in that first year.

You heard from one of the other speakers today about the absolute importance of transitions and the supportiveness of transitions. I cannot speak on behalf of other boarding facilities, but it is my pleasure to be responsible for the three boarding facilities that we run—at Dalby, at Spinifex in Mount Isa and at Weipa—and I can tell you that the transitions for those students are extremely proactive around supporting those students not only before they get there, because we know which kids are coming to us. As one of the other speakers said today, the majority of the kids in our Spinifex boarding facility are from Camooweal, so we are getting the little brothers and sisters. We can provide support there.

Mr KELLY: If there is a child or a student identified for whom going away impacts on their emotions or mental health, what is in place to support that from an Education Queensland perspective? What do you do in that situation?

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Dr Webb: The majority of the students who do not go away but stay in their local community will enrol in schools of distance education. I am sure that lots of you know about our models for school of distance education. In the old days it was the correspondence school at West End. Kids got their papers, did their papers and sent them back. With digital and emerging technologies now, we have the ability to provide wellbeing support, guidance support and to hook those kids up with other kids in their own age group. We run mini schools. The Brisbane School of Distance Education has eight guidance officers. Our support for students through our schools of distance education is high-quality and our emerging technologies allow us to be in constant contact. We have an ability to go out to our local communities and run mini schools et cetera. Lots of parents then go and visit the schools of distance education and meet the teachers. That wellbeing support is really important. Our three owned facilities are highly utilised and are very high quality.

CHAIR: I thank the departmental representatives for their very comprehensive presentation. The time for this briefing has now expired. Thank you for all of the information that has been provided today by members and organisations. I thank our Hansard reporters, committee staff and parliamentary broadcast staff for their assistance. A transcript of these proceedings will be available in due course. There was one question for the department to take on notice; that is, how many requests were there from parents for students to stay on at local primary schools? I ask the department to come back to us with the information by close of business on Friday, 15 March. I declare this public briefing closed.

The committee adjourned at 12.25 pm.