

# Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024

## Background

- On the evening of Thursday 17 October 2024, a severe storm in far west NSW resulted in extensive damage to power infrastructure, impacting schools, early childhood services and TAFE NSW.
- At the time, it was publicly reported that around 20,000 people in the Far West region, including Broken Hill and its surrounds were impacted by the power outage.

## NSW Department of Education response

- The department's response was in collaboration with a whole-of-government response.
- The department's initial priority was to understand the impact of this outage on NSW schools and early childhood centres.
- The NSW Department of Education identified that power had been affected at 13 public schools:
  - Alma Public School
  - Broken Hill Public School
  - Broken Hill High School
  - Broken Hill North Public School
  - Burke Ward Public School
  - Menindee Central School
  - Morgan Street Public School
  - Railway Town Public School
  - School of the Air
  - Tibooburra Outback Public School
  - White Cliffs Public School
  - Wilcannia Central School
  - Willyama High School
- Late on Thursday afternoon, the severity of the incident was outlined via a State Emergency Operations Controller tele-conference. Advice provided indicated that restoration could take 10-20 days minimum.
- The power outage coincided with the peak of HSC exams, creating an urgent need to restore energy as quickly as possible.
- To ensure students could sit their exams on the Friday after the storms hit, the department opened up its Broken Hill Education Office
- The department's Asset Management team immediately sourced two generators that were transported from Sydney to Broken Hill High School and Willyama High School. These schools were

prioritised to ensure that HSC examinations could proceed on the Monday after the storm, with minimal impact to students.

- The department quickly sourced and transported additional generators from Adelaide to support the remaining 10 public schools. These were operational on the Tuesday after the storm.
- The NSW Rural Fire Service also provided support in sourcing, transporting and commissioning generators for Catholic schools and the Broken Hill Education Office.
- This offer was also extended to early childhood education services.
- By the end of day Wednesday, 23 October 2024, less than one week after the storm hit, all NSW public schools across the Far West were on generator power. The two Catholic sites and the Broken Hill Education Office were connected by end of day Thursday, 24 October 2024.
- Generators were placed inside fenced compounds, with shade-cloth installed, to restrict access and maintain safety on school grounds.
- Monitoring and refuelling was undertaken by department staff while the outage continued.
- Generators remained in place in schools for up to a week following the restoration of transmission lines on 1 November 2024.
- When power was restored, the department coordinated the disconnection and removal of generators followed by reconnection to mains power.

## Communication

- Teams across the department maintained regular communication with affected schools, non-government schools and early childhood education providers.
- As mobile connectivity in the region was reliant on mains power with limited battery backup, emergency communications trailers were dispatched from Dubbo and Wagga Wagga by the department's information technology directorate, to support connectivity at Menindee Central School and at the Broken Hill Education Office. These trailers provided school connectivity and wi-fi calling via StarLink technology.
- Satellite phones were also provided to all NSW public schools located outside of Broken Hill, as well as handsets for Directors Educational Leadership travelling to support schools to ensure communication in the event of an emergency.

## Going above and beyond to support students and communities

- Given the remote location of these schools, achieving this response in such a short time, showed exceptional planning, coordination and resilience from teams in the NSW Department of Education.
- In addition, the fact that there was no direct disruption to HSC exams in the Far West region associated with the power outage is a testament to this coordination effort.
- Staff worked around the clock and there are many [stories](#) that highlight the way teams and schools and wrapped their arms around impacted communities.
- For example, all schools across the Broken Hill area ensured that all students and staff had food each day.

- Principals in the area supported their school communities and the whole of government response by ensuring that families with the greatest need could access food hampers arranged by Reconstruction Authority NSW.
- Broken Hill High School opened the school kitchen to staff in the event that community electricity was affected.
- Breakfast club occurred each morning for all students and the school provided charging areas for personal devices.
- Broken Hill High School set up an HSC study centre five nights a week, Sunday through to Thursday until 6 November 2024, with staff volunteering their time to support students at this important stage of their educational journey.
- Willyama High School had 21 teachers volunteering for an on-call after school study roster to support students.
- Both high schools applied through NESA for misadventure considerations on behalf of their students, as required for each exam.
- Each school provided ongoing communication to its community to reach out if any support was needed both at the time and in the aftermath of this challenging event.
- We acknowledge the teams and individual staff in NSW Education who supported schools, early childhood services and impacted local communities at this challenging time.