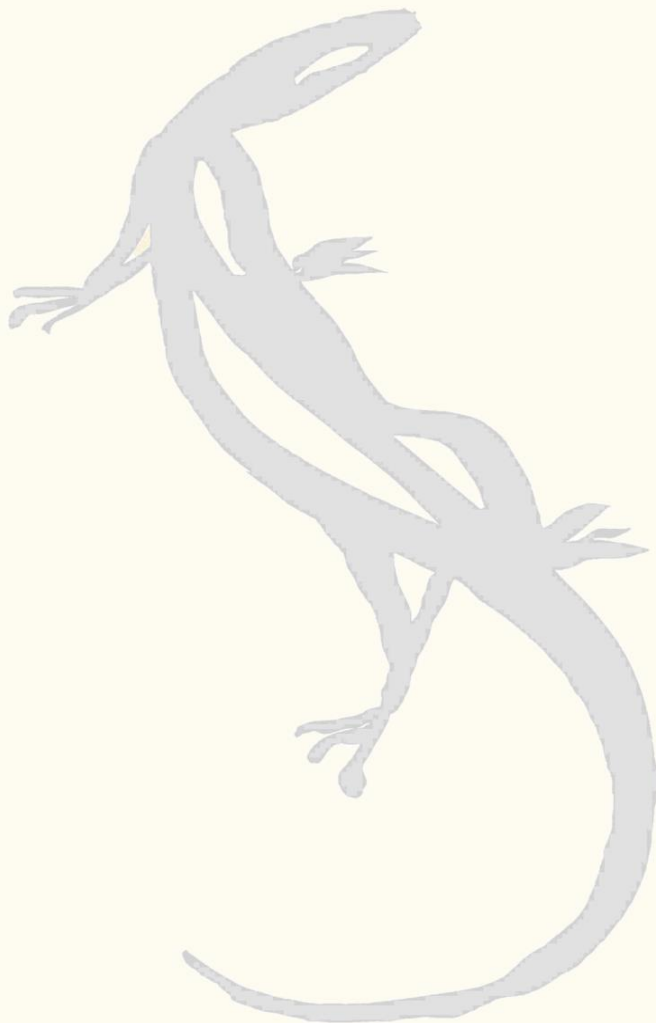


Barbara Preston Research

Submission to the Human Rights Commission Inquiry into Rural & Remote Education

The impact of boarding school policies & practices on the provision & quality of schooling in rural & remote Australia

1999



SUBMISSION TO THE RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION INQUIRY

By Barbara Preston

“The impact of boarding school policies and practices on the provision and quality of schooling in rural and remote Australia”

1. Introduction

This submission is concerned with the impact of boarding school policies and practices on the provision and quality of schooling in rural and remote Australia.

In much of rural and remote Australia there are powerful cultural traditions, going back over several generations, of sending children away to major metropolitan or regional centres to nongovernment boarding schools for secondary education. This is an understandable choice for many families.

However, the leaving of rural and remote areas for secondary education by many students seriously affects the quality and provision of secondary education in those regions, as the numbers and the political pressure is not there for school authorities to establish or adequately support schools, and what schooling there is, is residualised by 'middle class flight'. Thus a vicious circle is created and exacerbated. There is also an economic loss to the local communities as teacher salaries and other school costs are not locally spent, and as families spend money that would be otherwise spent locally on boarding and tuition fees and other expenses in the metropolitan and regional cities. There is a social and cultural loss as the number of teachers and other school workers is less than it would otherwise be.

I have estimated that the cost in dollar terms to rural and remote Australia of children boarding at metropolitan and regional city boarding schools is in the order of more than \$250 million which would remain in rural Australia if the students attended local schools or boarded at hostels or boarding schools in country towns (see section 4).

Major effort is needed by school authorities and the Commonwealth, working cooperatively and not cost-shifting, to turn this vicious circle into a virtuous circle of high quality secondary schooling 'keeping the kids in the country'. Creative and co-operative effort is also essential from many of those who live in rural and remote areas to effectively support education in their local areas. Those who send their children away for schooling should be aware of the great loss this is to their local community. If their children board at a hostel or boarding school in a country town - rather than a metropolitan or regional city -, then resources are at least retained in the country.

2. Background

The original idea for this submission arose out of my personal experience, growing up in central western NSW where there is a strong tradition of the property owners sending their children to boarding school in Sydney or major regional centres such as Bathurst or Armidale for their secondary education. My mother and her siblings had gone to Bathurst and Sydney in the 1920s to 1940s. My siblings and I had gone to the same schools in Sydney from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Almost all the children we went to primary school with whose parents owned farming properties went away to an independent boarding school - usually the school a parent or aunt or uncle had attended. There was little industry other than farming, and many properties did not have farm workers with families on them. So, those who went away to school were a high proportion of

those growing up in the district, a majority of the middle class, and a very high proportion of those with a hope and expectation of at least completing secondary education. Thus secondary education in the area was weak, no post-primary schools were readily accessible for us and many others, and the closest was a central school which did not go through to matriculation. Thus, there was little real choice - those committed to quality schooling and with the money to pay sent their children away. Others struggled with secondary correspondence lessons or other less than satisfactory options, and the students usually left school early.

This contrasted with where my partner grew up in the eastern Riverina. That area had a different cultural tradition going back generations, though the demographics (population density and income) have been fairly similar, at least since the end of the Second World War. In general, the only children to leave the district for boarding schools had professional parents new to the district. The secondary schools are strong, with high retention rates through to year 12 (and the leaving certificate in earlier times), and high rates of transition to university.

It would be a fascinating study to compare the educational outcomes of the two areas, controlled for socioeconomic status. My guess is that the overall educational outcomes would be much poorer where I grew up, and especially bad for the lower income families where parents themselves had low levels of education.

In thinking through the issues I have considered the policies of the Commonwealth and school authorities, and their unintended consequences; and issues of fiscal federalism and cost-shifting. I have returned to the Schools Commission's excellent 1987 report, *Schooling in Rural Australia*, and I have analysed some enrolment statistics and other relevant data. I hope that my submission provides a useful perspective and some relevant information.

The main issues that I raise are sensitive. Like so much of schools policy and debate for more than a century, the competitive struggle between private and public schooling, and over the positional goods that schools provide to their clientele, are central but often covert. Of crucial importance are the powerful, but unintended, consequences of government policies and the aggregation of the decisions of many individual families.

This submission focuses on secondary schooling. Some is relevant to primary schooling, and there are implications for tertiary education that are not taken up here.

3. Educational opportunities and expectations - social groups in rural and remote Australia

Throughout much of rural and remote Australia there are several discernible cultural groups relevant to educational policy. The categories I have set out are defined for the purposes of this submission. The groups overlap to some extent, and individuals and families may be differently categorised at different times:

(1) Pastoralists and large-scale farmers, tertiary educated managers and other professional or managerial people working on or with established primary industry enterprises.

These families are often very committed to sending their children to independent boarding schools, even if there is an accessible local school (as one parent has been quoted: 'There are good schools in the country but we wanted our kids to have an element of city life during their formative years', Vining 1998), and even if incomes may not always be high. The connections with independent boarding schools often go back generations - over a century -, and are a strong element in social networks. There is often (but not always) social opprobrium if parents chose local government

schools (or regional government schools with children staying in hostels or other living away from home arrangements) - it is something they are expected to justify to avoid being considered uncaring of their children or of dubious social status.

This group, especially that sector of it living in more remote areas, is very effectively represented in education policy forums by the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA). The ICPA was formed following a public meeting in Bourke, NSW, in 1971 'as a result of Australia experiencing a rural recession of a magnitude not experienced for many years. . . This economic downturn made it difficult and in some cases, impossible, for parents to meet the rising costs associated with children attending boarding facilities, the preferred option for most isolated families for secondary schooling' (ICPA 1999a). The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) program (see below) arose directly out of representations by the ICPA (ICPA 1999b). While the ICPA has a broad concern with ensuring that 'all geographically isolated children have the same access to education and equal educational opportunities from pre-school to tertiary which can be readily obtained by their non-isolated peers' (ICPA 1999a), the AIC boarding allowances program remains their central concern (see ICPA 1999b). The ICPA is a recognised peak body which, with the two national parent organisations representing parents of all students in government and nongovernment schools respectively, receives a Commonwealth grant-in-aid (in the order of \$10,000 a year for the ICPA, more for the other organisations) to 'enable it to continue to provide advice to the Government on issues concerning the education of isolated children' (Senator Chris Ellison, then Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training, media release, 29 July 1998). According to its Web site, the ICPA 'has 3000 plus member families and 133 branches across Australia' (ICPA 1999a).

(The AIC has several components, but by far its largest are boarding allowances. Boarding allowances are paid to more than 12,000 school students who do not have physical access to an appropriate government school. For most this is defined by distance from the school and/or school bus - lack of 'reasonable daily access to a government school offering education at their level'. In 1998 about 80% of recipients not in 'special circumstances', 7,066 individuals, lived at least 61 kilometres from the closest government school. The allowances are unmeans-tested at \$3,500, with an additional, means-tested amount to \$4,377 a year. I have estimated the total allocation at about \$45 million a year. See attached statistics.)

(2) Station workers and other employees of European descent/identification working on or with primary enterprises, or in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations in small-scale local support industries (retail, transport).

The parents in these families generally have not completed secondary schooling, and are often not confident in what they should expect (and demand) of school authorities for their own children's education. Some may not aspire for their children to complete secondary schooling (in the hope that secondary school completion would not be necessary for further technical education, training or employment), and the parents and children may be alienated from school. The cultural and social benefits (as distinct from educational benefits) of schooling outside their local area are often considered of little value. Educational attainment may not be a high priority for the family - for example, the loss to the family of a twelve year old moving away to attend schooling may outweigh the perceived educational benefit. The precarious financial situation of many of these families generally means that secondary schooling away from home is difficult to afford, even at a government school in a fairly close large town with their child boarding at a hostel.

It is the low retention rates of this group (along with Indigenous students) which is so clearly reflected in the low retention rates of rural, compared with urban, Australia.

Historically these families have had little political clout or lobbying support. They have benefited from some of the lobbying and active local work of the ICPA to improve schooling in rural and remote areas, and some have benefited from some AIC allowances. However, the relatively small proportion of AIC recipients not attending boarding schools (that is, attending hostels or other arrangements) indicates that this group has had little benefit from the priority policies of the ICPA. They would not be included in the ICPA's comment on its founding that 'children attending boarding facilities [is] the preferred option for most isolated families for secondary schooling' (see previous section). For this group the loss of other children from their districts to attend secondary schooling elsewhere has often had a very detrimental effect on the educational opportunities available to them - far outweighing the impact of particular support programs they have benefited from.

This group's educational disadvantages are great, but little effective attention has been given to their particular needs. The Commonwealth's Country Areas program is broadly relevant to their needs, but at less than \$120 per student at targeted schools it is little support compared with, say, boarding allowances at \$3,500 unmeans-tested. Much more effective support is needed for rural and remote schools, especially small schools threatened with closure or experiencing 'middle class flight'. Most importantly, the educational disadvantages suffered by this group because others chose to attend boarding schools must be recognised and compensated for.

(3) Middle class white collar and skilled employees, owner-managers and professionals in larger country towns

This group generally has aspirations for their children to successfully complete secondary schooling (or equivalent), but they do not have the social and cultural connection with independent schools of the first group. In general local government or Catholic secondary schools are their choice. However, in those districts where there is a strong tradition of leaving for secondary boarding schools they may assess the local schools as poor quality, as residualised, and they might themselves join the middle class flight, thus exacerbating the vicious circle.

In some areas that have had economic development related to new or restructured industries (intensive primary industry, tourism or consolidation of services for a wider area) the increase in middle class population occurred when the local schools were already residualised by a long-standing boarding school tradition. Many new residents felt they had little choice but to also send their children away. Thus, as the population increased, the local secondary school enrolment numbers and social mix did not reflect this. Yet if this group had not felt the initial need to send their children away (because of the residualised state of the local schools and the accepted middle class practice of sending children away), then local schools would have become strong in numbers and quality.

If the quality (real and perceived) of the local schools could be turned around, many of the families who currently send their children away would be only too happy to have their children attend them. As this group does not have the strong social and cultural connection with independent schools compared with the first group, they are a key target for 'keeping the kids in the country' (see recommendations).

(4) Employees of European descent/identification of large-scale mining or other intensive enterprises

The employers (often under the watchful eye of effective unions) generally ensure reasonable quality schooling is available for their employees' children, and school authorities make it happen. It is frequently noted that a mining town in the Northern Territory with a predominantly white

population will have schooling provided that is not similarly available to an Indigenous community with similar numbers of school age young people (see below).

(5) Indigenous people in rural and remote communities, country towns, pastoral or other enterprises

There are a variety of circumstances and educational needs of Indigenous people in rural and remote Australia. In this submission the concern is with the consequences and opportunities associated with boarding away from home for secondary schooling.

Historically boarding has played a significant part in secondary (rather than extended primary) education for Indigenous people living outside the predominantly white towns. However it is deeply problematic. For many there are associations with the stolen generations and a strong commitment not to break up families by sending children away to school. The financial costs are great, especially since the means-testing of ABSTUDY, as Christine Nicholls (1999) points out in reference to 'families most likely to be actively pursuing high school education for their children - the educated Indigenous elite living on Aboriginal settlements, currently in paid employment':

Because Indigenous Law demands the redistribution of income, and because poverty prevails in remote Aboriginal settlements, finding the extremely steep cash payments to send their children away to boarding school is frequently prohibitive. (p. 152)

In addition, she notes that:

Parents also often object to the fact that their children are required to participate in the Christian religion if they attend these church-run schools [especially the private residential schools catering for Indigenous students]. Given the history of separation and social dislocation of Indigenous children vis-a-vis their families, this issue can be emotionally charged. Sending their children away from home to attend an overtly culturally coercive boarding school (the closest of which could be up to 1,000 kilometres away) is a difficult decision for many parents given recent history. (p. 152)

Other options for secondary age young people in Aboriginal settlements include the equivalent of extended primary schooling, or correspondence lessons. In the Northern Territory 'Community Education Centres' provide what is effectively extended primary education for secondary age young people in the larger settlements. Correspondence is, of course, very difficult where the supervising parents have had very limited schooling. School authorities, such as the Northern Territory Education Department, can provide some support, but seldom by teachers with appropriate specialist skills in relevant subjects (Nicholls 1999, p. 154).

Outside the Aboriginal settlements, many Indigenous people are in circumstances in many ways similar to those of the European-descent people in the second group above, though their educational disadvantages would usually be greater.

The inter-generational cycle of poor, inaccessible or non-existent secondary schooling resulting in low educational attainment and low effective demand for schooling continues. Early school leaving and minimal transition to tertiary education is part of the pattern that must be broken. I have estimated that the low level of Indigenous participation in secondary schooling compared with the general population saves school authorities something in the order of at least \$130 million a year just in the number of standard secondary school places they are not having to fund (at about \$7,000 each). This money could be well targeted at providing quality secondary education accessible to Indigenous people. Christine Nicholls has argued that:

A long-term plan and a series of strategies for the introduction of high school education for all Indigenous rural youth in the NT needs to be put in place as a matter of urgency, with high levels of input from Aboriginal parents and family members. (1999, p. 156)

She argues that it may not be easy, but it is clearly possible - she refers to the implementation of the compulsory school attendance requirement of the South Australian Education Act in 1875, when 'literally hundreds of large and small schools had to be built, including schools in some very small towns throughout rural South Australia'.

School authorities must do for Indigenous students what was willingly done for white children more than a hundred years ago. They should not shift responsibility and costs to the Commonwealth's programs for isolated children - because these do not adequately serve Indigenous people (or many non-Indigenous people).

The provision of quality local schooling for Indigenous young people, and for all in mixed communities, would play a major role in breaking the vicious circle of low secondary participation and middle class flight leading to poor quality or nonexistent schools.

4. Money matters – the cost to rural Australia

Students leaving the country for boarding in metropolitan and major regional centres are a very significant financial drain on rural and remote communities.

For every child who leaves for secondary schooling away from their (actual or potential) closest secondary school around \$4,500 does not come into the local community in the costs of educating that child expended on local teachers' salaries (after tax), other school workers' wages and salaries, local school capital works, maintenance, and so on.

In addition, if the child is not eligible for an AIC boarding allowance and attends an established independent boarding school, something in the order of \$20,000 a year will be taken out of the local area and spent on boarding and tuition fees, plus additional costs (uniforms, other clothing, school excursions and extra-curricular activities, family expenditure on accommodation and other expenses when visiting, dropping off and collecting their children, and so on). Schools with total fees of at least \$20,000 a year enrolled more than 3,700 students in 1999. Schools with total fees of \$15,000 to \$19,000 a year enrolled around 7,600 students (ICPA 1999c).

Of course a crucial matter is the nature of the opportunity cost of expenditure on boarding and tuition fees (and other expenditure related to children's boarding education). For many families the funds would be kept as part of the family farming (or other) business, and thus spent on additional employee or contract wages (with the funds mostly staying locally), machinery or other capital investments (with some of the funds thus going out of the immediate local area), and/or used to reduce debt, thus lessening interest payments that leave the district. Funds may also be spent on holidays and other consumer expenditure away from the local area. Or they could be spent on local extra-curricular educational and cultural activities. I have assumed that most, but not all, of funds saved from fees and expenses associated with city boarding schools if children attended local schools would effectively remain in the local area. Thus, the net loss (including money which would have been spent by the school authority if the child was educated locally) to the local area per secondary student attending a major independent boarding school would be around \$20,000. If 25 children in a local area go away to major independent boarding schools, then around half a million dollars may be lost to that community each year.

Where the child is isolated (as defined by AIC allowance eligibility), the calculation is more complicated. It is possible that if a sufficient number of local children did not go away to boarding schools (or hostels), then a local school may be established and the funds that come with any local

school will come into the community. AIC allowances reduce the family expenditure on boarding fees (and thus their total expenditure out of the local area) by between \$3,500 (unmeans-tested) and \$4,377 (means-tested). Almost all rural hostel residents (a total of fewer than 1,900) are eligible for AIC allowances. A little under half of all boarding school students would be eligible for AIC allowances. In total, over 12,000 students receive AIC boarding allowances.

Expenditure (by families and by the Commonwealth through the AIC) on boarding at rural hostels and boarding schools in country towns support the economies, educational facilities, and cultural life in those country towns – thus maintaining resources in rural Australia. In addition to the fewer than 1,900 students in rural hostels, around 5,000 students board at boarding schools in country towns (though some of these towns are large – verging on regional city status).

If it is assumed that almost all the students boarding in country towns are eligible for AIC allowances, then a little under half the allowances are spent in metropolitan or regional cities. In addition, around 10,000 country students who are not eligible for AIC boarding allowances attend boarding schools.

From these figures the total dollar amount lost to rural Australia from students boarding at schools in metropolitan and regional cities can be estimated in the following way:

First, all funds spent on boarding in country towns (involving around 7,000 students) is not included in this calculation because the funds remain in rural areas.

Second, approximately 5,000 students boarding away from the country receive the AIC, thus reducing the effective boarding fee payment by between \$3,500 and \$4,377. It is assumed that, for this group, average total boarding and tuition fees and other expenses total \$15,000, minus an average of \$4,000 AIC, leaving \$11,000, of which 80% would remain in the local area if it was not spent on these school-related costs. Thus \$8,800 per student per year is lost to the local economy, to which must be added the \$4,500 that would come into the area if the child attended a local school. Thus the net loss to the local community is around \$13,300 per student, per year, a total of \$66.5 million for the 5,000 students boarding away from the country who receive the AIC.

Third, approximately 10,000 country students who are not eligible for AIC attend boarding schools (this assumes more than 4,000 boarders are from cities or overseas). Average fees and other expenses for this group are assumed to be \$18,000, of which 80% would remain in the local area if it was not spent on these school-related costs. Thus \$14,400 per student is lost to the local economy, to which must be added the \$4,500 that would come into the area if the child attended a local school. Thus the net loss to the local community is \$18,900 per student, per year, a total of \$189 million for the 10,000 students boarding away from the country who do not receive the AIC.

The total financial loss to rural Australia of students attending city boarding schools is thus calculated at more than \$250 million a year. The educational, cultural and social loss is great.

This loss is not spread evenly. As mentioned above, some areas, but not others, have long-standing traditions of boarding school attendance. In addition, provision of accessible local small rural schools and provision of rural hostels and relatively low fee boarding schools differs around the country. Nationally more than 60 per cent of boarding students are in high fee (boarding fees of more than \$7,000 a year) institutions. There is relatively little provision of low fee institutions in Victoria, South Australia or New South Wales. In Western Australia there is a network of eight government rural hostels, with total enrolments of more than 700 students, plus almost 400 students in nongovernment hostels, and around 800 students in low fee, country boarding schools (mostly government agricultural colleges). Queensland and Tasmania both have more than 200 students in rural hostels, and there are about 120 in South Australian rural hostels. In Queensland

there are also a large number of students boarding in lower fee boarding schools in large country towns. In New South Wales and the Northern Territory there are fewer than 100 students in rural hostels, and there are none in Victoria or the ACT.

The number of students boarding at schools and hostels in each State and Territory is set out in the Statistical Annex to this submission.

5. Money matters – federal fiscal relations

There is an unfortunate financial incentive for State and Territory governments to maintain a status quo where they wash their hands of provision of quality secondary schooling in many rural and remote areas, and leave the financial burden for secondary schooling on individual families and the Commonwealth (through the AIC and grants to nongovernment schools) as some families chose nongovernment boarding schools rather than government schooling in the country, and the children in other families are pushed to early school leaving.

Using the above assumptions, State and Territory school authorities (and, to some extent, Catholic and other nongovernment authorities which have responsibilities for country secondary schools) save around \$100 million a year by children attending independent boarding schools in metropolitan and regional cities, rather than country government (or nongovernment) schools (average annual expenditure per secondary student is assumed to be \$7,000). Rather than putting this money back in consolidated revenue, it should be spent directly on improving the quality and provision of schooling in rural and remote areas. The strong network of government hostels and boarding schools in country Western Australia shows what might be possible. But more needs to be done.

6. Recommendations for breaking the vicious circle

(1) Effective support for rural and remote schools, especially those threatened with closure or experiencing 'middle class flight'

Many other submissions to this inquiry will be recommending ways of supporting rural and remote schools. Here I want to emphasize the importance of improving the quality of schooling so that the local school is a reasonable choice, rather than assisting those who want to choose schooling elsewhere to leave the district. This strategy includes supporting secondary schools in larger rural centres which have hostels associated with them or otherwise do (or could) cater for students who genuinely have no ready access to local secondary schooling. Similarly, boarding schools in country towns could be supported, rather than those in metropolitan and regional cities.

These issues were addressed in the Commonwealth Schools Commission's excellent 1987 report, *Schooling in Rural Australia*. I strongly recommend that this inquiry, and the Commonwealth, school authorities, and other stakeholders consider the issues and conclusions of the report. It covered many matters of relevance to this inquiry. While some things have changed over the past decade, much has remained the same. Some of the important recommendations (and implicit suggestions) of the report have never been acted on.

I recommend that the report be revisited in the light of changes that have occurred, especially in terms of:

- a clearer recognition of the right of all young people to a full, high quality secondary education (or equivalent);
- school authority closures of small schools, especially around the early 1990s in States such as Victoria;

- developments in telecommunications and computer technology and access;
- transport (quality and cost of road and air transport in particular);
- demographic patterns and industry restructurings.

The report provided a strong critique of boarding, especially in expensive independent schools well away from students' homes. While recognising that such schooling was a preference for some, the Commission provided evidence of its unsuitability for many. The Commission was critical of the low level of support for rural hostels and the structure of the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme (which I estimate at currently costing around \$45 million a year - see attached statistics). The Commission stated that:

In considering issues in the accommodation area, the position is taken here that encouragement should be given to accommodation facilities which:

- are as close to the students' homes as possible;
- support rural schools;
- give students access to locally-relevant curriculum, especially in Years 11 and 12; and
- are likely to increase student retention into upper secondary school.

This report therefore proposes support for local student accommodation facilities in rural Australia. This support should take the form of Commonwealth financial assistance for eligible hostels, group homes and boarding schools, with the assistance to be paid to the accommodation facility, rather than the student or the student's family. It is proposed that the assistance to hostels, group homes and small boarding schools should be at a higher rate than that for large boarding schools. (p. 67)

The Commission also firmly supported the retention of small rural schools:

The Commission's view that small schools should be kept open wherever feasible results from its examination of the difficulties experienced by students and their families when physical access to school is not readily available. That examination underscores the important role of an extensive network of rural schools can play in minimising the number of students with access difficulties and in reducing the degree of difficulty faced by those still without ready access to school. The Commission's view, however, also results from its belief that small rural schools:

- provide educational advantages to students;
- are of social and cultural importance to their communities; and
- are of economic importance to their communities. (p. 74)

(2) Collection of data and other information, and its accessible presentation

Appropriate data should be readily available to inform policy and practice. For example, local residents and education planners should know the number of young people of secondary school age who leave a district for schooling, and they should have access to all relevant demographic information to develop appropriate strategies.

User-friendly data collections, which can allow complex cross-tabulations on a local area basis, should be developed and made readily accessible to policy makers, education organisations, and the public. Some relevant data and other information could include (with appropriate privacy protection):

- type and location of schooling or other activity attended by all school age people whose home residence is in the district (this would include those attending boarding schools or

hostels or who have a second home away from the district) by demographic characteristics of the individual (especially Aboriginality; parental income, occupation and education level, etc);

- education participation rates (as above for post-school education for people of all ages as much as possible);
- education attainment of the population in the district by occupation and labour force status;
- socioeconomic and other characteristics of the general population in the district;
- Commonwealth and other program support, including AIC, Country Areas Targeted Assistance, etc;
- school authority funding for schools on a local area basis;
- location of educational and other relevant community facilities;
- transport links;
- access to telecommunications and other communications links (including cost).

HeathWiz, a product of the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, provides a model for the software structure and type of data, though it is not amenable to all the types of information listed above.

(3) A positive, grass-roots campaign to 'keep the kids in the country'

Background. These ideas have come out of conversations with friends and relatives in the country when their children have been very young (or not yet born) and before decisions about boarding schools have been finalised. Boarding and tuition fees and other necessary expenses at major independent schools are in the order of \$20,000 a year for secondary students - \$120,000 for six years. This is a lot of money that could be well spent on augmenting and supporting children's education at a local government school. The flow-on effect to local schools and communities would be very positive.

The proposal. The task is to support the choice of a group of parents to keep their children in local schools and not send them away to boarding schools, thus breaking the vicious cycle referred to above in a local area. For these families the choice to keep their children at home must be in the educational interests of their children, and the overall cost-benefit for the family must be positive.

The place to start would be a district with an existing secondary school, but where many middle class and educationally aspiring families send their children away to boarding school. A group of parents who would otherwise send their children to boarding school would need to collectively decide to keep their children in local schools, and to use some or all of the money saved by not sending their children away to support their children's education in some way. The more families can be involved the better for several reasons: First, often a fair number of students deciding to stay is necessary for the critical mass needed for ensuring high quality schooling in terms of, for example, upper secondary curriculum options and the qualified teachers to provide those options. Second, several families pooling their redirected funds could make quite a difference in the provision of local specialist resources - for example, one family could not support an instrumental music teacher, but ten families could provide base funding, guaranteeing work which would be augmented by others in the district. Third, lone families making a decision to stay may find it socially difficult (for both adults and children) in social networks where independent school connections play an important part - several families can provide mutual support and enthusiastic encouragement.

How parents spend the money they would have otherwise spent on tuition and boarding fees is ultimately their decision, but ideally much of the expenditure could be decided collaboratively with other parents making the decision not to send their children away, and in consultation with other parents and the local schools. Part of the funds could be put aside for activities away from home, including excursions, and, perhaps, a year at a school overseas - this would compensate for missing the horizon-widening experiences of a city boarding school. Other funds could be pooled for the employment of, for example, instrumental music teachers, youth drama group coordinators and other specialist expertise that might not be available in a country town. This need not be directly associated with local schools, but would complement whatever is provided there. Access to such teachers and drama groups could be open, but on a user-pays basis. The important thing is that the organised group of families provide the base funding to ensure the provision of these resources so that their children have access to the fully rounded education that would be available in a larger centre and which they would otherwise be paying for through fees and associated expenses at a boarding school. The resources could be anything ranging from something privately organised and paid for by several families (such as a music teacher formally employed by the group of families) to an open community resource accessible to all (for a fee if appropriate) in the tradition of many community resources in country towns, such as swimming pools built in the 1950s and 1960s, when local funds were raised and some families made very large donations.

Benefits The primary benefits would be those associated with keeping the kids in the country schools - the enrolment numbers and social mix to enhance the curriculum options, specialist teachers, and general quality of schooling for all students. There would be flow-on economic, social and cultural benefits to the local community of having a (larger) school and more teachers, and families spending locally, rather than on fees and other expenses at city boarding schools. Families who might otherwise have considered sending their children away will have the option of higher quality local schooling. For those who chose to keep their children at a local school there will be financial savings and a substantial amount of money to use in other ways to benefit their children's education. And, of course, there will not be the emotional wrench of a child leaving parents and siblings around the age of twelve. In the longer term, the social capital built up by collaborative provision of community resources can be very enriching for the whole community. Breaking the cycle in one local area can set the precedent for other areas, making it easier in areas where the circumstances are more difficult to start with.

Specific suggestion: That a project officer be funded to investigate possibilities, perhaps through focus groups involving parents with pre-school age children who are considering sending their children away but have not yet made a firm decision. Consultation and collaboration should occur as appropriate with local community organisations. Where a proposal as set out above appears feasible, that the project officer coordinate and support the families as required.

References

- Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia 1999, 'AHISA Membership' Web page: <http://www.ahisa.com.au/mem.htm>. Accessed 7 October 1999.
- Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987, *Schooling in Rural Australia*, AGPS, Canberra.
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association Inc (ICPA) 1999a, *History*. ICPA Web page: <http://www.twgs.qld.edu.au/ICPA/History>. Accessed 7 October 1999.
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association Inc (ICPA) 1999b, *Access to Education*. ICPA Web page: <http://www.twgs.qld.edu.au/ICPA/Access>. Accessed 7 October 1999.
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. Federal Council 1999c, *ICPA Directory of Australian Boarding Schools & School Term Hostels*, ICPA, Hyden, WA

Nicholls, Christine 1999, 'Secondary education for the Northern Territory's Indigenous students: the "missing link" in the so-called lifelong education process?' in *Indigenous Education and the Social Capital Influences on the Performance of Indigenous Tertiary Students*, 18-19 June 1998, University of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia, Conference Proceedings, edited by Roz Walker, Daphne Elliott, Kathryn Seymour & Gus Worby, Australian Federation of University Women Inc, Black Swan Press, Fremantle, WA, pp. 149 - 165

Office of Country High School Hostels Authority, WA 1999, 'About Country Residential Colleges' Web page: <http://www.des.wa.gov.au/offices/chsha/cost.htm>. Accessed 7 October 1999.

Vining, Linda 1998, 'Tempting country boarders into town', *Education Review*, Vol 2, No 4, May

Statistical Annex

Enrolments	1998
Number of students boarding at the 121 boarding schools that are members of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (Source: Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia 1999)	19 050
Number of students boarding at all nongovernment schools (Source: DETYA)	22 802 (22 226 at secondary level)
Number of students boarding at all schools (Source: Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. Federal Council 1999, <i>ICPA Directory of Australian Boarding Schools & School Term Hostels [ICPA Directory]</i>)	24 432 (1999)
Number of students boarding at rural hostels (Source: <i>ICPA Directory</i>)	1 869 (1999)
Number of students in receipt of Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Students boarding allowances (Source: DETYA)	12 182
Fees and Allowances (annual per capita, secondary students)	1999
Weighted average boarding fees at rural hostels (Note: WA Country Residential Colleges 1999 fee is \$6,200, these hostels enrol almost 60% of all hostel residents. Source: <i>ICPA Directory</i>) (Unweighted average hostel boarding fee calculated by the ICPA is \$5,561)	Approx. \$6 000
Weighted average boarding fees at AHISA schools (ICPA Directory) Tuition fees are similar for AHISA schools. (Unweighted average boarding school fee calculated by the ICPA is \$8,048, highest in the ACT and Victoria at over \$9,000)	Approx: \$9,500
Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) boarding allowance, basic rate (not means-tested)	\$3,500
AIC boarding allowance, basic plus additional rate (means-tested)	\$4,377
Total annual Commonwealth expenditure on some selected programs	
(Total Commonwealth funds for government and nongovernment schools, not including student allowances, is more than \$4,000 million a year; States and Territories spend around four times this amount)	

Assistance for Isolated Children's Scheme boarding allowances (Source: Kemp 1998. The amount was calculated from the Minister's statement of funding of \$172 million over five years from January 1999. However, given the number of assisted students and the rates, the actual amount is likely to be more than \$45 million a year.)	\$34.4 million
Country Areas Targeted Assistance to schools (about 150,000 students - under \$120 each)	\$17.7 million
Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives*	\$122.4 million
Indigenous Education Direct Assistance Program*	\$62.3 million
School for children of travelling show workers (Commonwealth grant for capital, etc requirements)	\$1.4 million
* Indigenous young people's rate of participation in secondary schooling is well below the national average. If their participation was the same as the general population, then school authorities would be spending at least an extra \$130 million just for standard secondary schooling (at the national average of about \$7,000 per student).	

Number of primary and secondary students boarding at schools & hostels, 1999, States and Territories and Australia

	School boarders	Hostel boarders	Total school & hostel boarders
NSW	7 897	75	7 972
Vic	2 882	0	2 882
Qld	8 117	275	8 392
WA	3 113	1 119	4 232
SA	1 118	116	1 234
Tas	274	215	489
NT	848	69	917
ACT	183	0	183
AUSTRALIA	24 432	1 869	26 301

Source: Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. Federal Council 1999, *ICPA Directory of Australian Boarding Schools & School Term Hostels*