



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 HEARING—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 10.00 am.

CHAIR: Good morning. I declare this public hearing open. I am Mark Bailey, 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 and pay our respects to elders, past and present. 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 share.

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

Today's public hearing forms part of the committee's consideration of the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023. Mr Robbie Katter MP, member for Traeger, introduced this bill in the Legislative Assembly on 25 October 2023. Detailed consideration of the bill has been transferred from the former Education, Employment and Training Committee following the Legislative Assembly's dissolution of the former committee and establishment of the Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee.

This meeting of the committee is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind you that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. As we are in the chamber today, I ask every person who speaks to press their microphones on when we speak and off again when finished speaking.

BRADSHAW, Mrs Kate, Vice-President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association

HENNING, Mrs Wendy, President, Isolated Children's Parents' Association

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

Mrs Henning: Thank you, Chair. ICPA Queensland understands the merit and intention of this amendment bill and agrees with many of the arguments, especially around families leaving the bush for better educational outcomes for their kids, but it is a monumental change to amend the education bill and mandate the proposed changes to benefit a minority of families. The Julia Creek and Thargomindah models, which are mentioned in the explanatory notes, have not been well utilised, and the Thargomindah facility has not been used for the last two years.

Social, emotional and physical integration are all aspects of education and are as vital as academics and learning for a student. These are also as vital for staff working and delivering education. ICPA Queensland members across the entire state bring motions forward each year about the overburdening of not only teachers but also support staff in small schools which is exacerbated by staff shortages.

Over half of the schools that are mentioned in this bill are one- or two-teacher schools who are responsible for prep to year 6 and also now kindy to year 6—that is, four-year-olds to 12-year-olds in one learning space. Supervision sounds like a simple task, but in a school setting it is coupled with behavioural management, learning support, student wellbeing, knowledge of education policy, workplace health and safety, and age-appropriate development.

An example of this is a school mentioned in the bill—Clarke Creek State School, currently a K-6 school, with two classrooms and 23 enrolments. If you were to add five more secondary students to the classroom dynamic—whilst this could work in theory, the reality is fraught with challenges and would be to the potential detriment of a safe, supportive learning and employment space. Surplus learning areas in schools are mentioned in the bill due to year 7 moving to high school. However, they are not physical spare spaces because it has seen the introduction of prep and now kindy into the mentioned small schools, limiting space.

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Staffing in small schools has challenges and complexities that would be further exacerbated by needing to find additional staff with the age-appropriate skill set. A teacher aide who is responsible for a kindy cohort needs a vastly different skill set to that of a secondary teacher aide who is responsible for keeping teenagers on track with learning as well as environmental and social challenges. The physical resources also need to be addressed to ensure that the secondary learners feel accommodated and welcome and not just tucked away due to the environment not being age appropriate. These extra students deserve desks, chairs and amenities to accommodate their growing needs. Distance education for secondary years in Queensland is one choice rural, remote and geographically isolated families have. Families also have the option to choose to send their children to a boarding facility, whether it is a boarding school or a hostel.

The bill mentions and notes that the listed schools would automatically become bypass schools, of which there are currently only 19 in Queensland. The bypass schools procedure is a complex and multilayered process that needs to be protected and not have the integrity of the system eroded. If schools become P-10 schools under the amendments, students will no longer be eligible for LAFHAS. LAFHAS is the vital monetary support that families rely on and value, to give their children opportunity and access to educational outcomes. Education is not just curriculum, and rural and remote students in secondary years deserve the opportunity to have exposure to and experience of sports, cultural and social interactions. Whilst we understand this bill will benefit a minority of students and their families, the majority also deserve to have the choice and opportunity afforded to them by learning and developing at facilities that have the capacity to support, grow and nurture maturing minds. Without LAFHAS, this would be not be possible for the majority of families.

CHAIR: Thank you, Wendy.

Mr LISTER: Thank you very much for coming to Brisbane for this hearing. In your submission you say—

... it is "expected" that the schools which are expanded will be deemed "Bypass" schools (meaning they are eligible for support under the LAFHAS criteria; currently there are 19 "Bypass" schools in Queensland). There is no guarantee that this will transpire, and families would lose their LAFHAS eligibility ...

Can you talk a bit more about the bypass criteria and what that means? You were saying that it is quite complex. How exactly would this bill impact that?

Mrs Henning: Over the years, and historically in ICPA, bypass has always been an emotive issue also for communities, because nobody wants their school to be bypassed and to appear not to be the best educational delivery model for the students in their area. There is a rigorous process that goes with it and it has to fit criteria that the department has set as well in its bypass policies procedure. Along with that, there is community involvement and liaison. It is about making sure there is access to subjects and teaching staff. It all comes down to distance as well, to make sure if one school is bypassing it is not then to the detriment of another school or making sure there is still opportunity for a child to go anywhere or everywhere.

Currently in Queensland, if there is a bypass school students are eligible for LAFHAS. Therefore, they get that funding to go away to be able to have their secondary schooling. If every school becomes a bypass school, you are then saying that all of those schools are not suitable to deliver those years of curriculum and content. Why are we then wanting to put our students in those schools if they are already deemed to be bypass schools? For our members who are relying on LAFHAS to be able to fund and facilitate their education, they need to have that. It comes down to policy and legislation. Because we are going to change one thing, we have to make sure it is not going to take from something else. In this case there are no guarantees that the bypassing would be automatic and therefore LAFHAS would continue to pass on.

Mr O'ROURKE: When this bill was originally presented, it was very much around the 12-year-old having to move from home into boarding school. Could you chat about that component—about the wellbeing of those younger students?

Mrs Henning: There was a change with the starting ages and with prep coming in as well. When they go away, a lot of our students are 11½ to 12½ in year 7. They are younger but they are going to supported environments that are accommodating and facilitating age-appropriate care, protection and education. As a mother I have those concerns as well. It has all gone through transitionally. They have then still had that six years of primary school. So often they are emotionally ready to go and find something new, to be part of team sport, to be with more than one person or two people in their class, to have the opportunities of expanding their knowledge and horizons. They have hungry and thirsty minds and they do not know if they do not go. That is what they look forward to so often as well.

Mr O'ROURKE: It was interesting to hear about age-appropriate learnings in the boarding school system.

Mr DAMETTO: Wendy and Kate, thank you for taking the time to present to the committee today. We all appreciate it, I am sure. With regard to your opening statement, would you say that some of your objections to the bill speak more to staffing, investment and infrastructure neglect in the bush rather than a policy issue with the bill?

Mrs Henning: I would not say it is neglect. These schools are facilities that are accommodating what they are there to do—that is, educating so many of our kids from kindy to year 6 or prep to year 6. Staffing shortages are absolutely everywhere. It is exacerbated in the bush though, particularly with housing. A lot of these schools are small schools and they are standalone. They do not have a town and there is accommodation that goes with it, but that is for the teacher. It is not for the teacher aide. It is not for the grounds keeper. It is not for administration. That is where the complexity comes in. Then if you are wanting another staff person to come in, where are they coming from but where are they going to live? That then exacerbates the problem. There is already a detriment of having to facilitate it. If you are going to then put in another teacher aide—because realistically a kindy teacher aide is not going to be the same person who can be a teenage teacher aide—that is two roles then. That is two people who need to be found and then accommodated in these rural areas.

Mr DAMETTO: If there was the investment in school staffing, school accommodation and school infrastructure, wouldn't that solve some of those problems you are talking about?

Mrs Henning: If they could be accommodated then that would be ideal in so many ways. We often bring forward and meet with all of you about the shortfalls of not just teachers and teacher aides but also learning support, allied health and all of those things. Investment in accommodation would have an ultimate flow-on effect. This is not just about that. We are talking about five students. They are still going to be a minority in a classroom. Do you want to be the 15-year-old still playing with the five-year-old when you could be out exploring greater opportunities and benefits and finding your own self and growing into maturity? If the staff are there, the staff are not going to be a peer. There is the whole flow-on effect of that as well.

Mr DAMETTO: I do not think this bill is trying to restrict anybody from having an opportunity to do their schooling somewhere else. There are some children who would enjoy, or it would suit their families a lot better, being able to finish their high school education in their home town.

Mrs Bradshaw: The cost of building is a big outlay if you are not going to get the students. The Thargomindah Shire Council has provided their building, but in the last two years they have not had the students and it has not been in use. I think that is a big outlay if you are going to have accommodation or extend a building and then two years on it is no longer in use.

Mr KELLY: My parents actually ran a boarding school in the 1970s and 1980s in Charters Towers. In those days it was common for large groups of kids from a similar district to go to school together. I know that your organisation has been supporting families in that situation for a long time. Has there been any research done into the experience or the effectiveness of educating kids at that high school level in a larger group as opposed to a more isolated setting?

Mrs Henning: I am quite sure there is. We can only speak of our experience. I do not have that information on hand. I can take it on notice and find that out for you. What our members have been bringing through for 53 years is the importance of social interaction and immersion into society. They are physically geographically isolated so often and they are a minority. The opportunity to go away and be in a bigger cohort means they can experience the social norm. Sometimes when you live in rural and remote areas you do not have that opportunity until you go away and be part of a larger cohort.

CHAIR: Thank you, Wendy and Kate, for your presentation and for your submission. We appreciate the time you put into it and the distances you have travelled to be here with the committee. Thank you very much.

WISEMAN, Mr Scott, Chief Executive Officer, P&Cs Qld

CHAIR: Welcome. Scott, would you like to make a short opening statement before the committee asks you a few questions?

Mr Wiseman: Thank you for the opportunity to present to the committee. P&Cs Qld is the peak body supporting, advocating for and representing more than 900,000 state school parents and the wider school communities throughout Queensland. We support the achievement of quality educational outcomes for students through fostering parental and community engagement in a thriving and successful education system. Through our statewide network of 1,264 P&C associations and school councils and some 44,000-plus volunteers, we have the localised presence and voice to lead and enact change to achieve our objective of giving every child every chance in education and life. I ask leave of the committee to table some additional research that has become available to support the submission and to provide further clarity.

CHAIR: Does the committee give permission to table that? There being no objection, it is so tabled.

Mr Wiseman: I thank the committee. This document provides some research data that was compiled by us and QUT and contains some pertinent parental sentiment data and demonstrates support for our wonderful state school teachers and support staff. It also identifies some of the significant cost-of-living pressures that families currently face.

We believe that the current deficiency relating to the provision of high school education in remote areas is a legacy issue dating back to the 1950s when access to secondary education funding was limited to children with ability. Secondary education was a privilege and not a right back then. I note that it was in 1961 that the Watkin Committee recommended that the leaving age be raised to 15 years. In the Watkin review, grade 8 moved to high school. That also happened in a growth period when many high schools opened such as Cavendish Road and Wynnum High.

Until this point, children had to sit exams to be accepted and funded into high school—or junior and secondary, as it was commonly known then. This explains some of the limitations and deficiencies of secondary school infrastructure in remote and regional areas. Essentially, funding for infrastructure and staffing has not kept pace with changes dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. This goes some way to identifying why there are many primary schools in remote and rural townships but no high schools.

P&Cs Qld stands firmly in support of ensuring equitable access to quality school education for all students, irrespective of their geographic location. This principle aligns with the pivotal objective of the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill. The economic challenges faced by numerous families in remote areas are substantial. We are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. For many, boarding school might be an unattainable expense. For others, their children may not be emotionally ready to leave home to obtain an education. This amendment offers a viable solution by bringing education to the doorsteps of these families, ensuring financial limitations are not barriers to their children's educational prospects.

The data we analysed demonstrates that 31 per cent of families meet the criteria to be identified as food insecure. It raises the question of how many families can afford the option to send their children to boarding school if high school education is not available in their local community. In instances where state boarding school is provided or, more accurately, the child attends a state school and then privately-run boarding facilities, there are still significant out-of-pocket expenses incurred by many families.

The previous speaker talked about LAFHAS, and that is an important consideration with this bill. The extension of primary schools in remote areas, as outlined in the bill, stands as a beacon of hope for families who currently face the financial burden of sending their children away to boarding schools due to limited local educational options. LAFHAS, while instrumental in assisting families in supporting their children's education away from home, often presents challenges for families already grappling with financial constraints.

It is understandable that there might be some apprehensions about the impact of extending primary schools in remote areas on existing support schemes such as LAFHAS. However, it is essential to highlight that the intention behind extending primary schools is not to displace or disrupt current arrangements but to enhance educational opportunities for children living in these remote regions. In a metropolitan area we would not accept a child sitting on a bus for over an hour each way to attend school, yet for some reason we accept that this is okay for country kids.

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We understand that there are concerns around the unintended consequences of this bill, given the potential financial impacts to families who for many generations have had no option but to send their children away to boarding schools. For many they do not have a choice or the alternative is distance education in their home. A simple solution would be to make the necessary changes to add the schools listed to the bypass list of schools. This would protect the interests of those who wish to send their child to a boarding school whilst offering a localised option for those who, for a variety of reasons, may not be able to afford to do that. LAFHAS supports eligible Queensland families whose children need to live away from home to attend a state school or an accredited non-state school. This may be because the student's home is geographically isolated or the nearest school is a bypass school.

In relation to workforce, school resources, finance and infrastructure, this is a matter for the department to navigate. The department is undertaking a large body of work around the professional development and recruitment of staff within the sector. We commend them on this. There is existing infrastructure in place at these state primary schools who have not had a large influx in enrolment numbers and realistically have had a decline in enrolment numbers. We see an increased investment in improving this infrastructure to the benefit of the children at the school and also their communities. In practice, if a student is obtaining their high school education via distance education in a remote area of the state, how can it be a disadvantage for them to obtain their education in an educational setting rather than being locked away and isolated in their home?

If there is no need to enact the elements of this bill then there is no additional cost being borne to deliver the service. The act is clear. It states, 'The cost of providing instruction, administration and facilities for the education of the person at the school must be met by the State.' The department is doing a significant amount of work with its Equity and Excellence strategy. We fully support them with this and believe that they are more than capable of delivering the required changes to support the bill, but they can only do so if they are funded appropriately.

This is out of the scope of this inquiry, although the need for Queensland schools to receive full SRS funding is a crucial matter for all state school students and their families. It is widely accepted and proven that state schools are currently underfunded, and I am sure others will address this. We do submit that if state school students were funded at the appropriate levels we would not need to squabble over the cost of tables, chairs or teacher aides. It would also go some way to addressing the current workload, especially on those wonderful teaching principals out in the bush.

Our 'What Parents Want' survey shows strong support of our teachers. We asked parents where they think additional funding should be allocated. There was an overwhelming response to supporting teachers in the classroom and providing additional teacher aides.

In conclusion, we support changes to the system that give every child every chance in education and in life. That may be this bill or it may be other system improvements that ensure regional kids are no longer left behind their city counterparts. Parents have an obligation to ensure their children are attending school. Their children have a right to a quality education, irrespective of their postcode. Having children access quality education in their local community is equitable and an excellent outcome.

CHAIR: Thank you, Scott. I welcome the member for Traeger to the committee proceedings. It is good to see you, Robbie. We will go to questions.

Mr LISTER: Thank you, Mr Wiseman, for coming today. You touched on, as did the ICPA representatives, concerns about the resourcing of small schools. In my electorate there are 40 schools and half of them are small schools with a teaching principal and a couple of hardworking teacher aides. Do you have concerns that without significant additional funding for those schools this option will not be viable?

Mr Wiseman: In response, the education system is going through a lot of change at present. We saw through COVID that remote learning opportunities through technology can work very effectively. Whilst we have a current teacher shortage, I know there is a lot of work happening at a national and a state level to improve that circumstance. We see that more as a temporary issue. In the longer term it would be about allocating those resources to those particular areas. As I said, we see a lot of benefit from that, not just in education but in fostering the community out there as well.

Mr DAMETTO: I love your statement on the front of the P&Cs Qld survey 'What Parents Want'. When P&Cs Qld are talking to parents, what do they want for their children when it comes to their concerns of sending them away to boarding school at such a young age?

Mr Wiseman: We do not necessarily deal with parents who do send their children away to boarding schools. As we are all parents, we can understand the apprehension around that, particularly with those younger children who might not be as emotionally mature as others. This is about providing opportunities for those children. We all know that mental health and wellness within students and our child people is a very significant issue at the moment. In terms of the 'What Parents Want' survey, over 50 per cent of our parents indicated that they do not feel that their children are supported in their mental health by the education system. There are some big issues there. We see this as an option. If you have a child who is highly anxious or diverse then this could be an option for them to continue education without the stress and additional burdens of being away from home.

Mr DAMETTO: At 11½ I would have been petrified to go away to boarding school. I concur with that.

Mr KELLY: Can I just ask about the data in this document that you have tabled? How was the survey conducted? Was it done by a third party of professional researchers or was this just a survey that parents voluntarily opted into?

Mr Wiseman: P&Cs Qld worked with QUT to make sure that the data is reliable and statistically valid as well. We have worked in partnership with QUT over this research project. We have had nearly 700 responses to the survey, which was an opt-in opportunity, and it was all electronic. As I said, we worked with QUT to make sure it is statistically reliable data that we are referring to.

Mr KELLY: In that case, could I ask you to take on notice to table the methodology that was behind this data and get QUT to give us a proper research paper?

Mr Wiseman: Absolutely.

Mr O'ROURKE: From a P&C perspective and from listening to the Isolated Children's Parents' Association—they were talking about the importance of their children going to boarding school, having a whole lot more opportunities compared to being four or five young teenagers being in a prep to year 10 school in an isolated community—if we were to have more prep to year 10 in some of these isolated areas, do you think it would have a big impact on some of our bigger boarding schools around the state where a lot of our rural kids are going for learning? We have heard previously about how they really manage those young people, to make sure they are in the right age groups development-wise and all of that sort of thing. I am interested in your thoughts in that space.

Mr Wiseman: I think there would be some impact. I do not think it would be as significant as we expect or would note because we see this bill as providing an alternative option. I think there are a lot of families out there—and our data indicates—that are absolutely right on the line. Any additional expenditure which can be taken away or removed provides these students with a localised option. One of the things we would expect to see out of this, if this bill was to go through and the changes made, is that students would be a lot more engaged in their schooling, particularly as they get to those teenage years—and year 9 is particularly an area where disengagement starts to occur. We see this as being an option for students to remain engaged. If you are in small groups, that is still better than in isolation. We certainly think this would have legs.

Mr MICKELBERG: My question is in relation to the P-6 kids, the kids who are in the existing state primary schools. Presumably, the way we have set up the education system with that cut-off of going to high school in year 7 is around development and the child's basic development as they age. I am curious to get your thoughts with respect to the impacts on those kids who are in P-6 who might then be in school with considerably older kids. Most of the P-12 schools that exist right now typically geographically separate those two groups; while they may be co-located, there is a separation. I am keen to understand your thoughts and the thoughts of your membership around the considerations that the parents of the younger children might have.

Mr Wiseman: I think a lot of the older kids are probably going to be siblings or known in the communities. I do not think there is going to be that necessary difference between a 10-year-old and a 15-year-old because they are all going to be known; they will see each other around the community as well. I do not think that would be too much of a problem, or I would not expect it to be a problem, as I think a lot of these instances will be where the families are known to each other and then the children are known to each other in the first place as well.

CHAIR: Thank you, Scott, for your presentation and submission and answering the questions for the committee today. We appreciate it.

GUTHRIE, Ms Julie, Private capacity (via teleconference)

MARKS, Ms Edwina, Chief Executive Officer, Maranoa Regional Council (via teleconference)

CHAIR: Welcome. Edwina, I invite you to make a short opening statement before we go to questions.

Ms Marks: Good morning, Chair and committee members. It is lovely to be here. My name is Edwina Marks. I am the CEO of the Maranoa Regional Council. I am on the phone, so I do have limited audio-visual; I just mention that at the beginning. By way of background, council made a submission on 7 December to the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill. We had a number of concerns in relation to that simply because of probably having a slightly larger region than very remote councils, and certainly as the owner of student accommodation at the Roma Rural Student Hostel. Our two key elements of concern were around the financial implications from local government, if there was any expected commitment to the cost of wages for a teacher's aide as part of a remote delivery option, and the unintended impact on both school funding models and the Roma Rural Student Hostel located in the Maranoa.

From our perspective, we are a rural—sometimes referred to as remote—region, but we are seven hours from Brisbane. Essentially, we are already the subject of instability in relation to students at school. The education model is relatively complex in how it is funded and where that support actually comes from. Whilst we support that remote areas need bespoke solutions, we are concerned that a one-size-fits-all approach may be problematic in relation to that.

We find that many families in our locality already send their children to boarding schools. As a result, our smaller schools—we have six of them in our region—have quite variable enrolment. If we have further amendments to the legislation, obviously this makes that even more fractured. Currently, year 6 students have multiple viable education paths including free transport to nearby schools or boarding options. This, we think, is diverse enough and certainly supports post-primary education.

As a local government, we certainly have a lot of pressure on us these days and a focus on financial sustainability, so the support of moving into non-traditional areas in our business model is problematic for us. We still struggle to meet our overall local government bill for essential services.

Thirty years ago, the council invested in the Roma Rural Student Hostel. That was as a way of finding an interim model where students could come to Roma instead of having to go to the boarding schools in the cities. This has worked really well. Council funds this by way of a contract which it renews, and that contract will be up for renewal at the end of 2024. We find that that is quite a flexible option and certainly currently council supports this model. They are our main points in relation to the submission. I am more than happy to take any questions from committee members.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, Edwina. Are there any questions from the committee?

Mr DAMETTO: I want to thank you both not only for submitting but also for addressing the committee this morning. With regard to your local government area, has there been a problem with trying to retain young people in the town?

Ms Marks: Sorry, I just missed that last statement. Would there be any problem with—

Mr DAMETTO: Do you have issues with trying to retain young people in your local government area?

Ms Marks: As with all rural and regional areas, our best export is our students and eventually our young people as a result of school models. The answer is, yes, that is always a problem, I think.

Mr DAMETTO: Do you see a benefit in perhaps keeping young people in the community longer as a strategy, to perhaps keep them in town longer or provide an opportunity for them to return to their home town after finishing their high school education?

Ms Marks: Yes, I think the council and the local government areas—and local government in general—see the value of keeping our students in the region. We know that, from a financial sustainability perspective, not all families are able to send their kids to boarding school, but many families work in rural locations and need another model. What we would say is that our Roma Rural Student Hostel model is a model that this local government area has chosen, and we certainly think it works well. It has demonstrated capacity over 30 years.

CHAIR: Can you elaborate a little on what impacts the bill might have on local governments and the resourcing there? I know that local government obviously runs a pretty tight ship. Are there concerns in terms of that from you and the council?

Ms Marks: Yes, certainly. I have worked with both Bulloo Shire Council and McKinlay Shire Council, so I am quite familiar with the funding model. The difference is that both of those areas, because of their remoteness, have made a significant investment in educational infrastructure, and they even support those subsidies in relation to operating wages in relation to teachers' aides to further support those remote outcomes. I applaud that. That is fantastic in relation to what they have done, and that has been done out of necessity.

I think from a local government perspective, at least for Maranoa Regional Council, the challenge is that we do have a robust education sector in our region. We really are very much on from a regional perspective, so we have multiple high schools and primary schools, and we have services—the student hostel—so we have diversity here. I do not think we are in the same position as those more remote councils. Accordingly, I think we have a better structural investment from all levels of government where we are. Simply put, the real issue would be: could council pay more money in relation to education? I think we already have the form which makes the most sense, which would be infrastructure for the Roma Rural Student Hostel. When it comes to operating wages and recurrent costs in relation to running education, I think Roma really is big enough to support a state approach.

CHAIR: Thank you so much, Edwina, for your presentation and submission. It is much appreciated. Thank you for dialling in, and also to Julie as well.

Ms Guthrie: I am here in an independent capacity. Thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning. I am a retired school principal. I spent 37 years in education with many years as a principal in primary schools, secondary schools and P-10. I did put a submission in. This morning I would really like to talk about three different features. I want to emphasise the fact that every person—every parent and every educator—is on the same page. We all genuinely and sincerely would like to have the best education available to every child, regardless of where they are live, because education is the foundation for the future. I want to say that up-front. I do believe that everybody who is appearing would be of that similar mindset.

As an ex-teacher and an ex-principal, I want to emphasise that the provision of academic opportunity and the provision of having kids remain in school is desirable, but it comes at a cost. The cost is pedagogy. When you are a qualified teacher, when you have done your teacher training, when you are committed to looking at how to provide quality education, you look at three things. You look at what are you going to teach. That can come from a document or a series of information or a handout. In education we call it C2C materials. It is about what you are going to teach. More importantly, the essential part of quality teaching is about how you teach and the methods that you use to engage children, to interact with the curriculum and with the material being learned. It is essential to have somebody who is aware of pedagogical frameworks and about the learning process and the learning styles of individual children, because it is not one-size-fits-all. You can have a classroom of 20 children, and a quality teacher will be focusing on how to ensure that all of the children are engaged and the strategies being utilised to ensure that the learning is taking place, because quality teaching does not equate to quality learning. You need to be focusing on the learner. Without diminishing the role of the teacher aide, without diminishing the fact that they are essential assistance in a classroom setting, they are not qualified teachers. If you have a teacher aide sitting with a child or a group of children, they will be doing their darnedest to provide the best possible learning, but there is no actual monitoring or deep knowledge of pedagogy, and this will limit the quality of learning that the children may be experiencing.

I also want to emphasise the fact that, even if we focus on academic provision, there is a lot that goes on in a school, in a classroom, in a learning opportunity for children. I really want to push social interaction. I want to push the connectivity that can occur—the connection with other people. Their secondary years—I am a secondary trained person—are the years that are formulating the people they will grow into. They need to be bouncing ideas around with peers. They need to be stimulated with quality of conversation being undertaken. They need to be exposed to new ideas. I have sat in P-10 schools. It was mentioned before that many schools separate the children from a practical point of view. You do need to be extending those young people into the adults they need to become. I want to emphasise that, even though it is very difficult for some children to move away—or the parent and the children make a choice to move away—they then get access to greater opportunities that may not be academic but are nonetheless just as valuable.

I also want to talk about practical issues. As a principal—I was a non-teaching principal; I was in schools that were big enough that I was not required to teach—there was many a morning at 7.30 when the phone would ring hot and I would have a teacher aide or a teacher ring to say, 'I'm sorry, I'm unwell. I'm unable to attend.' The reality is that I would be quickly trying to source a replacement.

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If I am a teaching principal in a school such as Mungallala with three children and the phone rings hot at 7.30 and the teacher aide who was allocated to sit with a student in grade 9 is unable to attend, the reality is that, as principal, I would not be able to source a replacement teacher aide in a small community, so that grade 9 student would be sitting in the back of a classroom with three children in the primary years of their schooling. I believe that, even if we talk finances, that is a separate consideration. I am talking about practical aspects. I am talking about the issues that occur when you are running a school, when you are the principal in the school having to make decisions to enable students to be supervised, to be cared for, for learning to take place and for their safety to be maintained. I think there are a lot of other features that need to be considered as part of a whole package.

CHAIR: Thank you, Julie. We are going to have to keep moving on. We have gone over time. Thank you to you and Edwina for your submissions. We very much appreciate you joining us today.

WATT, Ms Amanda, Executive Director, Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network

Ms Watt: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network is the peak body representing the families of the more than 147,000 students enrolled in Queensland's 234 independent schools. I note that there are 32 independent boarding schools in Queensland. While independent schools are often referred to as private schools, Queensland private schools are as diverse as the communities they serve, with schools catering for families from a variety of social and economic backgrounds and income levels. More families than ever before are choosing to send their children to independent schools. Enrolments in the Queensland independent sector have increased 75 per cent, from 83,000 students in 2003 to 147,000 in 2023. This ongoing growth signifies the importance parents place on choice when it comes to where to send their children to school.

While we appreciate the good intention behind this bill, we support the concerns raised by ICPA Queensland in their submission about some of the unintended consequences should this bill be passed. We would be opposed to any amendment that would have the flow-on effect of disqualifying families from accessing the Queensland government's Living Away From Home Allowance Scheme, which provides important financial assistance to boarding school families. We also know that families value their right to make informed choices when it comes to their child's education and that families greatly value the many additional opportunities that boarding schools provide in terms of extracurricular activities and social and emotional development. If this amendment is successful and the financial assistance available to families through LAFHAS ceased, boarding would no longer be an affordable option for some families.

We also note that in his additional information document to the committee the member for Traeger clarified that his bill is not intended to undermine families accessing boarding school or their access to the LAFHAS subsidy and that he expected these P-10 schools would be deemed bypass schools; however, there is a distinct lack of certainty around this crucial point.

I made some notes while listening to the previous speakers. I wanted to make the point that independent schools are really well resourced and experienced at supporting children of all ages with the transition to high school. Picking up on the thread of some of the social and emotional concerns that were raised before, independent schools are really experienced at keeping parents updated and informed on their child's progress when they come from a boarding background.

The final point I want to make is that, whilst the staffing of the 104 Queensland government schools listed in the amendment bill is not something in our field of advocacy, like others we would question some of the practicalities and flexibilities of recruiting the school staff needed to make the suggested model work, given the significant workforce shortages impacting all education sectors in Australia including ours.

Mr DAMETTO: Amanda, my question is with regard to the LAFHAS payment and the scheme. Are you mainly taking the potential erosion of that scheme into consideration with your objections to the bill and maybe not considering the social wellbeing of the children that are caught up in the process of having to send children away to boarding school earlier?

Ms Watt: I am very sympathetic to the case studies raised by the member for Traeger in his information document. Like the previous speaker, there is no question that we are all supportive of every child in Queensland having access to a quality education. That is without doubt for all of us. I advocate for families that choose an independent education for their child, and that is supporting families. I know that if LAFHAS was unintentionally off the table it would remove that as a choice for families, and it is a choice that they really want.

Mr DAMETTO: If there was a guarantee from government or the department that if this bill was to pass there would be no detriment to the LAFHAS scheme, would you perhaps change your position on the bill?

Ms Watt: I would like to see all of the detail around that and the guarantees that would not be impacted. As ICPA Queensland said, a very detailed knock-on effect can sometimes happen. As long as we could see that that was not being impacted and that the families that can access LAFHAS today can access it after that is changed, I would be happy to review that and provide an updated submission.

Mr O'ROURKE: In your submission you raised concerns about the use of teacher aides as part of this bill. Can you expand a bit more on your thoughts there?

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Ms Watt: I do not think that was in my submission. I did not touch on teacher aides. I was talking about the recruitment of staff to make this model happen. I am happy to talk about that. Everyone knows that workforce shortages are real for every industry. Education in particular is struggling across all sectors. It is a commonsense observation, I think, that, while this amendment bill has merits—as I said, we are all sympathetic—there are some practicalities as an observer and not as an advocate, because state resourcing does not come into my field of advocacy. It would be tricky to think you could recruit additional staff when they are already struggling to get the staff they need.

Mr KELLY: Are there policies or processes in place in boarding schools amongst our members to support students who are coming from these isolated communities?

Ms Watt: Definitely. There are established processes and really established and experienced staff who run the boarding section of the school. It is a dedicated boarding school cohort of staff that look after them. Preparation and transition activities start the year before. I know of one school in Toowoomba, for example, that flies their boarding staff up to all of the regional and remote communities. They meet the families and spend time with them. They stay overnight et cetera. They take that really seriously. That occurs at many schools in the sector.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission and presentation today and for answering questions from the committee. It is much appreciated.

RICHARDSON, Ms Cresta, President, Queensland Teachers' Union

WOOD, Dr Craig, Research Officer, Queensland Teachers' Union (via teleconference)

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

Ms Richardson: The Teachers' Union is pleased to appear at today's Education, Employment, Training and Skills Committee public hearing regarding the inquiry into the Education (General Provisions) (Extension of Primary Schools in Remote Areas) Amendment Bill 2023. I acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Yagara and Turrbal peoples and that Dr Wood is joining us from the traditional lands of the Gubbi Gubbi people. We pay our respects to all First Nations people, and we recognise Queensland teachers and students who are First Nations people as well.

This year the QTU celebrates our 135th anniversary; that is, 135 years of representing the professional, industrial and legal interests of Queensland state school teachers and school leaders as well as educators delivering vocational education and training in TAFE. In 2024 we represent more than 48,000 members. Our members work and live in every community throughout the state. Prior to my election to the role of president I taught in Emerald for a long time, and I have strong connections to Mount Isa, Emerald, Townsville and the Sunshine Coast. While I appear here in Brisbane and live and work in the city, I have also worked and raised my family in rural and remote Queensland. Like other speakers at this inquiry and their submissions made to the committee, I and the QTU members have a deep understanding of the matter that is at the core of this bill. We understand challenges that are experienced by families living in rural and remote Queensland.

We should recognise the innovation that Queensland teachers have delivered. We have a proud history in this space of air and distance education. In fact, my mother was a distance ed. student. There are emerging possibilities to address the impact of geographic disadvantage through the use of technology. For example, the QTU and the Department of Education are currently engaged in consultation regarding the Queensland virtual academy. At the core of this work is the heart of the teacher—always. That is why the QTU has been a strong advocate for the new National School Reform Agreement that ensures all state schools in Queensland receive a minimum of 100 per cent of the SRS. Underfunding schools means underfunding students' learning conditions. It is always teachers who make up the shortfall from their own pockets and from the additional unpaid hours of work that our members deliver.

Factors of educational disadvantage include location. Educational disadvantage that is attributable to location is recognised by the Australian government's review of funding for schooling that is often referred to as the Gonski review. This review notes that the location of schools in Australia can be classified within one of four groups: metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote. The Australian Educational Act 2013 defines kinds of schools based on location, which include outer regional, remote and very remote schools. The Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 also provides a definition for a remote area. In Queensland, the meaning of a remote area includes—

A person lives in a 'remote area' if—

- (a) the person's principal place of residence—
 - (i) is at least 16km from the nearest applicable school;

One of the reasons the QTU does not recommend that this bill is supported is that it proposes new definitions for remoteness without recognition of how the 28 definitions in the bill would relate to the definitions that are already in use in Queensland and Australian legislation and regulation. I will now pass over to Craig.

Dr Wood: Thank you, committee, for the opportunity to join via teleconference this morning. I am joining you from Gubbi Gubbi country and pay my respects to the Gubbi Gubbi elders past and present. Cresta just discussed proposed section 20A of the bill and outlined QTU's concerns regarding definitions for remoteness. In the Education (General Provisions) Act, access to school transport services also factors into that definition of remote areas. I want to talk to QTU's concerns regarding proposed new sections 20B, 20C and 20D. Like Cresta, I also draw attention to the QTU recommendations that the government ensures all state schools in Queensland receive a minimum of 100 per cent of the SRS, and QTU joins calls for the Commonwealth government to remove the 20 per cent funding cap on SRS payments for public schools.

On proposed section 20B, the QTU notes the bill provides the minister with powers to extend education provided at remote primary schools. The QTU notes that the Education (General Provisions) Act provides the minister with the powers to establish, amalgamate or close state schools, but there are no provisions that provide the minister with the powers to repurpose a primary school

into a P-10 combined school. The QTU further notes that establishing, amalgamating or closing a state school requires consultation with the school community and the wider region, and that consultation with the wider region is important because where there is a new school, amalgamated school or closed school there is an impact on neighbouring school enrolments. When there is a repurposing of a school, that, too, will have an obvious impact on neighbouring school enrolments. The QTU does not support proposed section 20B without a consultative provision being included.

Turning to proposed new sections 20C and 20D, the QTU does not support the powers afforded to a local government which give powers to local government and that lead to a guaranteed result. Proposed section 20C is that the 'minister must extend education provided at remote primary schools in particular circumstances'. Then proposed section 20D is 'chief executive and local government to establish remote secondary learning facility'. We concur with the view put by previous speakers that local government's core business is not education. Education is always far more complex than simple rote delivery of scripted versions of the Australian Curriculum.

Further to the concerns pertaining to proposed section 20B and repurposing a school as a P-10 combined school, the QTU draws the committee's attention to the fact that there are no other provisions in the EGPA or, indeed, the Education (General Provisions) Regulation that would afford powers to local government. There is only one possible exception and that is at section 251A, where the local government could be a human services entity and the chief executive may disclose information about a young person in the compulsory participation phase to that human services entity or local government.

Ms Richardson: Just to wrap up the opening remarks, the QTU recommendations appear in the QTU's submission to this inquiry made in November 2023. In closing, the QTU joins with previous speakers and other stakeholders. We understand the challenges experienced by families in remote locations. Some of these families are our members and our families. The QTU recognises the matter that this bill is attempting to resolve and we welcome the opportunity to address the committee this morning. We also welcome the opportunity to continue to engage with all members of the Queensland parliament to consider teaching and learning for students and their school communities in rural and regional parts of this state.

CHAIR: Thank you. I will open up to questions.

Mr LISTER: Thanks very much for your appearance today. I noted what you were saying about the Schooling Resource Standard and the complexities of delivering education and so forth. In my electorate a couple of schools have closed, and you cannot divide something by zero. Obviously the outcome for the students there is that preppies are on a bus for an hour each day. Could this bill not provide a way to provide that extra bit of clientele for a school to keep it open so that it is not closed by the government? Are there not benefits there that have not been considered?

Ms Richardson: I would expect that if that were to happen it would happen through consultation. I have heard through Central Queensland of situations like that where consultation has assisted with schools remaining open. If there are consultative provisions in place, I think that is really important. Obviously, having access to education for all of our students and their families in Queensland is important.

Mr DAMETTO: Thank you very much for presenting today to the committee. We appreciate your feedback on the bill. My question is with regard to the social and health wellbeing of the students who are currently going away to boarding school at quite a young age. We heard earlier that some of the children who are going away to boarding school are as young as 11½. Talking to your members, has there been any feedback about positive social benefits or negative social benefits of those children being sent away at such a young age?

Ms Richardson: There has not been feedback so much; it is not something that we receive feedback on a lot. We know that some of our members do make choices to send their students or their own children to boarding schools for a variety of reasons. We also know that in a P-10 context sometimes having access to all of the subjects can be a little bit difficult, so it is about the subject choice. We know that our schools work really hard. As we said in our intro, talking through the Queensland virtual academy and some digital technology abilities to extend the education of students who stay in their home community is also important. The social emotional stuff is really important, though, and something we are hearing more about is the wellbeing and care of all students in our communities and concerns around that.

Mr DAMETTO: I have questions with regard to investment in infrastructure and also staffing of some of our small schools in regional and remote areas. If this bill were to pass, do you see a benefit to seeing more investment from the state government in those regional or remote schools and those towns?

Ms Richardson: Here is where we link to what other stakeholders say. Our previous independent stakeholder talked about the teacher shortage in Queensland. That is quite significant in Queensland. Centres in rural and remote Queensland have seen a positive impact, but we know at the moment in some of our regional areas along the coast where housing is not as accessible for our members that there are problems with staffing our schools. We know there is a staffing shortage in Queensland. We know that is national and international. We really need to increase the pipeline of teachers coming through so that all of our students in Queensland get good access to education. Part of that is an investment to 100 per cent of the SRS which we do not have in Queensland at the moment.

Mr O'ROURKE: In your submission you talk about the physical needs of a year 10 student in comparison to prep to year 6. Could you expand on that for us, please?

Ms Richardson: Having had two children recently finish school, one as recently as last year, I can say that the brains of 15-year-old children are quite interesting places—we all have them, don't we? If you only have a couple of kids in a school who may be of that age, their social network is reduced, and this could create or have further wellbeing developments for students that would not be ideal. It is a very critical time for students, and often their parents do not have the impact that they wish they had because that social connection that children have to each other at that time is really their point of belonging. Does that clarify what you are asking?

Mr O'ROURKE: Yes. Thank you very much.

Mr MICKELBERG: I understand there is a similar model already applied at Thargomindah and Julia Creek. Could you talk to the success or otherwise and the reasons for it in those two locations?

Ms Richardson: I might pass to my colleague Craig Wood, who may be able to provide some further information about that. We hear good things particularly around Julia Creek and Thargomindah.

Dr Wood: I would ask the committee if we could take that on notice and provide a written response.

CHAIR: I am happy to do that. We look forward to Craig making a submission on that matter in future. Could we have it back to us by Friday, 15 March?

Dr Wood: That is achievable at our end. We would like to talk to our members in those particular sites and see what their feedback is.

CHAIR: Sure.

Mr DAMETTO: Do you think there could be better strategies in place through the department to encourage young teachers to work in rural and regional areas?

Ms Richardson: Yes. We are really happy to work with the department, the government and stakeholders about what that might look like and how we increase the pipeline of getting students into university. We know that the rate of school leavers going into university is sitting at about 35 per cent. That is a pretty big decline. We know that the average age of people coming into the profession is about 36 or 37. They are often career-change people, so it is about what is available, accessible and flexible to allow people to continue earning while they go through their degrees and come into the profession.

It is not a simplistic response to say that we can solve the teacher shortage in 12 months, and we are actively involved, at both state and federal level, in what that might look like and how we can assist in delivering that. Ultimately, we need to look at how that is going to happen. I grew up in Mount Isa. I got a pretty deadly education. I am pretty proud of the fact that I am where I am because I am from there. I think every kid deserves that in Queensland, and so do their families and so do our members.

CHAIR: There being no other questions, I thank you very much for your submission. We appreciate that. The time for our hearing has now expired. I thank all of the participants for the information they have provided to committee today. Thanks very much to our Hansard reporters, parliamentary broadcast staff and committee staff for their assistance. A transcript of these proceedings will be available in due course. For reference, we have placed two questions on notice: from Scott Wiseman from P&Cs Qld on the methodology for the research of the document that was tabled today; and Dr Craig Wood from QUT in terms of the assessment of the Thargomindah and Julia Creek models. I note that in closing. I thank all of the participants. I declare the hearing closed.

The committee adjourned at 11.14 am.