

GRADUATE WOMEN VICTORIA

Serving and empowering women through education and advocacy



2/12 Tollington Ave
Malvern East
VIC 3145

9 April 2014

The Hon Martin Dixon MP
Minister for Education
Parliament House
East Melbourne, VIC 3002

Dear Mr Dixon

Re: Discrimination in Education Funding for Schools, especially in the case of rural students

Graduate Women Victoria is one of the State and Territory Associations affiliated to the Australian Federation of Graduate Women. While our organisation has a particular focus on women's access to tertiary education, to which end we provide annual scholarships for disadvantaged postgraduate students from a fund that has a capital of over one million dollars, we are also committed to advocating for universally accessible and affordable quality education, for all at all levels – early childhood, primary and secondary.

We believe that this goal is not achievable without a sound and adequately funded system of public schooling and are very disturbed by recent trends in funding for public schools, with a decrease in funding per student in both 2011 and 2012 (the latest year for which figures are available). This has been highlighted by a recent report "State schools funding in retreat" in *The Sunday Age* for 6 April. Two aspects of this report are particularly concerning. One is that the drop in funding for public schools is occurring while government funding for the private sector is increasing; the other is that the disparity between the resources available to private and public schools in Victoria is greater than the national average. Victoria should not be lagging behind in supporting education because education is critical not only to the wellbeing of individuals to whom the State has a responsibility for its provision, but also to the State itself, since its future productivity, prosperity and social stability must be seen as a dividend proportional to the investment made in education.

Inequity in educational resources is not only a matter of differences between the private and public sectors. Within the public sector itself there is discrimination against rural students as shown in *Access to Education for Rural Students*, the recent Report of the Auditor-General, John Doyle. This detailed analysis lists a number of measures in which rural students are falling short in benchmarks of educational achievement when compared to metropolitan students: absenteeism is higher, standards of literacy and numeracy are lower, fewer students complete Year 12, so that it is not surprising that fewer go on to tertiary education. TAFE has

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traditionally been one area where country students could pursue further vocational education and training (VET), but this resource has become less effective, available and attractive as cuts to TAFE funding have meant an increase in fees and a reduction in courses offered.

Meanwhile the private providers who share the VET field with TAFE are more likely to set up in metropolitan areas than rural ones. Private providers account for 57% of the training market in the metropolitan area, but only 33% of that in rural areas. The Auditor-General has noted the need for monitoring to ensure that rural students are not disadvantaged in VET education by lack of choice or by a failure to match courses provided to the skills needed in the region.

Government policy has for some time favoured larger schools, often resulting in closures and mergers, reflected in the fact that Victoria had a hundred fewer state schools in 2013 than in 1999. Consolidation of schools can have benefits, but in rural areas the effect is to exacerbate already existing financial problems created by the need for students to travel to access schools and in some cases, especially for high school students, to live away from home during the school week. Rural families as a group, and especially indigenous families and communities, are among the least financially secure in Victoria. They also suffer poorer health and social outcomes, with high rates of suicide, substance abuse and domestic violence. Education, along with other appropriate measures, is the best way to offer them new opportunities, but any further financial barriers to accessing education must increase absenteeism and low completion rates. There has recently been an improvement in participation and completion rates for indigenous students. It is imperative that the momentum for improvement be maintained by ensuring that they have access to high quality local schools and VET programs.

The Auditor-General's Report makes five recommendations to address the various barriers to equitable education for rural students. GWV believes that if these were to be fully implemented by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development then the current unjust situation would be greatly improved.

The Department has indicated that it accepts the recommendations. The political will to enable the Department to act must, however, rest heavily on your decisions as Minister. **We call on you to make a firm pre-electoral commitment to a rapid and fully funded implementation of all the recommendations in *Access to Education for Rural Students*,**

Yours Sincerely

Dr Jennifer Strauss AM
President, Graduate Women Victoria

cc. The Hon James Merlino MP, Shadow Minister for Education