

Rural Schools Staffing Formula.

Extract from NSW Legislative Assembly Hansard. This record is a proof version. See bottom of page for classifications and links relating to this extract.

RURAL SCHOOLS STAFFING FORMULA

Page: 22

Mr PETER DRAPER (Tamworth [12.03 p.m.]: Today I again refer to the staffing formula that the Government applies to small rural schools in New South Wales. I spoke earlier with the school captains of Farrer, Gunnedah, Peel, Tamworth and Walcha schools, who have just left the Chamber. On 14 November 2002 the honourable member for Northern Tablelands moved a motion in the following terms:

That this House calls on the Government to immediately implement a review of the formula determining the staffing levels of country schools.

The *Hansard* record shows that the then Minister for Education and Training, the Hon. John Watkins, recognised the need for flexibility "to ensure the public education system was as strong as possible" and he expressed strong support for the motion. The Hon. John Watkins said that he was "absolutely committed to our small schools and to ensuring they have the best possible resources to do the precious job of teaching our children". All honourable members agreed to the motion, which was subsequently carried. More than 18 months down the track it is with disappointment and frustration that I report that there has been a complete lack of action by the Government, despite its commitment to immediately review the formula.

In the meantime Bendemeer Public School in my electorate and Black Mountain Public School in the Northern Tablelands electorate face the prospect of losing a teacher due to dropping student numbers. After intense lobbying by the school communities, the honourable member for Northern Tablelands and me, the schools were granted an exemption due to the drought and they retained their second teachers. Had the staffing formula been reviewed as agreed, these schools might not have been subjected to the ordeal. Bronwyn Reid, president of the Bendemeer parents and citizens association, described the intense pressure during this time of uncertainty as unbearable. She wrote:

This year we lost a whole term of constructive education due to the black cloud of despair created by the possibility of Bendemeer losing its second teacher.

Similarly, Nundle Public School wrote:

Every year parents, staff and children are in trepidation of the school not reaching the special number of students required to keep teachers.

Niangala Public School wrote:

Imagine the anxiety parents and whole communities feel as the enrolment numbers fail to reach the magical number of 26 and we face the loss of a teacher.

Nowendoc Public School wrote:

The uncertainty of the staffing formula is a threat to our stable environment and will disadvantage our children.

Attunga Public School wrote:

It is not fair on teachers, children and the community wondering from year to year if we are going to have that magic number to keep our teachers.

Moonbi Public School wrote:

In a community of our size, local education is a top priority and we vote for the people who care for our children.

I would like Minister Refshauge to recognise that this crisis extends also to the provision of school administrative and support staff. Like other small rural schools in the electorate, Bendemeer's troubles were not over. Following the stay of execution on the second teacher the school has been advised that school administrative and support [SAS] members' hours will be cut from two days a week to one day a week. Mullaley Public School had its administrative staff hours cut from five days per week to 2.5 days. The letters that I have received are about the spectre of losing a teacher and about the stress placed on all staff due to administrative support staff cuts.

Teachers are not only expected to prepare lessons and to teach the children. While catering for students with special needs they also have to answer the phone, run the office, care for sick children, provide adequate and constant supervision for child protection, carry out principal duties and meet visitors. As an example, Tintinhull Public School has 51 students in two classes with one teacher and a teaching principal. The students include 17 children with special needs, for example, Asperger syndrome, behavioural disorders, emotional disturbances such as introversion, extraverted aggression requiring antidepressants, a child incontinent of faeces, one with hip dysplasia, one with English as a second language, two with immense but unidentified learning difficulties, two who have been home schooled and who need extra attention, and two at risk in relation to literacy. At the start of term one, although there were fewer than the 51 students required to warrant a full-time administrative support staff member, the school is not deemed to be eligible to have a full-time member.

Mr Richard Torbay: That is disgraceful.

Mr PETER DRAPER: It is disgraceful. The teaching principal has 27 students across three stages and that principal is constantly distracted when there is no SAS member. A recent meeting was held in the region to discuss this issue, to which we received an overwhelming response. Representatives from the 30 schools in my electorate and in the electorate of the honourable member for Northern Tablelands who could not attend the meeting sent letters of support, while representatives from 15 schools who travelled up to three hours to contribute at that meeting all expressed dire concern over the current and future viability of their schools.

This issue affects the education of hundreds of children, the work and personal lives of their teachers and administrative staff, and the welfare of rural communities. It seems to be a deliberate attempt to force public education to be centralised to the bigger centres. Teachers and parents in small schools want the Government to undertake this review. The need to review the staffing formula has not gone away. Along with the drought, floods and tough economic times, small schools constantly face the threat of losing their teachers. The Government can no longer afford to ignore this problem. I intend to keep working actively and to continue to raise this issue as a matter of importance.

