

Disclaimer

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In this report, the term Aboriginal is respectfully used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Executive summary

The Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements

In December 2008, all Australian State and Territory Governments entered into an agreement with the Australian Government for the three Smarter Schools National Partnerships: Literacy and Numeracy, Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) School Communities and Improving Teacher Quality. These National Partnership (NP) agreements are part of the school reform initiatives of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), and provide significant resources to selected schools with the aim of improving student achievement, particularly in schools serving low socio-economic status (low SES) school communities.

The National Partnerships aim to drive an ambitious reform agenda to lift the quality of education and improve the educational outcomes for all students. In considering the reform strategies being developed by jurisdictions, opportunities were identified for significant national collaborations to support the implementation of the National Partnerships.

This is the final report of the national collaboration project on Innovative Strategies for Small and/or Remote Schools Project. The project was one of six national key reform projects, funded by the Australian Government, to support jurisdictions in the implementation of the Smarter Schools National Partnerships reforms. Western Australia has been the lead jurisdiction for this project and this report was commissioned for the project to document and analyse good practice in remote education.

This report was commissioned as part of the Smarter Schools National Partnership to document and analyse good practice in remote education.

Evidence was collected from a range of sources, including analysis from national and international literature (stage one of this project), comprehensive mapping of current strategies in Australia (via a quantitative Principals survey) and stakeholder interviews, and in-depth case study analyses (through case study immersions in 28 Australian schools).

There are many themes that emerge from examples of good practice, and many strategies that can be used and adopted for other small and remote schools.

An important message from this work is that a holistic approach is needed to meet student needs in a remote location. This means getting the right leaders and staff, be it for a short or long duration, working hard to make the school a hub for the community and a highly valued and supported community institution, and finding ways to engage students and allowing them to succeed by measures far broader than academic performance, be it attendance, participation, or readiness for work or further education. A successful remote school is not an end point, but an ongoing journey which requires resilience and a willingness to change by the principal, teachers, students, and the wider community.

Understanding remoteness

Key characteristics of remote schools

Remote schools are spread across Australia, with the highest proportion in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory, which collectively account for 77 per cent of remote schools and 80 per cent of students in remote schools. Enrolment size varies from 2 to 1,812, with an average enrolment of 131 and a median enrolment of 66.

While remote schools are located in both low and high socio-economic areas, the majority of students and their families are from lower socio-economic groups. Many have a high proportion of Aboriginal students, particularly

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those schools in the interior and northernmost regions of Australia. Overall, 34 per cent of Australia's small and remote schools have enrolments that are more than 75 per cent Aboriginal.

The evidence shows that students in remote schools, on average, experience lower participation, attainment and learning outcomes compared to students in non-remote schools. In 2010, 83 per cent of remote schools reported highest year level National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results for reading that were below-average, with almost 30 per cent of these schools being 20 per cent or more below the national average. Conversely 17 per cent of remote schools achieved an above average overall NAPLAN score when compared to the national average.

The unique challenges remote schools face

Remote schools face unique challenges in terms of resourcing, teacher quality, and student performance that affect students' educational outcomes.

Some of the key challenges that were repeatedly raised during this review relate to attracting and retaining effective leaders and staff, engaging students, engaging communities, and dealing with broader issues facing remote communities, such as distance from employment opportunities and cultural barriers to education. Schools that were principally or entirely Aboriginal also encountered challenges in regards to engaging students and overcoming 'the shame' of success and achievement.

Remote schools further face the challenges that affect all schools, such as principals acting as change agents and the broadening of teachers' skills and abilities. However they are confronted with more limited access to professional development, coaching and mentoring than non-remote schools. In this environment, policy-makers and school communities face significant challenges in enhancing the educational outcomes of students in remote communities.

While the level of remoteness, socio-economic status and Aboriginal enrolment are key influences on academic performance, this is not always the case. Small schools can often be in close proximity to each other, with similar demographic and socio-economic conditions, but achieve substantially different student educational outcomes.

Hence, it is more than just local conditions that influence school success. The value of this report is in providing small and/or remote schools with insights about how other schools are coping and responding to these challenges – thriving in a remote environment and making sustainable progress in students' educational outcomes.

Innovation outlook

The challenges faced by remote schools do not necessarily inhibit progress. They provide the context within which remote schools operate. Indeed these pressures can ignite a passion and determination to take innovative approaches to meeting student and community needs.

The innovative practices and approaches highlighted in this report reflect a combination of measures that target the important determinants of educational achievement such as:

- *School leadership*
 - Achieving genuine collaboration and co-creation with local communities to set the strategy for the school, develop measures of success for students (from attendance and participation through to performance and readiness for work and higher education), and provide opportunities for students to meet their potential to show that they can achieve.
 - Creating a positive school environment that lifts the effort, spirit and pride of students and staff for example through implementing flagship programs such as kitchen garden schemes, or providing student leadership and mentoring programs and encouraging a principally young teaching staff to be innovative and to embrace new and alternative methods to meeting student needs.

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- Actively managing complex needs students, such as through the employment of mentors and diversional therapists, or through ring fencing senior staff, allowing them to dedicate themselves to managing intensive support needs, creating individualised learning programs and tailored environments for high needs students, and developing programs that are aligned to local culture and customs.
- *Teacher quality and quality teaching to meet individual student circumstances and needs.*
 - Finding ways to provide teachers with professional development, mentoring, and flexibility are key themes. The overwhelming consideration is to provide an environment that attracts the right kind of teacher and leader. Financial incentives are often found to be counterproductive and have a tendency to attract teachers who in the long run do not turn out to be well suited to the task of teaching in a remote school.
 - Key teacher attraction and retention programs include media strategies to promote remote schools and issues associated with under-staffing, specific targeting of students from local universities and also high achieving students who want a remote experience, offering a range of financial and non-financial benefits to staff, providing opportunities for staff to ‘test and try’ a remote experience before committing, new teacher mentoring, and specific efforts to increase Aboriginal recruitment. There are also strategies to provide better, more integrated support for teachers, innovative workforce structures, and more personalised incentives for teachers to work in remote areas.
 - Key teacher quality strategies include multi-school partnerships to provide professional development opportunities and moderate evaluation processes across schools, the use of video conferencing to connect classrooms at different schools to extend the subject range for teachers and students, streaming of numeracy and literacy classes to teach to ability ranges rather than age ranges, feedback programs to enable ongoing monitoring and development of teaching formats and styles, and establishing professional learning teams to focus teachers across the curriculum on the unique needs of year groups and students.
- *Student engagement.* Student engagement in a remote context has a particularly wide application. It will often not be driven by academic performance or a gateway to further education, although many students in remote schools do strive for and achieve this. Engagement strategies need to make students want to attend and participate at school, and need to provide ways for students to succeed who may have had much lower levels of literacy or support for education prior to commencing school. Common approaches include:
 - Finding ways to teach students outside the classroom, such as kitchen garden programs.
 - Opening the eyes of students to a world beyond the school and local community, such as through ‘virtual excursions’, ‘email pals’, and school excursions to festivals and events outside of the community (which are often linked to positive behaviour management strategies).
 - Giving students a tangible sense of purpose – providing genuine and sustainable opportunities to participate in the workforce and keep a connectedness to their culture and tradition.
 - Taking innovative approaches to sparking student interest and demonstrating to teachers and principals that they can succeed. One example is dance rap groups that have formed in some remote schools that use the production of a rap video featuring students as a way to teach Aboriginal customs, improve literacy, build student confidence, learn about digital media, and develop leadership qualities as students travel across the country to perform. Drama and theatre programs are also being used to provide access to different styles of learning.
- *Student readiness for primary and secondary school as well as for work.* Ensuring that young children have a positive transition to schooling, and that older students see a purposeful path to employment or further education are an important function of all schools. Achieving this in a remote context is difficult and there are many strategies being employed by schools to achieve this.
 - Ready-for-school programs involving playgroup arrangements and parent involvement in schools are particularly important in remote communities where young children have little exposure to life outside of their own family. These initiatives are often used to provide access for young children to books and creative

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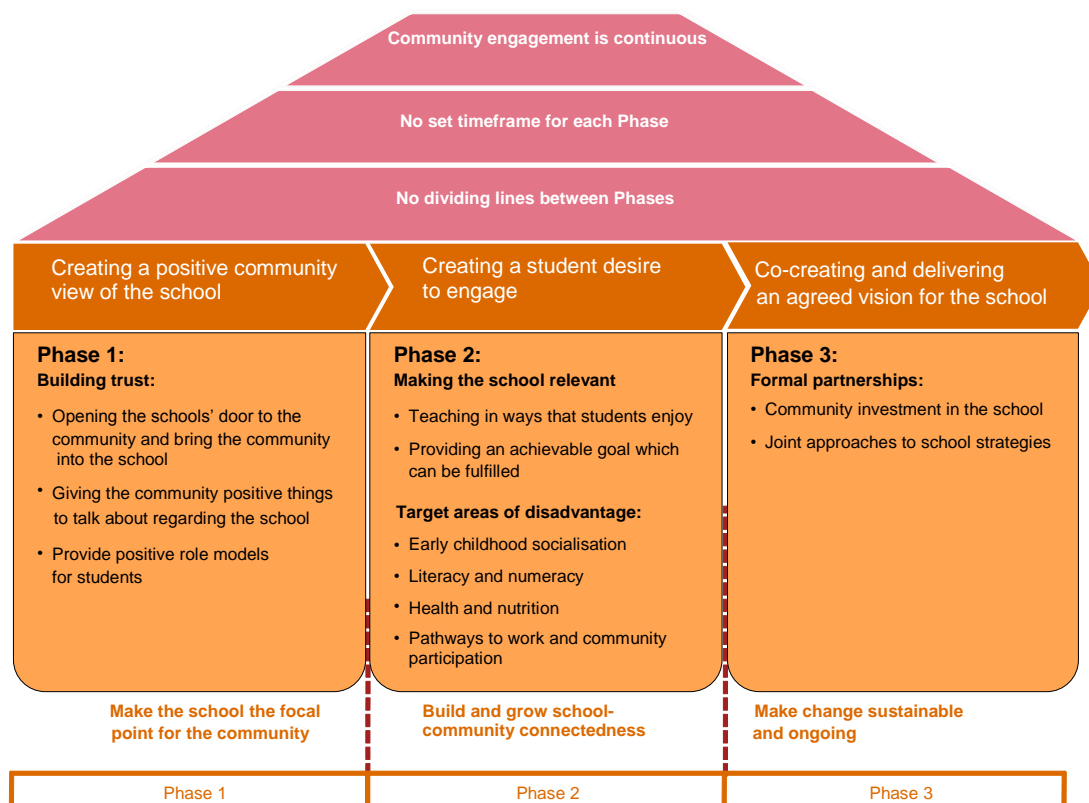
activities, health services and wellbeing information, as well as improving parent relationships with the school to create a supportive, rather than defensive, pattern of school engagement.

- Successful school-to-work transition programs involve local communities and businesses and in some cases involve proactive job creation programs. Outcomes for students in successful school-to-work programs are very positive, with some of the most successful partnerships involving the most challenging students, although school retention rates can suffer as a result of students finding ways to achieve through work.
- **Community engagement.** Through community engagement, students of small and remote schools gain access to a variety of community resources and adults as part of their education, which broadens their learning experience beyond the classroom. Schools have employed a number of innovative strategies that aim to engage with the local community. These differ in scope and level of formality.
 - Staff are very aware of the importance of their school in the community. In many instances, they set up the school resources so they can be easily accessed by community members, including those without children currently attending the school. A number of strategies encourage the community to use the school as a resource through activities such as providing community access to rooms for playgroups and social groups, or opening the school kitchen as a ‘driver reviver’ stop.
 - Annual or more regular school sponsored community events are often significant milestones on the community social calendar. In many schools, they attract both the families of current students as well as community members without formal connections to the school and serve to provide broader community cohesion beyond the immediate school population. These events are often sponsored by local companies, raising funds for the school and strengthening community ties.
 - Engagement can extend to involve members in the school curriculum or to help develop the school vision. This has proven critical in drawing upon the expertise of community members and has had the benefit of providing children with role models in addition to their parents and the school teachers. Examples include bringing Aboriginal elders into the school to take students out to make didgeridoos or to teach about traditional painting and bush foods, bringing knitting groups into the school who knit scarves for the school uniform, and establishing cooking groups to teach about nutrition and hygiene. As well as providing interest and mentoring opportunities for students, these initiatives also help build a positive image of the school in the eyes of the community.

Messages and actions for small and remote schools

There is no ‘single solution’ or one-size-fits-all approach to improving the educational attainment of students in remote schools. There is also no example of an ‘overnight sensation’. Strategies are tailored to reflect the unique challenges posed by the remote context within which each school operates, and will change over time as needs do. For small and remote schools, the pathway to becoming a good school involves three phases, with progress underpinned by the increasing engagement of the community in the school.

Figure E1: Key Phases along the pathway to a successful remote school



In the first phase, community engagement is generated by the process of developing trust between individuals from the school and the community, generally through informal, day-to-day contact. This initial level of engagement provides the opportunity for targeting increased attendance at school.

The second phase is characterised by the improved engagement of students and the further building of community engagement. It involves bringing the community into the school and taking the school out into the community. At the same time, the success of initial attendance strategies allows the school to focus on engaging students and to address barriers to regular and engaged attendance such as nutrition, health and social disadvantage. For primary school students the school has the opportunity to work on routine and socialisation, particularly where early childhood programs have not been available. For secondary school students, a focus on developing genuine pathways to post-school employment is particularly important for engagement and maintaining attendance.

The third phase involves the closer integration of the school and community, sometimes culminating in a formal partnership between the two groups. Schools that reach this point have ceased to be institutions that are separate from the communities they serve, and are significant contributors to the growth and development of those communities.

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Strategies to develop effective leadership, build teacher quality and address resource constraints are necessary. These strategies provide principals, teachers and other school staff with the skill sets required to build the necessary engagement with both the community and students.

Across these strategies, commonly recurring themes and principles that characterise schools' successes in improving student outcomes and managing challenging and complex local issues include:

- **Effective leadership** is a critical component of success.
- **A committed staff that feels connected to the school is another crucial foundation.** There is a growing consensus that teacher quality is the single most important school-based factor determining educational outcomes. Remote schools need the right staff. Teachers need to want to make a difference and be adaptable to ongoing change.
- **The need to involve local communities in decision-making,** and in some cases deliver initiatives to build a genuine and sustainable culture of support for the value of school in the small and remote communities. Schools often play a central role in community life, where community attitudes towards education have a significant impact on student engagement. Approaches to community engagement typically seek to build school-community relationships that support education. These can include community participation in educational programs, efforts to align attitudes to education between schools and communities, and development of personal relationships.
- **The need to customise strategies to reflect individual student needs.** Good strategies will reflect the needs of the student population at a particular point in time. In some cases strategies will target attendance and student participation and in others they will target academic excellence.
- **The need to be agile** and continuously adapt the approach as student and community needs change and grow.
- **The need to be resilient** and to persevere, as trust and consensus is built between the school leaders, teachers and the local community.
- **Student engagement is a key driver of student learning outcomes.** Remote schools often face economic and cultural barriers to engaging students. In particular, students may face little incentive to participate or succeed in school where there are no opportunities for employment or further study. A number of identified approaches target specific elements of student engagement, including development of relevant curriculum, student mentoring, and creation of employment pathways.
- **Partnerships and networks within schools, between schools, and between schools and other institutions** also emerge as key themes. By facilitating sharing of assets and resources, these approaches respond to the problems of small scale faced by many remote schools. They can also increase the effectiveness of responses such as pathways, relevant curriculum and community engagement.

Successful strategies almost always recognise that students, parents and the wider community engage with schools because of the benefits that this engagement brings. The successful strategies that we have examined recognise this, and create returns to engagement where they may not have previously existed.

Structure of this report

The structure of this report is as follows.

Part 1: Understanding remoteness

- **Chapter 1: Background** – Provides a detailed analysis of the profile of small and remote schools across Australia, including school types, location across areas of varying degrees of remoteness, and the demographic characteristics of students and their families, including socio-economic status and level of Aboriginal enrolments.
- **Chapter 2: Key challenges** – Provides an overview of key challenges facing remote schools to set the context for the key strategies that are being adopted by schools. These include challenges around low levels of student engagement and participation in school, challenges facing employment and higher education prospects, challenges in engaging effectively with communities, and difficulties in attracting, retaining, and developing the right leaders and the right staff to improve student performance.

Part 2: Innovative strategies for small and remote schools

- **Chapter 3: Effective leadership** – Highlights a range of leadership strategies that inspire confidence and innovation in staff practices, and develop and implement a vision for the school that makes the school a valued institution in communities and delivers improvements in student engagement and outcomes.
- **Chapter 4: Teacher quality** – Highlights strategies to deliver effective professional development and networking opportunities to staff, mentoring initiatives, and strategies to provide higher learning opportunities to staff in a remote context.
- **Chapter 5: Student engagement** – Student engagement strategies are spread across the spectrum of initiatives to improve student attendance and participation to opportunities to extend the curriculum and provide advanced learning opportunities for students.
- **Chapter 6: Community engagement** – Community engagement strategies vary from school-run community events to targeted programs which include the community in the delivery of the curriculum, the delivery of school services, or improve and uphold the value of the school in the local community.
- **Chapter 7: Student readiness** – Highlights initiatives that focus on the readiness and willingness of students to commence primary school and high school, and the readiness of senior students for work or further study.
- **Chapter 8: Student health and wellbeing** – Examines a range of initiatives that extend the role of the school in delivering community services, such as providing health clinics and undertaking screening programs to improve student health and wellbeing.

Part 3: Key lessons for small and remote schools

- **Chapter 9: Implications for all remote schools** – Provides an overview of some key building blocks for successful strategies for small and remote schools, drawing on the lessons learnt from schools that have successfully lifted student engagement and/or performance.

Part 1: Understanding remoteness

1 Background

Small and remote schools are spread across Australia. They vary in enrolment size, and are located in low and high socio-economic areas. Many have a high proportion of Aboriginal students, but some do not. Some achieve above average academic outcomes and some do not. There is not always a relationship between school location and demographics, and student outcomes. Small schools can often be in close proximity to each other, with similar demographic and socio-economic conditions, but achieve vastly different student educational outcomes. Hence it is more than just local conditions that influence school success.

1.1 Context for this review

Providing quality education services to children in small and remote schools is critical to improving the lives of some of the most disadvantaged Australians.

While in general Australian children and young people are well educated, there are still many who are disengaged and underperforming at school, and who leave the school system too early and then face barriers to social equality and economic prosperity. Sadly, a significant number of these children and young people are from families and communities that are disadvantaged as a result of living in rural and remote areas, their low socio-economic status and the well-documented specific challenges associated with some Aboriginal communities.

According to the 2010 Productivity Commission Report on Government Services, about 3 per cent of Australian students attended government schools in the remote zone, most of which are small.

Students in these areas have been found to achieve less satisfactory outcomes in terms of their participation, performance and attainment compared to students in metropolitan areas. Furthermore, there is a significant disparity in outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in small and remote schools.

In 2009, only 79 per cent of Australian Year 9 students in remote areas reached the national minimum reading standard compared with 93 per cent of students living in metropolitan areas. Of students living in very remote areas, only 48 per cent reached the standard.

Of course, the value of education extends far beyond simple measures such as National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test results.

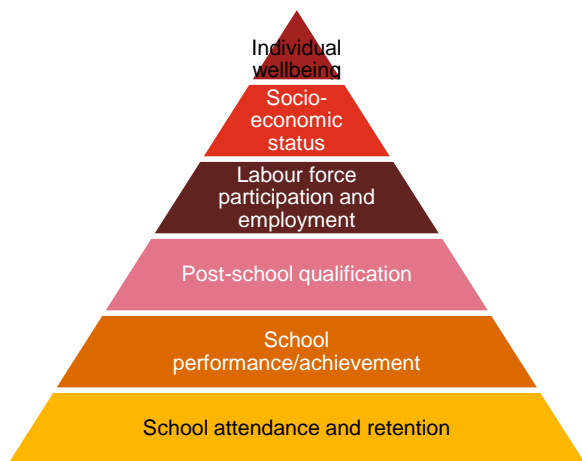
The key objectives of strategies aimed at improving outcomes for small and remote schools are multifaceted. They are about improving educational outcomes. They are also about improving social inclusion, individual motivation, and overcoming cultural and other barriers to learning and participating in communities.

Background

1.1.1 Importance of education and outcomes sought

Australian governments recognise the importance of quality school education and have been working towards improving standards in the Australian education system and ensuring universal access to school education for all Australian children. Education provides a foundation for the country's economic growth and prosperity through its significant contribution to individual development and wellbeing. Education also presents a means of entering the labour force and facilitates access to greater employment opportunities. Outcomes sought through education can be considered at multiple levels as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Education outcomes - a conceptual framework



Source: AMP Foundation, Effective Philanthropy and Social Ventures Australia (2009) *Our children, our future – Achieving improved primary and secondary education outcomes for Aboriginal students*

As part of the Smarter Schools National Partnership, the WA Department of Education, representing the Education Departments of all States and Territories, has commissioned PwC to document and analyse good practice in remote education.

1.2 The Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements

In December 2008, all Australian State and Territory Governments entered into an agreement with the Australian Government for the three Smarter Schools National Partnerships: Literacy and Numeracy, Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) School Communities and Improving Teacher Quality. These National Partnership (NP) agreements are part of the school reform initiatives of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), and provide significant resources to selected schools with the aim of improving student achievement, particularly in schools serving low SES school communities.

The National Partnerships aim to drive an ambitious reform agenda to lift the quality of education and improve the educational outcomes for all students. In considering the reform strategies being developed by jurisdictions, opportunities were identified for significant national collaborations to support the implementation of the National Partnerships.

At its meeting in April 2009, the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) agreed to progress six Australian Government Funded national collaboration projects with a State or Territory identified to lead each initiative:

- School Performance Improvement Frameworks
- Innovative Strategies for Small and/or Remote Schools

Background

- Parental Engagement in Schooling Low SES Communities
- Extended Service School Models
- National Literacy and Numeracy Diagnostic Tools
- School Leadership Development Strategies.

The Australian Government considers the Innovative Strategies for Small and/or Remote Schools Project a priority for supporting the educational needs and wellbeing of students in remote communities.

1.2.1 Overview of the Innovative Strategies for Small and/or Remote Schools Project

The first stage of the Project was to undertake a comprehensive literature review to determine what strategies are currently in place in Australia and overseas. The literature review, completed by The University of Western Australia, provides a comprehensive overview of programs and strategies, where and why they are used, and how they may be applicable to the Australian context. The literature review provided the foundation upon which the second and final stage of work, undertaken by PwC, is based.¹

The research in this stage of the project was designed to identify and document innovative strategies and models of best-practice in small and remote schools in low SES communities in Australia. The project aims to provide an understanding of enablers and barriers to the sustainability and successes of the range of approaches; and to provide direction on good and best practice such that it can be effectively shared across jurisdictions.

Evidence was collected from a range of sources, including analysis from national and international literature (stage one of this project), comprehensive mapping of current strategies in Australia (via a quantitative Principals survey), stakeholder interviews, and in-depth case study analyses (through case study immersions in 28 Australian schools).

1.3 The geographic distribution of small and remote schools

Small and remote schools are located on the fringe of urban areas and in the most remote areas of the country. Student numbers vary from 2 to 1,812 as small schools form partnerships to help manage the challenges of remote education.

The definition of small and remote schools used in this project refer to schools with less than 100 students that are considered 'remote' or 'very remote' under the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). ARIA was developed by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and the National Key Centre for Social Applications of GIS and measures the remoteness of a point based on the physical road distance to the nearest urban centre. The zones under ARIA are: highly accessible, accessible, remote and very remote.

This typology of schools is different to that used by the MCEETYA Geographical Location Classification model,² which uses the ARIA data to identify students as being from a metropolitan, regional or remote background. The standard ARIA classification is used to provide further detail on schools in remote areas.

Based on the ARIA measures there are currently 615 small and remote schools located across Australia.³

¹ The literature review is available at <http://www.smarterschools.gov.au/supplementary/Pages/NationalKeyReformProjects.aspx>.

² Roger Jones, (2004)

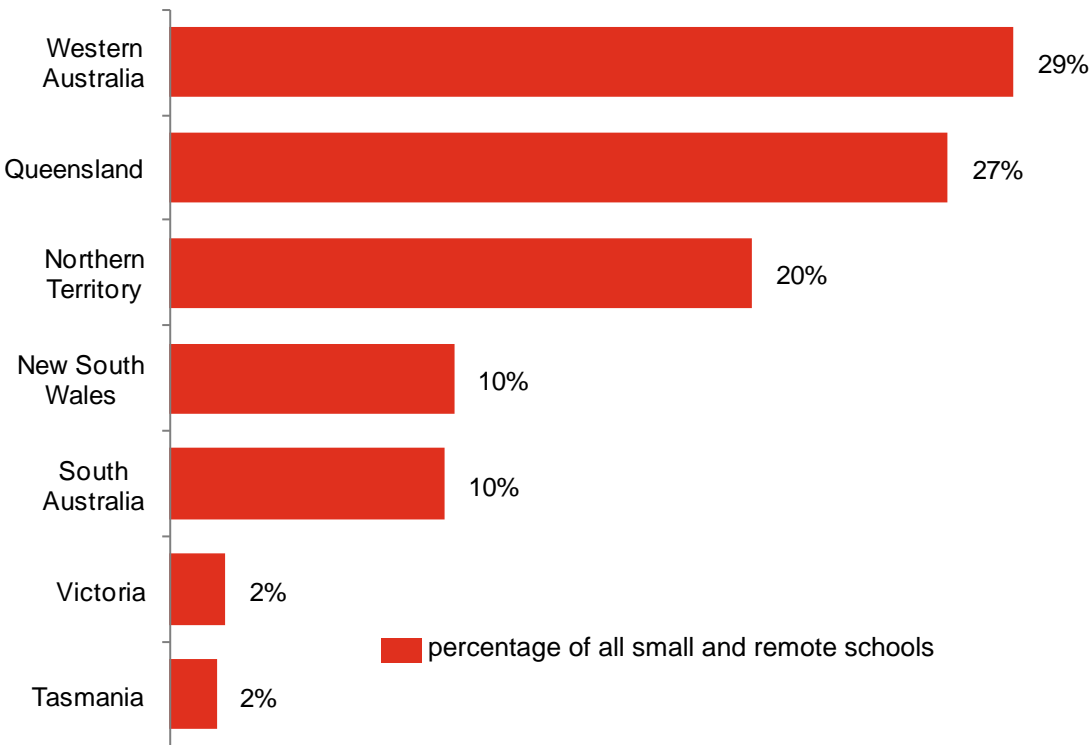
³ The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia defines small and remote schools as schools with less than 100 students. Of the list of schools used in this report, only 374 of the 615 schools fit this definition. However, the small and remote schools category can actually vary widely in size, with 40 per cent of the schools

Background

This chapter provides a statistical analysis of these schools, based on data reported for May 2011⁴ to provide context to the challenges and opportunities that small and remote schools face.⁵

Figure 2 shows the breakdown of small and remote schools by state and territory. Western Australia (29 per cent), Queensland (27 per cent) and Northern Territory (20 per cent) make up the majority of small and remote schools, while Tasmania and Victoria account for the smallest proportion, with only 2 per cent each. Small and remote schools are also located in areas such as Lord Howe Island and Christmas Island.

Figure 2: Proportional breakdown of small and remote schools by jurisdiction



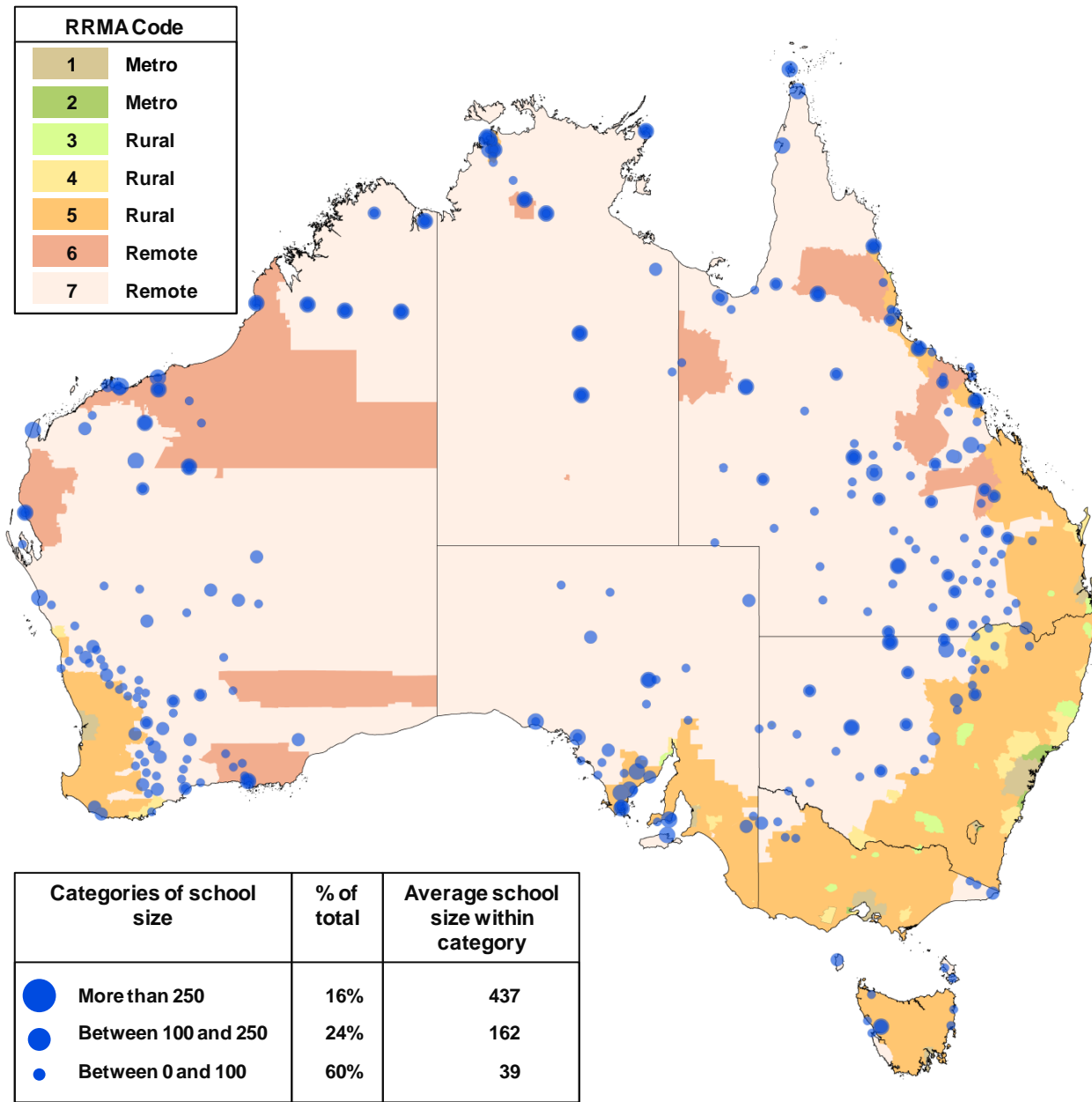
Small schools are located in regions of varying remoteness, including rural, remote and very remote areas. Some schools are located on the outskirts of major metropolitan areas, while others occupy the most remote regions of Australia (see Figure 3).

having over 100 students. This is likely due to their extreme remoteness, as well as the result of a past consolidation of multiple smaller schools in the region. In general, the larger schools are in the most remote areas, while the smallest schools tend to cluster closer to major metropolitan areas. For instance, a large cluster of very small schools can be found in the remote regions surrounding Perth and Brisbane.

⁴ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2011, *My School*, available <<http://www.myschool.edu.au>>, viewed 1 June 2011.

⁵ Some data refers to fewer than 615 schools, including for NAPLAN results (386 schools) and ICSEA scores (609 schools) due to reporting restrictions for schools with very low enrolments.

Figure 3: Geographic location and enrolment size of small and remote schools⁶



⁶ Individual small and remote schools may not be shown on the map if data for the school is not available for confidentiality reasons or if the school in question is a member of a multi-campus school. The use of postal codes to determine locations for the mapping may also influence the mapping of schools to geographic location.

Background

Small and remote schools can vary widely in size.

If we consider small schools to be those with an enrolment of less than 100 students⁷, then small schools account for 60 per cent of remote schools. As seen in Figure 2, an additional 24 per cent of remote schools have enrolments of 100-250 students. The remaining 16 per cent of schools range in size from 250 to over 1800 students. This is likely due to their extreme remoteness, as well as the consolidation of multiple smaller schools in particular regions into a single school with two or more campuses.⁸

Across all remote schools the average enrolment size is 131 and the median enrolment size is 66.

In general, the larger schools are in the most remote areas, while the smallest schools tend to cluster closer to major metropolitan areas. For instance, a large cluster of very small schools can be found in the remote regions surrounding Perth and Brisbane.

1.4 Types of small and remote schools

Given the many different types of small and remote schools, this review classifies schools into particular groups, so that the issues confronting those schools, and the strategies available to them, are relevant in a range of different contexts.

Schools can be grouped into those which have a predominately Aboriginal enrolment, and those which have a mix of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Within these two primary categories, the following types can be distinguished:

- Primary schools with low levels of literacy and numeracy
- Secondary schools with low levels of literacy and numeracy
- Combined primary and secondary schools with low levels of literacy and numeracy
- Primary schools with high levels of literacy and numeracy
- Secondary school with high levels of literacy and numeracy
- Combined primary and secondary schools with high levels of literacy and numeracy.

Multiple factors have an effect on student outcomes, including:

- socio-economic factors, such as family income, access to mainstream services, housing and safety
- factors linked to family characteristics and history, such as education and occupation of parents, parental status and family capacity to support the child's development
- factors associated with the school system, such as curriculum, delivery of education, parental involvement and student access to school
- factors linked to individual students, such as career goals, needs for learning and personal support, behaviour and personal and cultural identity.

Students from small and remote schools are often affected by a number of the above factors simultaneously.

⁷ The definition of small and remote schools used in this project refers to schools with less than 100 students that are considered 'remote' or 'very remote' under the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). ARIA was developed by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and the National Key Centre for Social Applications of GIS, and measures the remoteness of a point based on the physical road distance to the nearest urban centre. The zones under ARIA are: highly accessible, accessible, remote and very remote.

⁸ For example, the Ngaanyatjarra Lands School in remote Western Australia has a total student enrolment of 350, spread across nine campuses.

This makes a holistic approach to improving education outcomes very important. This approach should go beyond traditional service delivery and curriculum to provide additional support to students, particularly from low SES background.

1.5 The socio-economic composition of the communities served by small and remote schools

In general, the more remote the school, the more likely it is to cater for families in a socio-economic group well below the national average.

The school communities attending small and remote schools are drawn from both high and low socio-economic groups. Figure 4 shows the average deviation from the national Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) mean score for all of the remote schools in Local Government Area (LGA) that are classified as remote.⁹ This shows that the majority of remote schools cater to communities that have below average ICSEA scores, and the majority of those are below the national average by 10 per cent or more. The LGAs containing small and remote schools with above average ICSEA scores tend to be located near major metropolitan areas such as Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane.

In terms of the actual number of schools, 20 per cent have above average ICSEA scores, while 80 per cent are below average. Of those schools with below average ICSEA scores, 38 per cent are more than 20 per cent below the national average. This means that almost 40 per cent of all remote schools have scores that are more than 20 per cent below the national average.

Small schools which cater to families in lower socio-economic groups are significantly over-represented in the Northern Territory, which accounts for 20 per cent of all small and remote schools in Australia (shown previously in Figure 2). Almost all remote schools in the Northern Territory, as well as the northern portion of Western Australia are in socio-economic areas that are significantly below average.

Low income limits access for families to school education and support services as they are often unable to cover school fees and additional school related expenses such as uniforms, books and transport.¹⁰ A number of the schools we visited as part of this review expressly address these issues through initiatives such as school buses and maintaining uniform stores. Programs are also in place to provide books to students not only for specific curriculum but also for general reading in the family home.

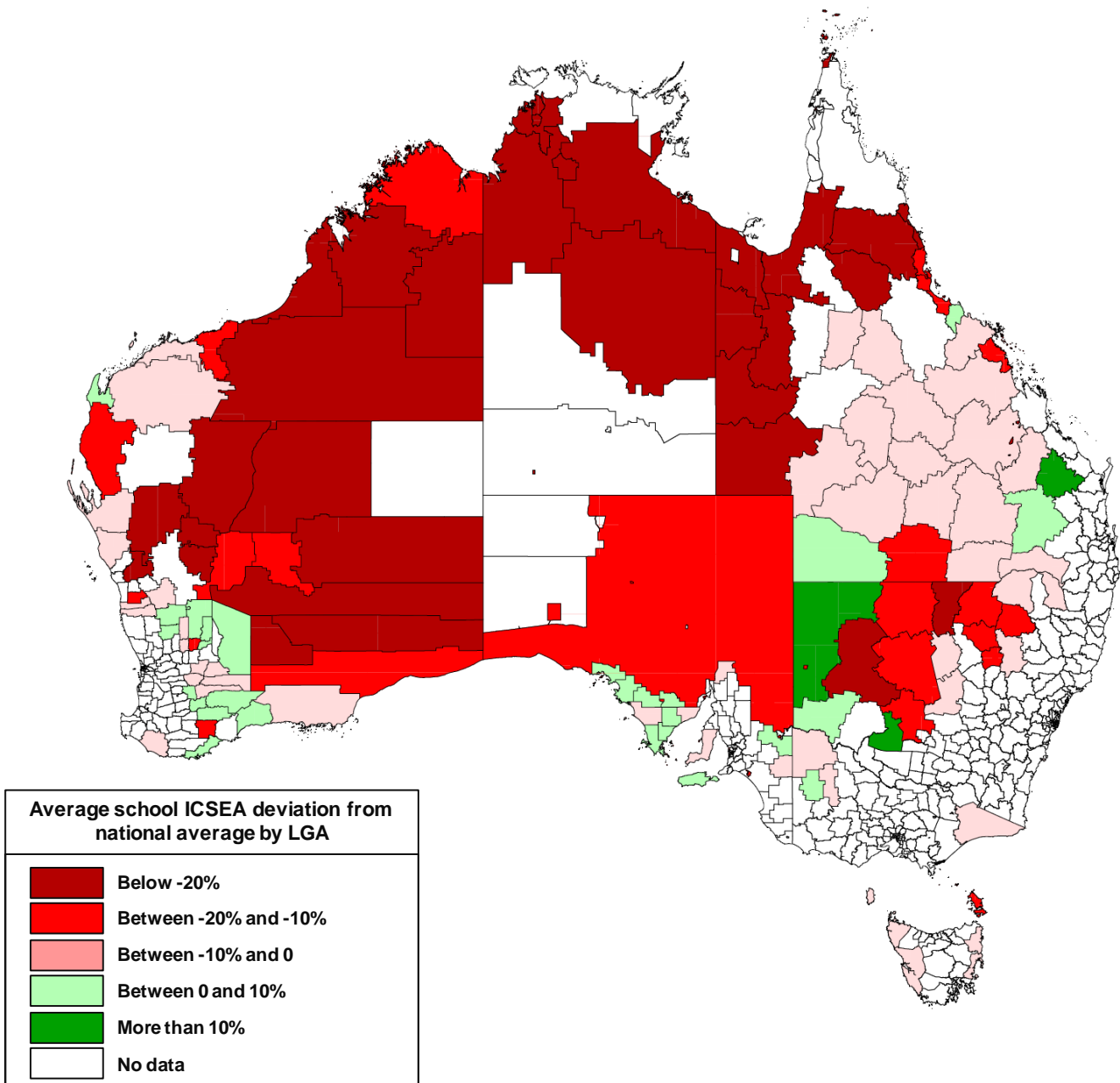
Low household income also negatively affects other outcomes, including health and housing.

Socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal people are generally poorer than those for the non-Aboriginal population. In respect to employment and housing, the disadvantages are reflected in low average income levels and home ownership rates, and high levels of homelessness and household overcrowding. The disparities in the area of health are also evident as Aboriginal health is generally worse than that of the non-Aboriginal population.

⁹ ISECA is constructed using information on the economic characteristics of the areas in which students live, the geographic location of the school and the proportion of Aboriginal students enrolled at the school.

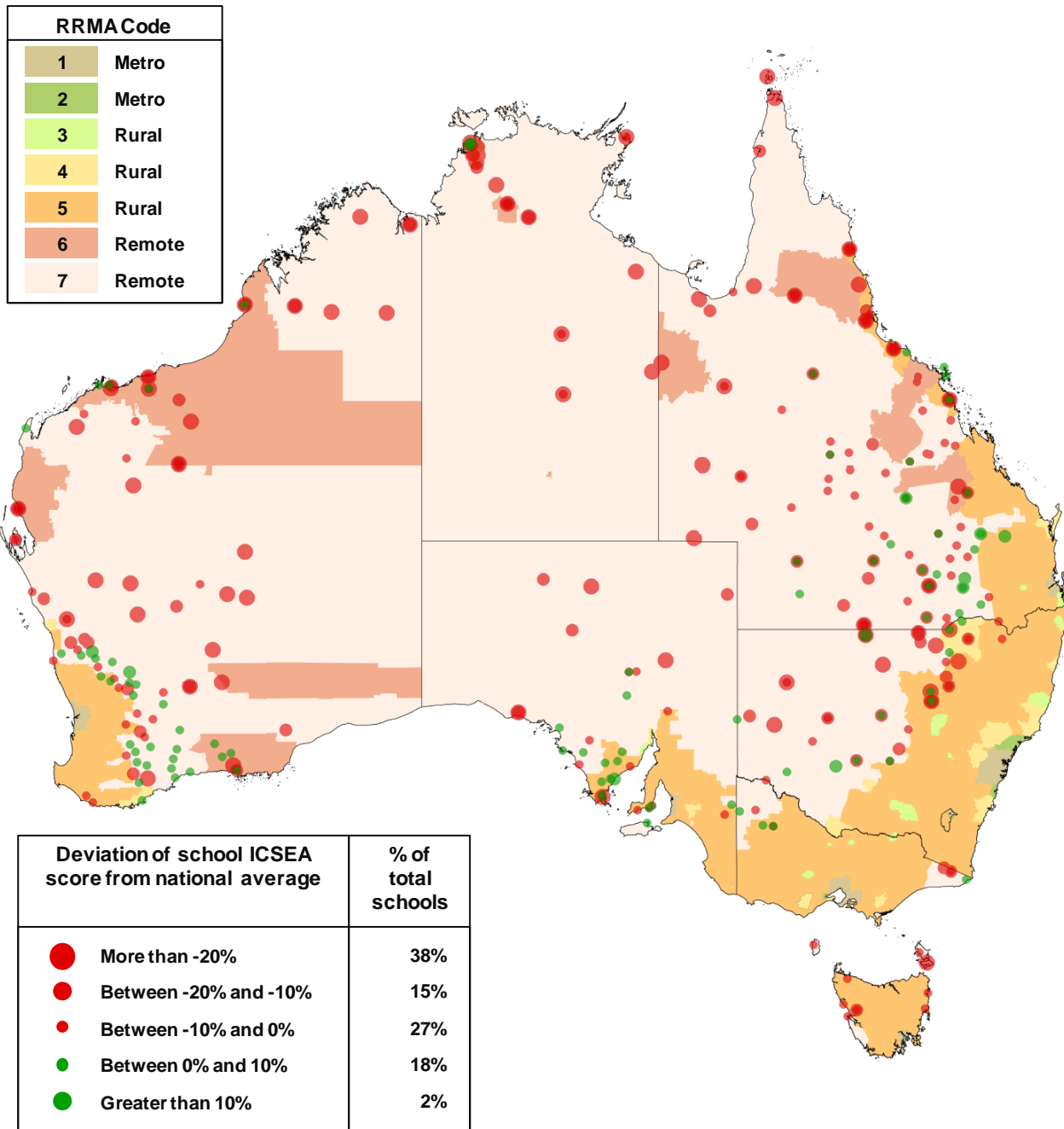
¹⁰ Our children, our Future, 2010

Figure 4: Average school ICSEA deviation from national average by LGA¹¹



¹¹ ISECA was developed to provide a composite measure of disadvantage that was closely correlated with NAPLAN test performance. As remoteness is one component of the composite index this contributes to the close correlation between the schools that are classified as a remote or very remote in this paper and the ISECA values in this map.

Figure 5: Deviation of school ICSEA score from national average¹²



¹² Individual small and remote schools may not be shown on the map if data for the school is not available for confidentiality reasons or if the school in question is a member of a multi-campus school. The use of postal codes to determine locations for the mapping may also influence the mapping of schools to geographic location.

Conversely, small schools closer to major metropolitan areas are equally as likely to cater to families in higher socio-economic groups as they are to those in lower socio-economic groups.

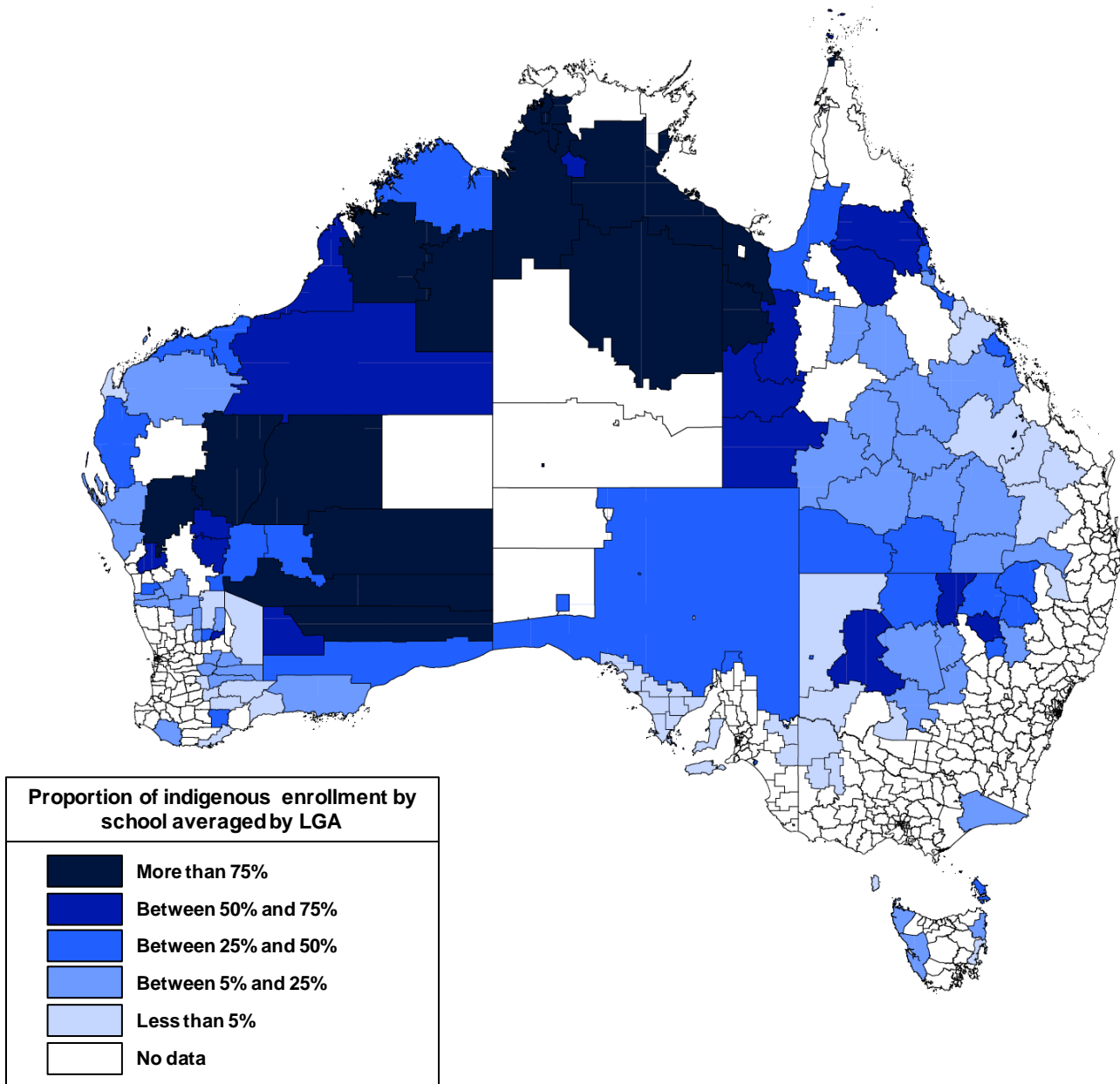
There is a proportion of small and remote schools that cater to families in higher socio-economic groups than the national average (20 per cent of total). Of the schools that cater to above average socio-economic communities, most are located in Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia. Of those, only South Australia enjoys a relatively high proportion, with regards to total small and remote schools (see Table 1). Victoria is the only state in which a majority of small and remote schools have above average socio-economic scores, although this is based on just 12 schools in the region.

There are a number of schools in the surrounding Brisbane area which also have a high ICSEA score, although a number of below-average SES schools are located within the same area. Interestingly, along the NSW/QLD border, there is a mix of very low SES schools and relatively high SES schools (see Figure 5).

Table 1: ICSEA Score Deviation from National Average, by jurisdiction

State	Below Average Schools	Above Average Schools
New South Wales	77%	23%
Northern Territory	95%	5%
Queensland	81%	19%
South Australia	64%	36%
Tasmania	100%	0%
Victoria	42%	58%
Western Australia	76%	24%
Total	80%	20%

Figure 6: Proportion of Aboriginal enrolment by school, averaged by LGA¹³



¹³ The map shows the average percentage of Aboriginal enrolment of all small and remote schools within an LGA. It is important to note that the percentages are not weighted by school enrolment. It is simply a measure of school-by-school average. The map only includes data from schools classified as 'small and remote', essentially the schools found in the enrolment map (refer back to Figure 1).

Looking at Figure 6, it is clear that a wide variation in Aboriginal enrolment exists in remote schools across Australia. In general, highly Aboriginal schools are more concentrated in the interior and northernmost regions of Australia, whereas the primarily non-Aboriginal small and remote schools are generally found closer to the west and east coasts, and near major metropolitan areas.

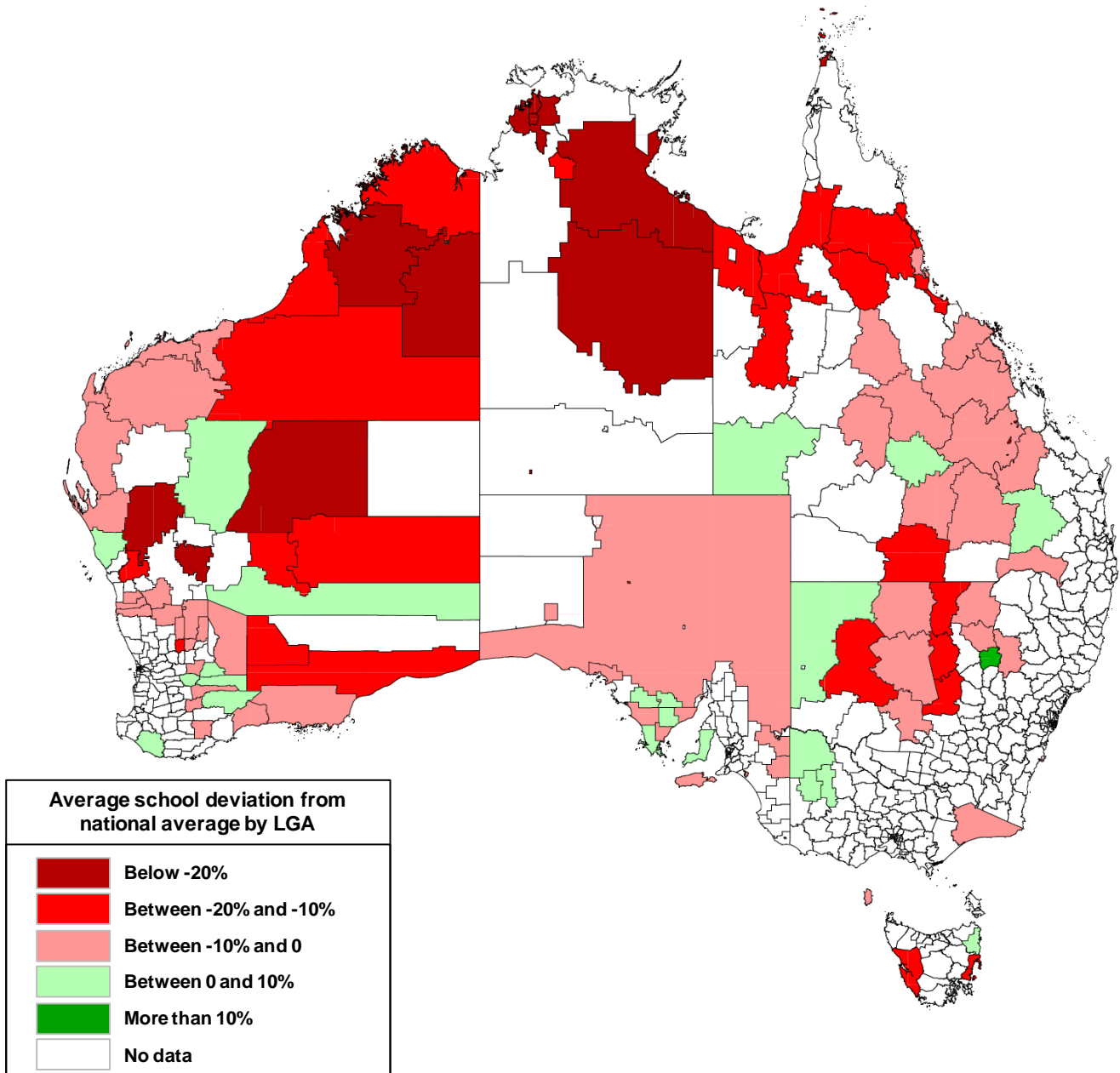
1.6 Variation in academic performance

Academic performance varies across small and remote schools but is lower overall compared to like schools in less remote areas. Level of remoteness, socio-economic status and level of Aboriginal enrolment appear to be relevant considerations, but this is not always the case.

There is a wide variation in the academic performance of small and remote schools relative to like schools.

In general, small and remote schools reported results below the national average for their like schools. Only 17 per cent of the schools achieved above average NAPLAN Reading test scores when compared to like schools. Of the 83 per cent of below-average scoring schools, almost 30 per cent of the schools came in 20 per cent or more below their like school national average.

Figure 7: Average deviation of highest year level NAPLAN Reading test scores from like school national average, by LGA

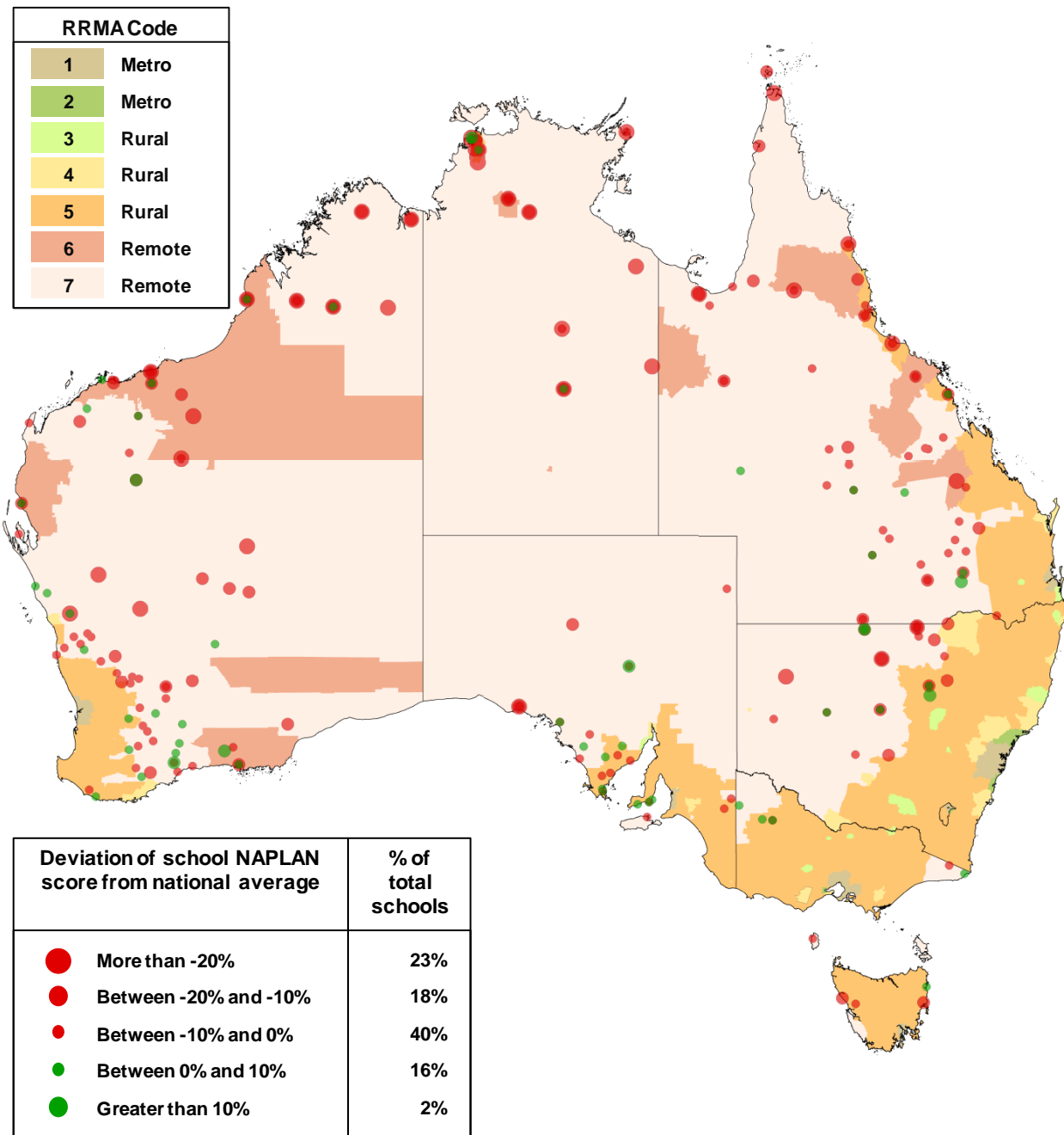


Overall there is a general trend of more remote regions having lower scores, and less remote regions achieving higher results. Figure 8 shows the NAPLAN Reading test score deviation from like school national average overlaid on a map detailing the remoteness classification of each region. Set against this level of remoteness, schools with the greatest (negative) deviation from the average performance are found in the most remotely classified areas.

The schools with lower than average NAPLAN Reading test results are found in the interior and northernmost regions of Australia, while the higher scoring regions are near the east, west and southern coasts.

There are very few schools that show a substantial 'above average' deviation in overall NAPLAN reading results. However, this may be due to the lack of reported data for very small schools, where due to privacy reasons results are not made available in the public domain.

Figure 8: Deviation of school highest year level NAPLAN Reading test scores from like school national average¹⁴



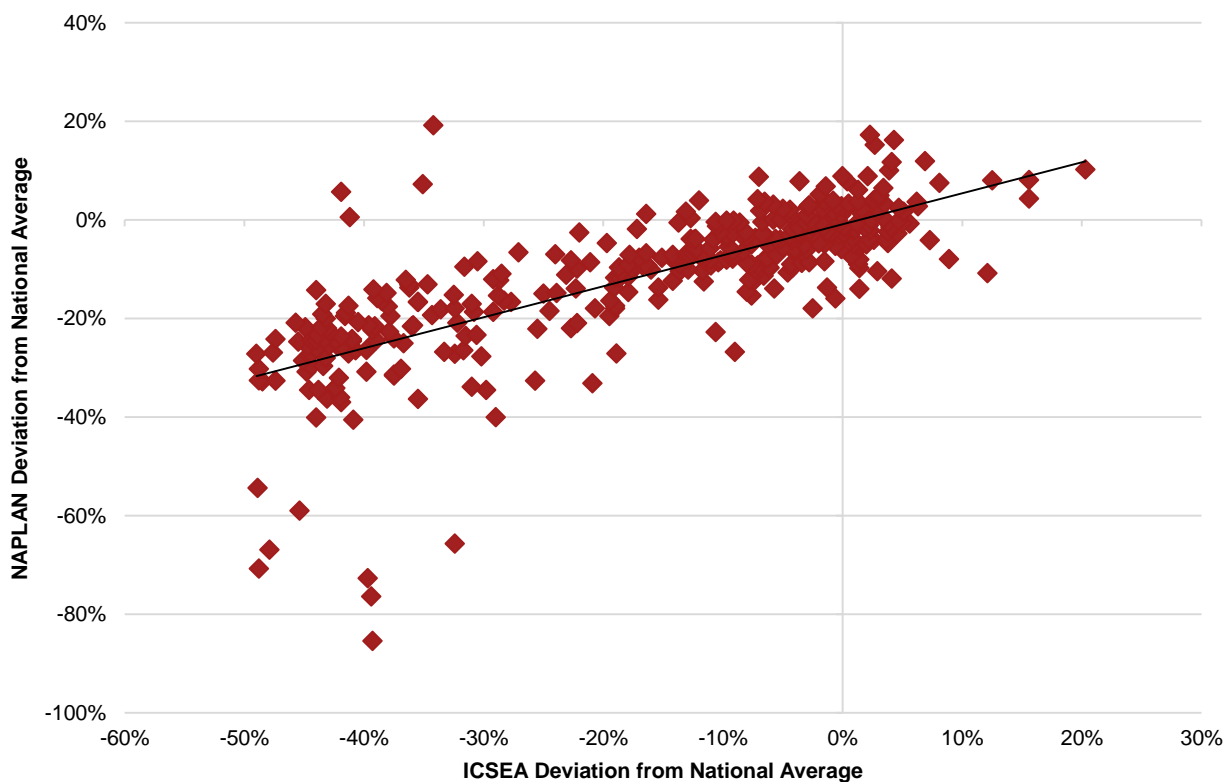
¹⁴ Individual small and remote schools may not be shown on the map if data for the school is not available for confidentiality reasons or if the school in question is a member of a multi-campus school. The use of postal codes to determine locations for the mapping may also influence the mapping of schools to geographic location.

However, Figure 8 also shows that it is more than location which is driving performance. There are several examples of schools in close proximity having variable performance relative to their comparative schools.

This is shown in areas on the map where a green mark and a red mark sit side-by-side. Good examples include Darwin, the southern region near Port Lincoln and the region surrounding Perth. There, a number of small schools exist in close proximity, with some achieving above-average scores to like schools and others scoring below.

The combined impact of economic resources, remoteness and the proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in the school community can be seen by in Figure 9. There is a positive correlation between school ICSEA scores and NAPLAN reading test results. Figure 9 also reinforces the observation that the majority of small and remote schools are both below average in socio-educational status, as well as NAPLAN test results.

Figure 9: ICSEA Deviation from National Average



However, NAPLAN results are only one measure of academic performance, and for many small and remote schools they are not a highly relevant measure of student engagement, participation, development, and overall school success.

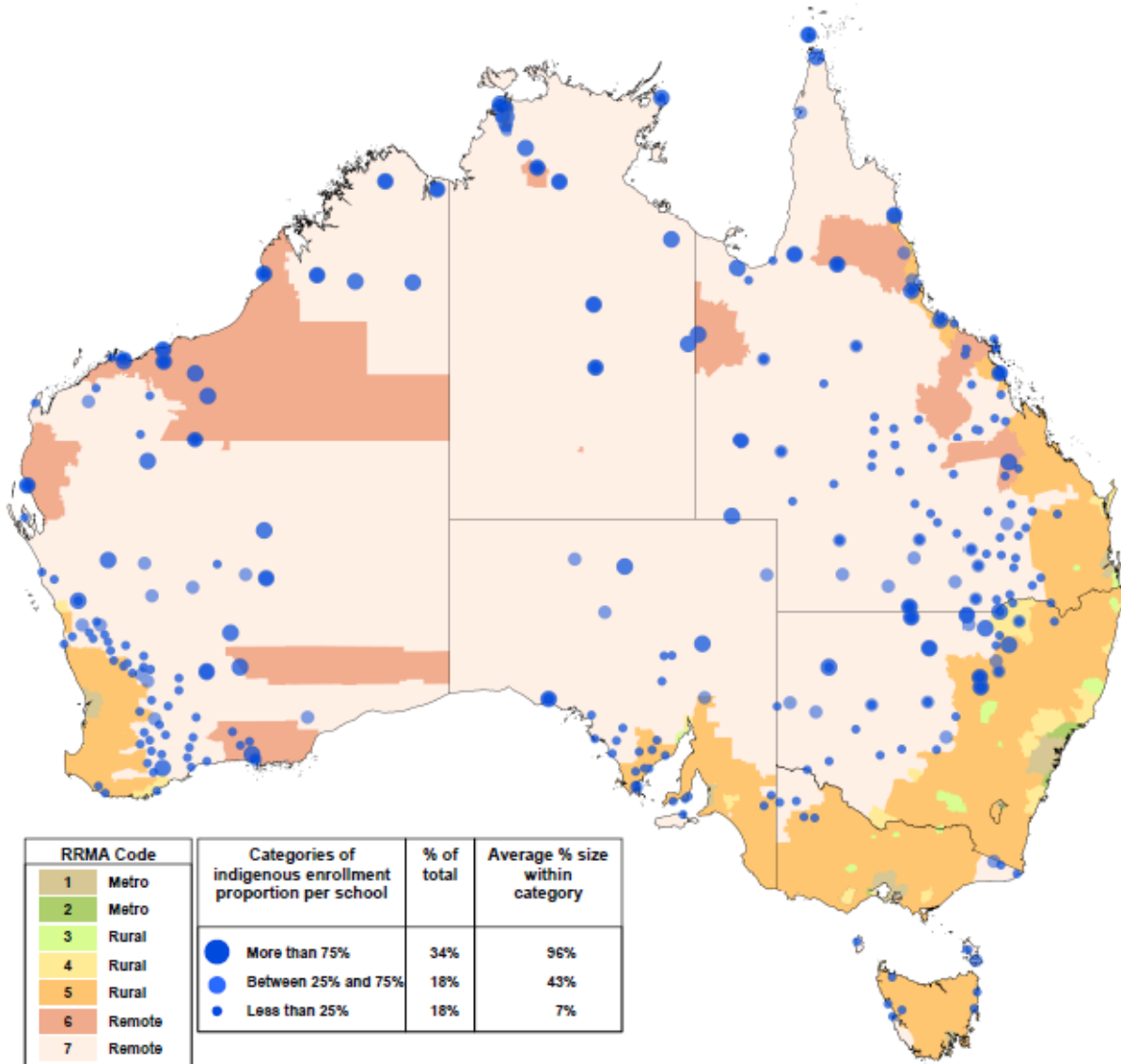
1.7 The characteristics of students who attend small and remote schools

The majority of small and remote schools in Australia are either primarily Aboriginal or primarily non-Aboriginal, with only a small proportion of schools that are substantially mixed.

Figure 10 looks at the proportion of Aboriginal enrolment in each school. This shows that of the over 600 small and remote schools in Australia, only 17 per cent had moderately mixed populations of students (between 25 per cent and

75 per cent Aboriginal). Close to 50 per cent of the small and remote schools in Australia have less than 25 per cent Aboriginal enrolment, with roughly 33 per cent of schools having enrolments that are over 75 per cent Aboriginal.

Figure 10: Aboriginal enrolment proportion per school¹⁵



¹⁵ Individual small and remote schools may not be shown on the map if data for the school is not available for confidentiality reasons or if the school in question is a member of a multi-campus school. The use of postal codes to determine locations for the mapping may also influence the mapping of schools to geographic location.

Background

Of the primarily Aboriginal schools, the average Aboriginal enrolment percentage is 96 per cent. Hence, of the schools that are primarily Aboriginal, most are almost entirely Aboriginal.

Regionally, the majority of schools in the most remote regions of Australia are in the more than 75 per cent Aboriginal category. Conversely, the majority of schools in the south-west, south and east-coast have enrolments that are less than 25 per cent Aboriginal. Within NSW, the schools in the north are primarily Aboriginal, while the schools in the south are primarily non-Aboriginal. Overall, 49 per cent of small and remote schools in NSW have Aboriginal students making up less than 25 per cent of their enrolment, contrasted with only 20 per cent of the schools containing a population that is more than 75 per cent Aboriginal.

This breakdown is similar to the enrolment map, in that the schools closer to major metropolitan areas tend to be smaller and primarily non-Aboriginal, whereas the more remote schools tend to be larger and primarily Aboriginal.

1.8 Implications for school strategies

This data analysis demonstrates that small and remote schools encounter a diverse set of situations and challenges, and provides the context for an analysis of school challenges and strategies.

Schools are found in very different parts of the country, with a diverse set of cultural backgrounds and a variety of socio-economic levels.

For instance, a large, very remote, highly Aboriginal school is likely to have a very different set of challenges compared to a small, less remote, mostly non-Aboriginal school.

As a result 'success' will mean something different for each school and there is not likely to be any single solution to meeting the challenges faced by each small and remote school.

The next section highlights the particular challenges that small and remote schools face, which includes both classroom performance indicators, as well as factors like community acceptance and participation, student attendance and relevant curriculum tailored to local values.

2 Key challenges

Remote schools face unique challenges in the areas of resourcing, teacher quality, and student performance.

They further confront challenges that affect all schools as principals need to become change agents and teachers need to broaden their skills and abilities, however they are faced with more limited access to professional development, coaching and mentoring than non-remote schools.

These challenges are the undercurrent for the strategies that remote schools pursue to thrive in a remote environment and witness a sustainable improvement in student educational outcomes.

2.1 Challenges in attracting and retaining the right leaders and staff

Attracting and retaining leaders, both principals and teachers, is a challenge in remote areas as many teachers are reluctant to experience a rural and remote practicum.

A survey conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 2000 indicated that 49 per cent of survey participants in WA and 34 per cent in the NT expressed concerns over teacher availability in rural and remote schools.¹⁶

Shortages are particularly pronounced in specific subjects such as science, mathematics and english. Studies suggest this has been further exacerbated by the ageing population and baby boomer generation leading to a high proportion of teachers who are young and in the process of building experience.¹⁷

The key reasons highlighted by principals and staff in the survey and case studies undertaken for this review include:

- **Perceived lifestyle disadvantages** of living and working in regional and remote communities, which can be confronting for teachers who come from a different background. Even for those teachers who have grown up in such environments, the diversity of small and remote schools means that there is no guarantee that they will fit easily into life in a new school. Staff can feel like strangers in a new community and struggle to develop natural ties with the community. This can be particularly the case in mining communities where a move to fly-in, fly-out workforces has eroded traditional social infrastructure such as sporting clubs. Partners and families can add further to this challenge given limited employment and educational opportunities.
- **Perceived cost disadvantages** of living and working in regional and remote communities as teachers may face higher food and power bills, higher costs of telephone and internet usage, the time and financial imposts associated with travel, and costs associated with importing bulky goods.
- **Perceived limitations to career advancement** (although in many cases the opposite is the case and remote school postings are often used as a stepping stone to a higher level).
- **Logistical realities.** For teachers willing to work in remote areas, many are only willing to commute over an hour to certain communities if there is another teacher with which they can carpool. As a result, staff are often drawn from the local community where the pool of resources is thin.

¹⁶ Stokes, H., Stafford, J. & Holdsworth, R. (2000)

¹⁷ MCEETYA (2004)

Key challenges

2.1.1 The reality of high staff turnover in remote schools

When they do arrive, teachers and sometimes principals often stay for short durations. In some cases this can be because staff are insufficiently prepared prior to their first posting at a remote school. Consequently many remote schools face the challenge of teachers and principals not staying beyond the minimum period, and negative experiences can lead to myths surrounding teaching in rural settings. Tenures are often particularly short in the more demanding postings.

“Turnover is very high. As fast as you train them they go to another job.” (Principal from a combined Aboriginal school in New South Wales)

“I have been incredibly fortunate to have the staff that I have had. Unfortunately, over the next few terms many of the staff will have completed their four years and will go to postings in less remote schools (which they fully deserve). They will be replaced by inexperienced graduate teachers.” (Principal from a primary school in remote Western Australia)

“Some teachers just don’t realise what it’s going to be like. These teachers can be the ones attracted by the higher salaries, but in reality, you can’t rely on that because you end up using the additional financial incentives to do things like socialise on the weekends.” (Principal from remote Northern Territory)

The short tenure of principals is also a significant challenge for remote schools. A recurring theme of our discussions with principals and teachers in case study schools was that it takes time for a new principal to establish themselves at a school, develop their understanding of the schools particular circumstances, establish trust with students and build relationships with the local community. Short tenures compress the time available to identify, plan, implement and manage change effectively.

“It can take 18 months to two years for a principal to understand their new school and to build trust and rapport with staff, students and the community. If a principal is only at a school for three years there is little time left to implement change. Some principals see their remote school posting as a stepping stone to positions in more desirable schools and to demonstrate their capabilities will make changes too quickly with disruptive consequences.” (Teachers from a remote Western Australian school)

“It takes time to establish yourself as a new principal, especially if the principal who has just left was well-known and well accepted by the community. It can take a long time to properly engage in the same way, with both the community and with staff.” (Principal from remote South Australia)

Short tenure is also an issue for student and community engagement. A common theme is the fundamental need to develop and maintain routine for students if attendance at school and student engagement with school is to be increased, and higher turnover can be deleterious to the maintenance of routine.

“We put so much effort into building trust with our students and ensuring that they feel that school is a safe and welcoming environment. It actually helps that we have multi-year classrooms as we can work with the same group of students for several years. However, when a new teacher comes to the school they have to start this process over again. Rather than take permanency I have chosen to remain on contract so I can stay at this school.” (Teacher from a school in remote Western Australia)

“High staff turnover does make it tough to sustain a school culture for the students.” (Principal from remote South Australia)

Rapid turnover also has an impact on the effectiveness of networks among the leaders of schools. It was frequently highlighted that new principals, because they need time to establish themselves at a school, are less likely to be able to participate fully in leadership networks.

“A new principal has so much on their plate that they simply aren’t able to devote the time to the principal network that established principals can.” (Principal from a District High School in remote Western Australia)

Key challenges

High turnover and a high proportion of beginning teachers also impose an additional training cost on remote schools.

Remote schools are frequently required to provide the training ground for large numbers of young teachers who then relocate to metropolitan areas, leaving these schools with the financial burden of training the next intake. This means that remote schools often wear a disproportionately high burden of training beginning teachers without receiving any of the benefits of continued tenure and professional growth.

Of course, there are exceptions and many of the schools visited had one or more staff members who had been at the school for many decades. However most school principals spoke about the need to ‘sell the benefits’ of working in a remote area to overcome the challenges identified above.

“Young teachers aren't drawn by permanency these days. We have to sell the job in other ways, for example advertising the community and lifestyle or highlighting that it's an adventure. Perhaps it is a ‘Gen Y’ thing where the young teachers like to do a bit of this and a bit of that, take off and backpack over Europe before coming back again. This is a big change from when people were attracted to teaching because of its permanency. Extra money is the wrong ‘lure’ as the ones that come for the money are inevitably the ones that don’t work out on a long term basis.” (Principal from a primary school in remote South Australia)

2.2 The prevalence of less experienced and beginning teachers in remote schools

This review has confirmed that it is very common that inexperienced teachers rather than experienced teachers are posted to small and remote schools.

“The staff that come to this school are typically young and have not worked in this environment before. However, there is no opportunity when they first start for a deep conversation about what it is like to work in this environment and ensure its where they really want to be.” (A K-7 remote Queensland school with less than 50 students, principally Aboriginal)

“Many applicants to our teaching posts are from very new and inexperienced teachers, often straight out of university. The difficulty with this is that they are not likely to understand what it takes to be a teacher in a remote location.” (Principal from a primary school in remote South Australia)

In some cases this is driven by specific staffing policies and incentives offered for remote placements for beginning teachers, and in some cases it reflects the intention of staff to use their posting as a stepping stone to a better position elsewhere.

The high turnover of predominantly inexperienced teachers creates further issues for remote schools in terms of the continuity of relationships with other staff, students and the wider community. Long standing research has noted that if teacher turnover is high and teachers themselves are not at their best, they can make a disproportionately adverse impact on pupils, and small schools are disproportionately destabilised.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ankrah-Dove (1987)

Key challenges

2.3 Fewer structures, and in some cases resources, to support change

A lack of support and resources is often cited as a frustration for principals and teachers in small and remote schools. The key areas highlighted throughout this review include:

- insufficient funding (although this was not universally applicable)
- insufficient access to health and welfare professionals
- limited access to professional development for school leaders and teachers and other support within schools.

2.3.1 Financial constraints

In some of the schools visited as part of this review, operating budgets were felt to be constrained by the influence of the student enrolment formula on the operating budget rather than actual needs, which poses particular challenges to the smaller schools.

Other factors that influence allocations, such as the ability to acquire well-trained and specialist teachers, the ability to hire teachers with broad skills to teach in a variety of subjects, and threats of regional consolidation¹⁹, also do not bode well for small remote schools.

This is not universally the case as specific funding arrangements that provide additional resources for qualifying schools often exist. However, some schools visited as part of this review could reasonably be considered to be remote, but did not meet the criteria for equity funding. In some cases when equity funding was available, some remote schools funding per student does not necessarily reflect need.

Because small and remote schools lack the internal staff resources of larger schools they have a greater need for external assistance to help them deal with administrative burdens and specific issues. In some cases, efforts to reduce central and district office staff levels have impacted adversely on these schools as the support available to them has diminished.

“I work from five in the morning to five in the evening. It is frustrating that things that used to be done by central and district office staff, for example organising housing, vehicles and plane flights, are now my responsibility.”
(Principal of a primary school in remote Western Australia)

2.3.2 Limited access to health and other professionals

Other forms of support that may be taken for granted in schools in urban areas are either not available to small and remote schools or available in such a way that their effectiveness is limited. Good examples are access to speech therapists and occupational therapists. These professionals play an important role in responding to developmental issues that reduce students’ ability to make the most of learning opportunities.

While access to these professionals via the public health system may be limited in urban areas, parents at least have the option of accessing private providers. This option is generally not available to parents and students in small and remote schools. Where small and remote schools can arrange visits by health professionals, low-levels of attendance can mean that the students who most need assistance may not be at school on the day of the visit. In some cases, students may really need more intensive and on-going assistance than can be provided.

¹⁹ Barter, B. (2008)

Key challenges

“We have a school psychologist who visits regularly. However, the students who really need the help need more intensive support than is possible. To some extent, the school psychologist visits help my teachers more than they really help the student.” (Principal of a primary school in remote Western Australia)

“Students that were ill would generally stay at home before we got the health clinic to make a weekly visit to the school. As well as not attending school, it was also unlikely that they were getting their health issue addressed.” (Principal from a remote secondary school in the Northern Territory).

2.3.3 Limited access to professional development and support within schools

Remote schools, like all others, operate in a constantly changing environment.

In particular, the contemporary educational leadership context requires principals and staff to acquire new skills and abilities associated with new accountabilities and responsibilities, new technology, the need to balance managerial and leadership responsibilities, initiating and coping with change, and increasing the availability of staff professional learning.²⁰ This can present real challenges for remote schools that do not have access to the same programs to assist principals and teachers to develop the necessary skills to deal with this context.

For example, new thinking around leadership programs is that they should aim to support leaders throughout their working lives, they should be long-term rather than episodic, they should be job-embedded rather than detached, they should be carefully planned with a coherent curriculum, and be focused on student achievement.²¹

This can be difficult to achieve in remote schools where there is a lack of long-term, high quality professional development for principals and inadequate support for reflective practice for teachers in their schools.

“Teachers miss out on those deep and rich conversations that often occur in the staff room and in the school corridors which is a major challenge.” (a K-7 remote Queensland school with less than 50 students, principally Aboriginal)

“A key issue is the lack of support for leadership staff in small and remote schools.” (a 7-12 Victorian school with less than 100 enrolments, no Aboriginal students)

Some of the specific challenges to improving access to professional development and greater support within schools highlighted in consultations for this review include:

- challenges balancing management and leadership roles given that remote schools and leaders often have less administrative support available to them than non remote schools
- difficulties in developing effective leadership networks and the mentoring relationships that are important for the on-going development of leadership potential
- the need to engage extensively with the community to deliver change within schools and to collaborate with the immediate community, local business and industry, and social welfare and health services
- limited access to and availability of technical support, given that technology is increasingly integral to enabling leadership and teaching within remote schools
- limited resources overall, with many remote schools unable to fill staff vacancies and some school resources being too stretched to consistently apply for grants and additional resources to which they may be entitled due as a function of their remote status and the generally poorer educational outcomes of students.

²⁰ https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/reviews/futuresproject/report/o_comppaper3.pdf

²¹ http://www.canberra.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/27748/quality-teaching-leadership.pdf

Key challenges

2.4 The need to lift teacher quality

There is mounting evidence suggesting that teachers are perhaps the single most important factor influencing a student's educational progress and outcomes.²²

Teacher quality can be an issue in remote locations when vacancies can be hard to fill and/or when high levels of turnover mean that teachers leave a school at the point when they have only recently developed the skills and knowledge required to be highly effective.

Access to professional development is a major issue in rural and remote schools. Professional development is often hard to access in rural and remote regions and staff members have to travel long distances to attend, rely on school based mentoring and development, or have infrequent (and costly) access to visiting consultants.

These schools then face the added challenge of being less able to find temporary relief teachers to redeploy existing staff to replace absent staff.²³

“Professional development is absolutely a priority. We don't want our staff to miss out, but it gets very difficult to timetable it in. It's also best if multiple staff go, rather than just one, but this adds to the challenge of making sure it happens.” (Principal from a primary school in remote South Australia)

While staff in small and remote schools can and do attend major professional development activities they frequently miss out on the on-going professional development activities available to their city colleagues. Cost and time away from the school mean that they are generally not able to attend workshops, seminars and short courses. In some cases, poorer access to professional development can slow the rate of skills development for teachers.

“Accessing advice, research, strategies for teaching multi age and multi grades – multi age schools have existed for decades but we have difficulty accessing experts and advice to help with training and professional development for staff.” (Principal from a primary school in remote Northern Territory)

2.5 Challenges to achieving student engagement

The challenge of building student engagement is a common theme for remote schools. It is recognised that getting students to school is only part of the battle and that once they are there, ensuring that they are engaged is crucial to achieving outcomes. As with many of the other challenges discussed above the challenge of achieving student engagement is exacerbated by the circumstances facing many small and remote schools.

A student's level of engagement is comprised of both behavioural and educational components. Often the observable behaviours directly related to academic effort and achievement are solely used to measure student engagement. The affective and cognitive elements can also play a significant role, such elements include:²⁴

²² Selafani, S. (2010)

²³ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000)

²⁴ Cunningham E., Wang W. & Bishop, N (2006)

Key challenges

- perceptions of connectedness to school
- student-teacher relationships
- student-peer relationships
- motivation to learn
- self-esteem
- student safety.

When all contributing factors are taken into consideration it can be easier to understand the reasons for lower levels of engagement. Particularly within Aboriginal communities, notions of shame and shyness have a powerful impact on a student's willingness to attend school but it also affects their degree of participation and engagement.²⁵

“There’s a big range in terms of previous school attendance. Some haven’t attended school in years and others come more than 80 per cent of the time so it can be difficult to teach to each of these levels of school engagement.” (Principal from a school in the Northern Territory)

2.5.1 Relevance of the school curriculum

In communities where the curriculum is viewed as irrelevant due to urban-based content, urban teaching and learning strategies and urban information structures, students in remote schools can find it difficult to see the purpose and value of attending school.²⁶

“NAPLAN is not accessible for most kids in our schools but they still use it and participate. We are trying to develop alternative ways to measure their achievements and progress that are relevant for their context.” (Principal from a primary school in remote Northern Territory)

Schools often struggle to gain support from local communities and families as parents expect the curriculum to provide both ‘rural education’ and an ‘education in rural areas.’ This requires a well-rounded curriculum equivalent to the quality and scope of urban schools that provide the same quality of literacy and numeracy skills, social studies, the sciences, languages, music and the arts. Furthermore, there is an expectation to address rural values, lifestyles and issues related to the local context.²⁷

In many cases, small and remote schools are restricted in the range of curriculum options and subject choice is often limited. Many students are faced with a choice of staying in rural communities and accepting the limited curriculum, undertaking distance education or boarding at larger urban schools, requiring significant travel and lengthy periods of time away from family and friends.

“It is our aim to deliver secondary school appropriate content to the students but it is often not accessible where the students have low literacy levels, presenting a challenge to our teachers. It takes a lot of time to tailor the curriculum to suit the needs of our students.” (Principal from a primary school in remote Northern Territory)

²⁵ Schwab, R. (1998)

²⁶ Arnold, P. (2001)

²⁷ Arnold, P. (2001)

2.6 Barriers to achieving improved educational outcomes

There are several factors that remote schools often exhibit which can act as a barrier to improvements in student educational outcomes. Issues that were repeatedly highlighted by the schools visited as part of this research include:

- often lower levels of literacy and numeracy
- cultural and language barriers, particularly for schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal enrolments
- distance barriers preventing equal opportunities to further education and the workforce
- poor health and nutrition of students
- unsafe home and community environments.

Some remote schools struggle to provide the breadth of opportunities to students, some of whom have complex needs and some who require extensive support and access to work and higher education.

“Our school faces the difficulty of ensuring that it is able to cater for all young people and is able to offer programmes which challenge the most able students academically and which offer real alternatives for those students who wish to pursue non-academic options such as vocational education and training.” (A 7-12 remote Victorian school, principally non- Aboriginal)

2.6.1 Literacy and language barriers

The overall lower levels of literacy and numeracy levels for students in small and remote schools creates specific challenges for small and remote schools.

“There is no early childhood education in the community. So prep and kindergarten children arrive at school with almost no literacy or numeracy skills – the students are starting school at a disadvantage.” (A combined remote Queensland school with less than 80 students, principally Aboriginal)

Amongst Aboriginal students, especially when first entering the school system, literacy and language barriers can be a significant issue. In some cases standard Australian English may be a second or third language at home, being used less often than either the traditional language or Australian Aboriginal English. These students require greater support and more resources if they are going to effectively participate at school. Unfortunately there is a constant challenge to provide remote schools with teachers with English as Second Language (ESL) skills in these schools to provide the assistance and direction that these students require.²⁸

Cultural differences also impact on a child’s ability to perform at school and these are prevalent in remote communities. Cultural obligations do not always fit easily within a school system developed around Western norms. This is true for students, but also for parents who may be obligated to remove their children from school so that they can attend important cultural activities. Furthermore, the extension of the concept of personal autonomy to children can mean that a child’s decision not to attend school is accepted by their parents and the wider community whereas the mainstream norm gives children little choice in this matter.²⁹

²⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000)

²⁹ Schwab, R. (1998)

Key challenges

2.6.2 Distance barriers to further education and the workforce

Connecting students to work and further education are highly desirable as this can influence a student's willingness to stay in school. Without these opportunities, students struggle to see the relevance in attending school and the ultimate pay-off to performing at school can be unclear.

Small and remote schools face challenges in providing these opportunities as resources are limited and the curriculum content is not sufficiently related to post-school outcomes. Schools often find they are restricted in providing access to:

- educational service centres
- vocational role models
- supporting institutions
- work and vocational experiences.

“We would like to offer more VET courses to students but because of the distance RTOs struggle to come out to us, which makes it very difficult. Sometimes we send students to town, but this is resource-intensive from our end. In addition, some of the correspondence courses require guidance from staff members. It can be hard to find the time to provide this.” (Principal, Northern Territory)

Even within local communities, the partnerships between schools and community services providers are often limited. Of those students that do undertake vocational education courses, the number and variety of work placements available are still limited. Students who require access to Registered Training Providers are often required to travel long distances or board in distant regional centres.³⁰ In 1994, 64 per cent of Aboriginal people living in rural and remote areas lived more than 50 kilometres away from a TAFE.³¹

2.6.3 Poor health and nutrition of Aboriginal students

Poor health and nutrition are key factors impacting both the ability of Aboriginal children to attend school and to be able to concentrate and participate effectively in school when they do attend.³² The health problems in many Aboriginal communities are well-documented.

Each year, around 11,000 Aboriginal children are born. By the age of 10 years, in many remote Aboriginal communities, up to 40 per cent of these children will have developed a chronic suppurative ear infection causing hearing loss, about 20 per cent will have been infected with trachoma, 10-15 per cent will have developed malnutrition, around 30 per cent will have anaemia, some will suffer the highest rates of acute rheumatic heart disease in the world, and a further 5 per cent will have been hospitalised for preventable pneumonia.³³

Of those with chronic ear infection, school attendance will be one-third less than non-Aboriginal children. In non-Aboriginal Australian children, it is likely that none will develop trachoma, rheumatic fever, and chronic suppurative ear infections, and only a few may develop the other diseases.³⁴

³⁰ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000)

³¹ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (1999)

³² Our children, our Future 2010

³³ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/perspective/stories/2004/1012609.htm>

³⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/perspective/stories/2004/1012609.htm>

Key challenges

2.6.4 Poor or unsafe community environment

Poor or unsafe community environment (reflected in high levels of community violence or a high number of stressful events) reduces individual and family welfare and the stability of student' home environment leading to impaired physical and emotional wellbeing of students.³⁵

'Life stress events' have been identified as the factor most strongly associated with a high risk of clinically significant emotional or behavioural difficulties in Aboriginal children (Zubrick et al. 2005). In WA, in 2000-01, more than one in five Aboriginal children aged 0-17 years were living in families that had been exposed to 7 to 14 major life stress events, such as death, incarceration, violence and severe hardship, in the previous 12 months (Silburn et al. 2006).³⁶ Those children were found to be more than five times more likely to be at risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties than children in families subject to lower levels of stress (Zubrick et al. 2006).³⁷

Apart from the increased risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties the community environment may simply not be conducive to conditions that support a child's ability to attend and participate at school. Lack of routine in the home can translate into children who are too tired to attend school and be engaged while there.

"I cannot think about [topic] because my mum and dad are always drunk, now my sister is pregnant, and I can't think about anything else." (Response of a 6 year old student to a writing exercise about a particular topic at one of the schools visited as part of this review)

The challenges faced by remote schools do not inhibit progress. They provide the context within which remote schools operate. Indeed these pressures can ignite a passion and determination to take innovative approaches to meeting student and community needs.

The value of this report is in providing small and/or remote schools with information and insight about how other schools are coping and responding to these challenges – thriving in a remote environment and making sustainable progress in students' educational outcomes.

³⁵ AMP Foundation, Effective Philanthropy and Social Ventures Australia (2009)

³⁶ Productivity Commission (2009)

³⁷ AMP Foundation, Effective Philanthropy and Social Ventures Australia (2009)

Part 2: Innovative strategies for small and remote schools

3 Key strategies

An effective remote school is characterised by students who are highly engaged, performing well with the support of the local community under an effective leadership with a stable and committed staff.

Remote schools adopt a variety of strategies to achieve the various components of a good school. These strategies vary in scale and scope, and include:

- ‘bottom-up’ approaches driven by local schools and communities
- larger scale programs driven by private or non-government organisations, typically spanning a number of schools and communities
- government-driven programs.

The strategies outlined in this report are not a ‘recipe for success’ or a guarantee of short term turnarounds or change. They have also not been subject to formal evaluation.

However, they are an important showcase of what has been effective for individual schools. In identifying these strategies, this report draws out what have been the likely success factors, and the transferable lessons for other schools facing similar challenges. The key themes which best describe the innovative strategies reviewed include:

- the critical role of effective leadership
- ways to build staff connectedness to school through:
 - attraction and retention
 - improving teacher quality
- ways to build student connectedness to school through:
 - student engagement
 - student performance
 - student connectedness to work or further education
- ways to build community connectedness to school
 - improving the way that the school is valued by the community
 - co-creation strategies to set the objectives for the school and for students
 - partnerships between the school and the community to deliver educational content that enhances educational outcomes for students
- strategies that enhance student health and wellbeing.

The case studies and insights from successful remote schools highlighted in this report are drawn from a survey of all small and remote schools and a series of school visits to remote schools in Queensland, the Northern Territory, Western Australia, New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia.

While there are common themes being adopted by successful remote schools, each school takes an individual approach to meeting the needs of students and managing the challenges they face. The appropriate strategy or implementation of a strategy for any school depends on the evolution of a school and the stage of its community relationships and student needs.

Hence ‘success’ and ‘innovation’ can mean different things to different schools at different times.

4 Effective leadership

Key leadership strategies for remote schools focus on building community trust, involving the community in the school curriculum, ensuring that the school is well resourced by successfully tapping into all public and private funding sources, and providing intensive support to deal with complex student needs.

Some remote schools are highly innovative in their multi-pronged approach to partnering with local communities to co-create and then drive innovative approaches to improving student engagement and learning outcomes. A 'can do' attitude, persistence, resilience, hard work and determination are essential elements of success.

4.1 The importance of effective leadership

"The leadership role played by the school principal is critical. Principals wear many different hats during the school day, but the most effective school principals are not only managers and disciplinarians but also instructional leaders for the school. Successful principals provide a common vision of what good instruction looks like, support teachers with the help and resources they need to be effective in their classrooms, and monitor the performance of teachers and students, with an eye always on the overall goal - to create school cultures or environments in which all children can achieve to their full potentials." ³⁸

Leadership emerges as a key theme for successful remote schools simply because many strategies actually reflect outstanding school leadership and demonstrate its effects. This makes innovative strategies that develop effective leadership within a school community essential for small and remote schools.

Effective school leaders engage staff in whole-of-school issues, manage change, and are a recognised leader in the community, often performing community leadership roles in addition to their role in the school. Good leaders in schools are described as those who:

- are able to build trust and rapport
- have the capacity to diagnose organisational conditions and fully understand the challenges and needs facing their school
- are effective in dealing with processes and change, having the change management skills to effectively lead change initiatives within the school
- are dedicated to building skills and confidence in others
- are able to effectively engage staff, students and the local community.

In a remote school environment, principals and staff highlighted several key areas where these attributes are used to best address the challenges that remote schools face. These include:

- an ability to drive staff to achieve their best and manage the 'respectful tension' that exists between principals and staff. Principals are change agents which can make them unpopular. They need to respect others but remain steadfast in pursuing the schools strategic agenda
- the fostering of a culture of pride in the school and its students: pride in the school's achievements, pride in the association of staff and students with the school, and optimism about what can be achieved. This fosters a positive school environment which helps create a momentum for change

³⁸ http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PBo9_Leadership08.pdf

- the successful anchoring of the school in the wider community where the school becomes the hub of the community and a valued and respected community organisation. Many successful remote schools have only become so because they have worked hard with local communities to gain respect and a commitment to improving the school and its role in the community
- the ability to provide some continuity of staff and executives over time (acknowledging however that many successful remote schools have never had extended periods of tenure for principals or staff)
- the provision of effective support to staff, where staff feel valued and feel that they are receiving a unique development experience at the school.

“I try to impress on my staff the overriding need to focus on our core business of teaching kids. In terms of implementing strategies for improving outcomes for our students we don’t really have the capacity to be innovators. Rather, we need to follow without falling behind, adopting strategies that others have trialled and hopefully not having to repeat the mistakes, and go through the same amount of learning by trial and error.”
(Principal of a district high school in remote Western Australia)

Box 1: What principals and staff told us about effective leadership

...the importance of leading and encouraging change

- Effective principals are driven in their desire to improve the outcome for students at the school. They are highly self-motivated, passionate, and put their vision for the school first.
- Effective principals need to ensure that staff don’t get too set in their ways and are always encouraged to innovate and adopt new ways to keep student engagement high.
- When the school is implementing ‘best practice’, effective principals are thinking about what is the ‘next practice’.
- It is important that the principal has a lot of flexibility and autonomy to make decisions that work for the school. For example, the final say on staff recruitment, school hours, and professional development for staff.

...the importance of instilling pride in the school among staff and students

- Successful principals in remote schools are passionate about the school and have a vision for its students and the role of the school in the community. This pride becomes infectious and staff become more engaged, committed, and better able to see opportunities for student development. A school that is proud of its achievements and optimistic about the future is testament to the effective leadership of the principal.
- Communicating the school vision well demonstrates effective leadership. This requires regular staff meetings and interaction and in house training to ensure staff are ‘on the same page’ to deliver on the schools strategy and develop a positive school culture.

...the importance of anchoring the school in the wider community

- Principals must engage with the local community to gain support, respect and trust. When done well, the school can become the hub for the community and bring the community closer.
 - In highly Aboriginal communities, an effective principal would be described by the community as someone who “comes here white but leaves black”.
 - Effective principals bring the community into the school. Community representatives or decision makers are invited to build a consensus around the school strategy. In Aboriginal communities it is effective to recruit an Aboriginal mentor who is independent and respected to guide the consensus building. Patience and resilience are essential. There will often be a rough storm before there is calm.
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...the importance of staff support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective principals need to ensure staff are supported in their professional development, teaching strategies and resource needs. • The principal should help teachers focus on their students by helping out with ancillary duties, such as student logistics, grant-writing and community engagement. • One single Senior Management Team across dual (or multiple) campuses is critical for supporting students and staff as it ensures that the schools are connected but have autonomy and scope to develop specialised focuses.
...the importance of celebrating success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many ways that students can succeed and all types of success should be recognised and promoted. Sometimes the most important thing is to tell a student or their families that they worked really hard in maths last week. Families need to hear good things from the school not just about the times when things aren't going well.

Box 2: Examples of strategies to attract and develop effective leaders

Providing mentoring support for principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>One-on-one mentoring for principals</i> is an important strategy being used for what can be a very lonely role for principals in remote areas. Some regions have created Regional Network Leaders whose role is to provide mentoring the support for principals in a particular area. • <i>Providing forums for principals of remote schools to network.</i> One of the challenges for remote principals is that there is often no-one around to bounce ideas off and talk about problems being encountered. Taking time out of the school for networking is often difficult when it leads to a greater workload. Several areas are using web conferencing to provide a forum for principals to develop relationships with each-other and provide networking opportunities and a means to discuss common problems.
Investing in identifying the right principal for a remote posting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A year-long pilot phase for identifying principals that are appropriate for a remote school.</i> As part of Queensland's 'Principals and School Leaders Program', considerable effort is made to recruit <i>the right leaders</i> to lead remote schools. There are regional 'scouts' that look for the right people to be leaders in remote schools, who may or may not be principals already. Scouts and potential leaders have many 'fitting in' conversations. There is an Ambassadors Program where previous principals get engaged in providing insight and information to prospective new principals for remote schools. There is also a 'Bound for Success Recruitment' strategy where orientation workshops are held for principals as well as teachers who give an introduction to cultural aspects of teaching and living in specific remote areas (Cape York and the Torres Strait), an introduction to the Identified Aboriginal Schools, second-language pedagogy, as well as practical information on how to apply for transfer to these schools, transfer arrangements and incentives available. After the placement, there is ongoing relationship management to keep in touch with principals that are new to the posting. The experience of those involved in these initiatives is that the background work involved is an excellent investment as getting the right individuals is crucial to the principal involved, the school, the students, and the wider community.
Selling a remote posting to the right principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Promotion and branding of leading a school in a remote area.</i> There are various programs being designed for rural principals and used in remote regions to attract principals to remote schools. These often involve branding a remote lifestyle and the benefits of working in rural communities where the school is often the social fabric of the area.

4.2 Achieving genuine collaboration and co-creation with local communities

Examples of effective leadership in remote schools often involve the establishment of strategic partnerships with key stakeholders and the building of the capacity in remote communities. This ensures that a range of perspectives contribute towards challenging thinking around significant issues facing the school and wider community.

In remote schools in particular, it is important to harness the collective leadership capacity of the school by incorporating a range of key stakeholders while also promoting trust and openness between parties. Leadership structures that have not attained the trust of local communities can significantly hinder the effective development of meaningful partnerships.

Case Study #1: A school's own Enterprise Park in Western NSW:

A holistic vision to bring the community together around a significant school initiative which engages senior students, creates positive images for younger students, builds pride amongst staff, generates sustainable employment and promotes the work-readiness of students.

Years K-12
99 enrolments
69% Aboriginal

ICSEA of 729 (-27% from national average)

NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average):

Yr 9: 536 (+11%)
Yr 7: 464 (+2%)
Yr 5: 409 (+7%)
Yr 3: (+35%)



Enterprise Park opened in March 2010 as a centre for training and commercial activity and has changed the face of education in this remote town. It comprises:

- Beyond Café – coffee and entertainment each Sunday showcasing student performance and well attended by the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community
- Early childhood programs
- Traineeships at the centre and funding for traineeships beyond the school
- Local FM station, at which students are able to make presentations
- An arts and craft centre to showcase student and community artworks
- A boutique motel accommodated in a 1923 fully refurbished vintage railway sleeping car (10 compartments, each with the ability to accommodate 2 guests) with a functional commercial kitchen and amenities for guests
- A construction facility for transportable homes (business plan written and awaiting funding)
- A farm providing a range of agricultural products which the students plant and tend to, which is also used for outdoor science and maths lessons to measure, assess, experiment, and learn.

The program was created in recognition that training opportunities are limited in the rural community, with the intention to generate student employment in the hospitality, construction, agriculture and tourism industries. The project has been successful from a commercial venture point of view and is providing jobs and delivering training and skills to local children. As the initiative progresses further, it intends to deliver traineeships in hospitality and

business administration as well as further employment opportunities.

The park was developed from cash and in-kind donations from many parts of the community as well as a Commonwealth Government grant and grants from local donors. For every dollar received from grants, \$2 was donated or acquired in kind locally – testament to the support from local industry and business.

Importantly, the Park has Aboriginal community support, which has grown as a result of the Schools in Partnership (SiP) initiative from 2006 to 2009. Under the SiP an advisory committee was formed for the school comprising the principal, two members from the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and a member of the town's Aboriginal Working Party, a P&C representative and a Teachers Federation representative. The SiP hired a renowned Aboriginal educator as a mentor and facilitator to work with the group to resolve differences and build a shared vision for the school and its students. The Chair of the SiP Committee has said "Five years ago our views weren't being listened to. Aboriginal parents and community felt unwelcome at the school. But now we own it – the processes, the decisions, and the future of our kids' education."

The whole school community is clearly proud of its achievements, demonstrating the Principal's very positive impact on the school culture and the way that the school is valued by the community.

4.3 *Creating a positive school environment*

A positive school environment plays a significant role in determining a student's sense of belonging and satisfaction. Studies suggest there is a direct link between student's perception of school and motivation, achievement and behaviour.³⁹ If a student perceives themselves as being members of the learning environment, this is likely to influence the level of engagement and achievement.

Maintaining a positive school environment can be a challenge in a small community because smaller towns do not offer the anonymity of a large town or city. One principal noted the prevalence of cyber-bullying in the local community and highlighted the lengths the school had gone to in ensuring that it was clear that such issues needed to be left at the school gate.

Case Study #2: A wide variety of initiatives being pursued to create a positive school environment in a remote primary school in South Australia

Changes to staff and student culture have opened opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and to conceptualise aspirations within the school environment and beyond.

Years 3-7
470 enrolments
9% Aboriginal

ICSEA of 956 (-4% from national average)

NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference- similar schools average):

Yr 7: 552 (-8%)

Yr 5: 454 (-2.5%)

Yr 3: 357 (5%)



This remote primary school introduced a new pedagogy five years ago that aimed to create opportunities for the staff and students to aspire to leadership in the classroom, in the school and in the community. The school prides itself on being forward looking and aspirational and a young enthusiastic staff are open to new ideas and excited by opportunities to develop new approaches to learning.

Staff shifted their language from the notion of 'student management' to 'student development'. Staff are encouraged

³⁹ Cunningham E., Wang W. & Bishop, N (2006)

to continuously challenge and evolve their approach: ‘*when we have best practice...we think about what is next practice*’ and staff are encouraged to not be isolated in thinking. To ingrain the new culture, for 2 years the school funded a ‘social inclusion’ staff position which is now integrated in the counsellor role.

Several progressive programs are being run for students to encourage them to broaden their engagement with the school and the wider community. Students participate in a program in which the school partners with small business and community members to provide students with one-on-one exposure to business to develop a sense of aspiration. The program originated as an initiative for Aboriginal students but is now offered to all. The school runs its own ‘Kids Café’ to enable students to continue their education outside the school grounds and learn about health and nutrition. A number of initiatives have been developed to build leadership skills among the older children, including:

- a talent contest in the morning break, which has seen behaviour improve in the playground
- the Blue Shirt Brigade whereby senior students lead activities during lunchtime, e.g. vortex. Senior students have the opportunity to lead social learning within the school context and behaviour has improved dramatically as a result, and
- the Lunch Time Activity Centre where students have the option to voluntarily engage through activity if they have a difficult time interacting and engaging with others in the playground environment.

The principal, staff, and students are proud of the sense of initiative and community that the school represents.

Case Study #3: Personal development training in a remote Western Australian District High School:

A program provided by another agency provides a focal point for meaningful and positive school experiences.

Years K-12 186 enrolments 53% Aboriginal	ICSEA of 777 (-22.3% from national average)	NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average): Yr 9: 494 (-1%) Yr 7: 525 (12%) Yr 5: 433 (8%) Yr 3: 368 (13%)
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The school actively tries to ensure that the programs it offers students reflects the community’s social and economic base. The town has a rich mining history and a proud and strong Aboriginal culture. The Bush Rangers Program is an initiative of the Department of Environment and Conservation (WA), which is part of the broader Cadets WA program. Bush Rangers, who must be in Year 8 or above, have the opportunity to get involved in conservation projects, go on camps, and learn about the role of the Department, bush survival techniques, first aid and how to conduct and present nature conservation research.

The overarching objective of the program is to give secondary school students the opportunity to participate in personal development training that provides practical life skills, develops leadership, teamwork and initiative skills, and fosters qualities of community responsibility and service. Bush Ranger cadets gain most of their conservation skills and knowledge by participating in projects and are involved in choosing, planning and undertaking those projects. Building relationships with local councils, community groups and the Department of Environment and Conservation is an integral part of the program. The school also receives support from local employers in the mining industry. Bush Rangers has been a successful initiative at the school for a number of reasons, including:

- the program allows the school to exploit one of its advantages – proximity to the natural environment; and
- the delivery of other important programs, including Aboriginal Studies and Vocational Education and Training, is facilitated by the program.

4.4 Actively managing complex needs students

Remote schools have a higher proportion of students with complex needs, particularly schools with a high number of Aboriginal students. Remote schools adopt a range of strategies to address this, as shown in Case Study #4 and Box 3.

Case Study #4: Development of a role for an Aboriginal Male Educator (AME), which is a non teaching position to provide a positive male role model for Aboriginal students in a remote principally Aboriginal NSW school

Years K-12 99 enrolments 69% Aboriginal	ICSEA of 729 (-27% from national average)	NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average): Yr 9: 536 (+11%) Yr 7: 464 (+2%) Yr 5: 409 (+7%) Yr 3: (+35%)
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One remote, principally Aboriginal school has employed an AME who is responsible for providing assistance to the school to design and implement programs associated with cultural affirmation. The AME is paid a salary above that of a beginning teacher and has a desire to obtain a teaching qualification to send a signal to the community on the high value being placed on this role. While teaching staff were initially reluctant to accept such a role, the AME function has become one of the most valued programs in the school. The AME has responsibility for:

- value, respect and appreciation of Aboriginal culture and student identity by being a positive male role model and planning and implementing cultural events at the school, and encouraging the Aboriginal community to be involved in school programs
- genuine partnership and engagement with Aboriginal parents, communities and interagency groups through ongoing liaison, producing radio content on cultural matters for the school run local radio station
- maximising educational outcomes for each Aboriginal student through a variety of means including assistance at the school and at home, providing drug education and delivering sports programs outside of school hours
- increased engagement and participation of all students by promoting attendance, self-belief and self esteem and to enthuse students to have higher expectations and greater confidence, and to promote the dignity of risk
- increased capacity, awareness and empowerment of Aboriginal students through education by promoting university, VET courses, apprenticeships etc in culturally appropriate ways.

It is a position that extends beyond the hours of the school to do whatever is needed to lift the engagement of Aboriginal students and their participation in the school and community.

Box 3: Examples of strategies manage complex needs students that demonstrate effective leadership

Employment of staff other than teachers to address individual student needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Employment of an Aboriginal Male Educator (AME)</i> as highlighted in the case study above. • <i>Employment of a diversional therapist.</i> One remote, principally Aboriginal school has employed a part time diversional therapist who is also a musician and entertainer to work with students with special needs. The performance focus is incidental to the role and exists in addition to a music teacher. The therapist’s role is to help build student confidence in a way that matters to the student, to show them that they can achieve whilst opening their eyes to opportunities they would not otherwise have seen.
Providing dedicated staff to manage intensive support needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A dedicated senior executive position to manage intensive support needs.</i> A combined, principally Aboriginal school has created a role for an additional senior executive that coordinates the intensive support needed by many students in remote areas that have serious social, physical, and intellectual issues which require intensive support. In some cases this role is co-funded by the school and the region. The senior executive does not have day-to-day deputy principal responsibilities and organises a wide range of testing and screening for children to monitor their health status and wellbeing and runs various support programs throughout the school. • <i>Creation of Learning Support Teams (LST)</i> to provide support to students in particular age brackets. The same remote, principally Aboriginal, combined school has created three LSTs for year P-4, 5-8 and 9-12 from whom staff can call on to help meet a specific learning need. Each LST meets on a three weekly basis and the make-up of each LST is

specific to the stage/needs of the student group. The LSTs provide:

- guidance of improving attendance
- Individual student support
- In school DET programs such as Home School Liaison Officer support, School Counsellor, Support classes/Access Requests, Individual LST's
- In school programs that are negotiated with other providers to provide student access to services such as hearing, vision, speech, dental, and occupational therapy.

Creating individualised learning programs for high needs students

- *The ReENGAGE Program:* A large, combined, principally Aboriginal remote school provides separate teaching arrangements for particularly challenging students who experience difficulty in coping with their engagement at school. The program is designed for students who have previously had chronic attendance issues, increased numbers of days lost due to suspension and associated social/emotional issues that has affected their ability to engage with the curriculum. Features of the program include:
 - A dedicated home room for these students
 - Two teachers and one School Learning Support Officer
 - Shorter period of attendance via a Negotiated Attendance Plan
 - Life-skills program, catering for individual learning needs
 - Community involvement through agencies
 - Utilising the skills of school, DET and outside community groups to assist in partnerships between the home, school and broader community.

The program has led to improved attendance of students, fewer days lost due to suspension, increased engagement whilst at school, support via interagency organisations, and improved teaching and learning opportunities for students outside of this program.

Development of innovative behaviour management programs aligned with local culture and customs

- *8 Ways Behaviour Signs.* A remote, principally Aboriginal primary school has customised a positive behaviours program based on the 8 Ways of Knowing. It involves use of various symbols being used to reinforce positive behaviours by students, which have been designed by a local Aboriginal artist based on local Aboriginal stories. The signs are displayed throughout the school and form part of the teaching framework. In this case, the signs are based on (1) The long neck turtle – Waraba: I ignore bad behaviour; (2) Snake – Dhuru: I do not swear or tease; (3) Yabby – Girray: I finish all my work; (4) Yellowbelly – Dhagaay: Always do as the teacher says; (5) Red Kangaroo – Bawurra: I stay in my seat; (6) Kookaburra – Gugurrgaagaa: I put up my hand to speak; (7) Echidna – Bigibilla: Be generous and share; (8) Bowerbird – Wiidhaa: I keep my hands and feet to myself. The involvement of the community and the alignment with community values improves the value of the program to students and its support from families.

5 Teacher quality

Staff connectedness to school leads to a stable and committed staff who can teach multiple subjects in a mixed classroom format (e.g. to a greater age range of children), with a strong desire to improve outcomes for their students, and can deal with the myriad of challenges of working in a remote environment.

Innovative strategies are seen across multiple fronts. Finding ways to provide teachers with professional development, mentoring, and flexibility are key themes. The overwhelming consideration is to provide an environment that attracts the right kind of teacher. Financial incentives, while seen as being appropriate for compensating staff for some of the costs of living and working in remote schools, are often considered to be counterproductive as a way of attracting staff to remote schools.

The role of teachers as leaders is becoming an increasing focus of academic study and debate.⁴⁰

Teachers have long served in leadership roles, including roles as team leaders, heads of departments and in developing curriculum and instructional aides. More recently, there is recognition that because teachers are in daily contact with students, they are well-placed to lead in a number of areas. Teachers are also increasingly playing a central role in leading the implementation of change programs, as principals themselves increasingly become drivers of the change agenda.

This is particularly the case for remote schools where the role of teachers is often broader than it would be in a larger metropolitan school.

5.1 Attraction and retention

Attraction and retention involves capturing the right number and type of teachers, and providing strategies to retain these teachers.

“Attracting the right teachers is of critical importance to small and remote schools because of the need for teachers to agree to operate within the team. It is so important to remote schools that principals would rather run understaffed than employ teachers who are not suited to the job.” (an Aboriginal homelands school in the Northern Territory)

High staff turnover and/or the predominance of inexperienced teachers in remote areas highlights the need for innovative strategies which attract the right types of teachers to small and remote schools as well as strategies that provide the support and preparation needed to retain teachers.

“A while ago I was trying to fill a specialist science teacher position on my staff. I was offered a 77 year old teacher. Apart from my concerns about this person’s ability to cope with life in a remote location they would have had to share a house with someone in their twenties. It just wasn’t practical.” (Principal of a district high school in remote Western Australia)

Increasing teacher salaries is often used to attract staff to remote areas. However, financial inducements are often a way of encouraging people not to leave, rather than a way of attracting and retaining teachers who are committed to the idea of working in a small and remote school. There is also little evidence that increased salary alone has a high

⁴⁰ http://www.canberra.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/27748/quality-teaching-leadership.pdf

long-term impact on attraction and retention.⁴¹ This is consistent with wider work on what drives staff turnover, which suggests that remuneration issues may be far less important than factors such as the commitment of the individual worker to the organisation.

Strategies that incorporate the appropriate career, social and personal factors enhance the success of attracting and retaining quality teachers, and are often believed to be more cost effective than financial incentives.

Different teachers have different motivations in their choice and location of employment. Recruiting and retaining education staff in remote locations should employ a range of incentives depending on the motivations of individual.

Box 4: Example of what principals and staff told us about attraction and retention

...the importance of strategic staff acquisition

- To build any sort of successful and ongoing school culture it is vital the recruit the right people and even more important to retain them for longer periods. In [the school region] we have various incentives (e.g. subsidised rent) which help. Building the trust of communities takes time.
- It is important to sell the lifestyle of working in small and remote schools and downplay the additional remuneration. Teachers who come for the money don't last and don't readily pitch in to help with the extra tasks that need doing.
- Staffs are small, work closely together and spend a lot of time together. New hires must fit the culture and work well with their colleagues for the school to be successful. Cohesiveness and buy-in are essential.
- Small staff numbers and a wide range of student age and ability mean that teachers must be flexible, multi-skilled and adaptable.
- The model only works if the staff can commit to and work in the team approach. The right teachers are important. If a teacher doesn't work out it's important to recognise that they're not necessarily a bad teacher, they may just not be right for the environment.
- Schools would rather operate with one or two less staff than push for full staffing and have the wrong people.

...the importance of personal space

- The staff is constantly engaged with students, other staff and the community. They need to have their own accommodation to get away, relax and recharge. It is impossible to recruit staff if they are told they will be sharing accommodation.

...the importance of professional development

- Teachers must feel that they are growing their skills and abilities so they are getting something out of this experience.
- Forming partnerships with nearby universities and creating student teaching opportunities are a great way to recruit staff and they know what they will be getting themselves into.
- Regular monitoring and support, as well as strong and open performance management systems are necessary components to improve teacher quality.

One of the challenges for staff working in very remote, particularly Aboriginal, areas is the dependencies that can develop between staff and homeland teachers. These dependencies can often become unhealthy and can wear teachers down and make their role too consuming.

One strategy being adopted to help address this and maintain teacher engagement is to encourage the regular rotation of staff (Case Study #5).

⁴¹ Recruiting, Retaining and Retraining Secondary School Teachers and Principals in Sub-Saharan Africa, p.12

Case Study #5: Encouraging staff rotations to help deal with remoteness

Strategies of a remote school in the Northern Territory.

Years P=12

156 enrolments

100% Aboriginal

ICSEA of 521 (-52% from national average)

NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average):

Yr 9: n/a

Yr 7: n/a

Yr 5: 161 (-47%)

Yr 3: 59(-74%)



The purpose of this strategy is to allow for staff movement across the region as well as across communities to prevent unhealthy dependencies in staff relationships. Unhealthy dependencies are at risk of building up between some visiting teachers and homeland teachers in small and remote schools. While close working relationships are important, dependent relationships can be unhealthy for staff members involved.

The strategy involves staff across one network of schools reapplying for their positions each year. In doing so, they nominate three preferences for where they would like to be placed in the next year.

Senior staff members consider all applications and negotiate and develop a plan for each teacher. This is then endorsed by the school council.

This has proved to be an effective way of encouraging staff development whilst addressing the development of unhealthy staff dependencies.

Box 5: Examples of strategies to attract and retain staff being implemented in remote schools

...increasing awareness of rural staffing shortages through media appearances

- Attraction of staff is a widespread problem facing remote schools across Australia. Many principals of remote schools across Australia find media opportunities to raise the profile of their school.
- Principals frequently provide the school newsletter to the local media (radio and television) to keep the profile of the school high and communicate the initiatives being undertaken by the school.
- Certain principals have made public media appearances, such as in 'Australia All Over' and various ABC programs to outline the difficulties facing the school, which resulted in a large number of applicants.

<p>...active recruitment amongst penultimate year students at nearby tertiary institutions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many schools have developed strong links with their nearest university to target final year students directly. Appealing to students with a rural background has been shown to be successful in attracting staff that are well suited to a role in a remote school. Several principals emphasised that the most successful recruiting is in rurally-based universities, where many of the students come from rural backgrounds and choose to continue that way of life. • At the jurisdiction level there are also programs to target students to engender a desire to learn about teaching in a remote school. For instance, the WA Government and WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy provide financial support for student teachers under the Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP) to undertake work placements in rural or remote schools. Creating realistic expectations helps reduce negative perceptions, as well as mitigate ‘culture shock’ of teachers commencing without prior experience of the rural/remote context. A review of the program found that 73 per cent of participants were encouraged by the program to apply for jobs at rural/remote schools. • ‘Grow your own’ strategies were also highlighted in the international literature. There are several approaches. The Ozarks Teacher Corps, Missouri offers scholarships to rural university students who return to their hometowns as teachers and school leaders. Students get a set financial allocation along with support and in turn must agree to teach in a rural school for at least three years. The University of South Dakota teacher preparation program includes a rural-teaching track for candidates who spend the entire fourth year of study in rural schools, and new rural teachers are mentored for two years.
<p>...linking with universities to better prepare students for a remote posting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working closely with regional universities to develop new models of teacher training is an approach that has been adopted by some schools to prepare teachers for a remote experience. This includes pre-service experience at the school as part of the remote teaching module.
<p>...providing staff accommodation and financial incentives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many remote schools offer onsite living accommodation for staff which is either fully funded or heavily subsidised. The intention is to minimise the disruption that new staff members may face when relocating to a new school and ensure that a lack of appropriate accommodation does not discourage staff from coming to a school. • In some jurisdictions, teachers in remote areas are provided with subsidies for travel, housing, or ‘hardship’ to minimise the inconvenience of a different lifestyle. • Incentives that are attractive to teachers include professional development opportunities such as special study leave, better training opportunities or linking postings with progression.
<p>...providing non-financial benefits to staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In some schools, teachers are provided with counselling and medical care, increasing teacher responsibility for educational decisions, formalised teacher support and recognition, reduced class sizes and increased parental and community support.
<p>...hiring staff locally</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While it can be challenging, hiring staff from the local community is an effective way to minimise turnover that results from staff having to travel long distances to reach work. More generally, it is an opportunity to find staff with a strong, existing attachment to the community.
<p>...hiring Aboriginal staff in predominantly Aboriginal schools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students actively recruiting Aboriginal staff is an important strategy. This has proved to be important in the front office of the school as well as among the teaching staff. Aboriginal staff have also been found to be more likely to remain at a school for an extended period of time.

...providing opportunities to road test a remote school experience

- Many jurisdictions around Australia have structured programs that provide opportunities for teachers to travel to remote areas before committing to a remote school experience. Examples include the Beyond the Line – School Executive Program in NSW, whereby participants undertake a two-day, three-night visit to selected schools and regional offices in western NSW. Teachers meet with department officers, school executive, teachers, students, and the school community, and receive a first-hand look at lifestyle options in rural communities. They also meet with community leaders, businesses and service providers as part of the program.
- One remote school principal has prepared a DVD on the experience of teaching in a rural or remote area which is provided to prospective staff. The DVD, outlines the professional development opportunities that are provided by the broader set of responsibilities that staff in remote schools are required to take on.

...providing mentoring for teachers and principals that are new to a remote school

- Several schools have implemented mentoring initiatives for staff to facilitate the adjustment to a remote lifestyle and assist with retention. Some schools have a specific beginning teacher induction program, which includes mentoring as a key component and involves weekly meetings after school. The program provides information on the local community and culture.
- Some remote school principals maintain a mentoring relationship with the previous principal from the school. This relationship ensures that the previous principals experience, developed over a number of years, is not lost to the school. Some schools use video conferencing to allow for the regular communication between staff and a mentor at another school, or a recently retired teacher.
- Queensland has a Community-based Mentoring Model comprising face-to-face and online mentoring programs for new teachers in remote/rural settings, including mentors from across the community, aiming to facilitate school and community networks for teachers. Face-to-face mentoring has been found to be highly valued by new teachers and the program also has a positive impact on school-community relationships by creating a sense of welcome and support for the new teachers and reducing social isolation.

5.2 Improving teacher quality

Improving teacher quality is attained through increased professional development opportunities (conferences and in-service training and access to further qualifications), access to peer-learning and mentoring within schools, coaching and mentoring outside of school, and involvement in school decision making.

In all settings, the quality of teaching is the most important school-based factor impacting on educational outcomes. In the small and remote context, this can have a range of specific dimensions – for example, teacher quality in remote settings has been directly associated with attendance. Attracting, retaining and developing teachers are central challenges for small and remote schools. Many of the identified strategies reflect innovative approaches to supporting teachers across one or more of these dimensions.

One significant aspect of this is the need to facilitate a supportive environment in the broader community, recognising that the determinants of a teacher's wellbeing and success are not limited to the school environment. Another approach relates to the innovative structuring of the school workforce – in particular, making use of teaching aides. Creative workforce configurations may play an important role in supporting teachers, and therefore in removing barriers to quality teaching in small and remote schools, while also helping facilitate student engagement.

Box 6: Example of what principals and staff told us about improving teacher quality

...the importance of strategic professional development

- Professional development is important for all teachers, but particularly for those in remote schools where there often is not the variety of student needs to respond to or the breadth of curriculum to teach. Utilising technology that allows teachers in remote areas access to development is essential.
 - Professional development can create significant staffing issues for remote schools. It is important that professional development that is undertaken helps the teacher as well as contributes directly to the needs of the school.
-

...the importance of forming partnerships with other schools in the region

- Schools can work together to fund development opportunities such as setting up regional conferences or having speakers come to them.
 - Teachers are able to network with their peers to share ideas and learn new practices.
-

...the importance of multipurpose programs

- Ensure that programs reinforce each other and are able to accomplish multiple goals. This way, teachers can develop individualised programs for each student, but do not have to teach each student individually.
-

Case Study #5: Connecting classrooms to expand the curriculum offering and encourage teachers to teach across learning areas

The use of video conferencing to link classrooms from separate remote schools is becoming well established in some school clusters and networks and has positive learning outcomes for staff as well as students and is an excellent way of broadening the curriculum.

These approaches are being used to offer VCE subjects to other schools and to allow students to join the subject classes in the other school live via the video conferencing network. All schools across NSW are achieving this through the Connected Classrooms program.

A common approach is to have regular links between a group of three to five schools where a single teacher teaches a subject to students across all schools. One teacher sets the program, provides the learning materials, and twice a week formal lessons take place using video conferencing.

Often a teacher in the 'receiving' school will mentor the student who is being taught by video conference from the other school. This has the effect of improving the skills and knowledge of the teacher as well as the student, and has been an effective way of extending the subject teaching range of staff within the school.

Some remote schools have found that their intensive use of ICT has required the employment of an ICT technician above and beyond the technical support provided and/or funded by educational authorities. This is prioritised by schools and paid for out of the schools funding raising efforts.

Technical difficulties can be frequent which can interrupt the lesson although teachers using this approach are still enthusiastic and positive about its contribution.

Case Study #6: Innovative ways to moderate teaching and evaluation approaches

Years Prep-12 78 enrolments 70% Aboriginal	ICSEA of 727 (-27% from national average)	NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average): Yr 9: n/a Yr 7: 484 (+7%) Yr 5: 424 (+11%) Yr 3: 325 (+7%)
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One of the significant challenges for very small schools where teachers have multi-year classrooms, is that teachers struggle assessing students work when the field for comparison is so small or just not there at all if the student is the only one in his/her year level at the school.

Additional complexity can exist where transience is a characteristic of the local population as the students within a cohort may change completely over the space of a few years. One approach being undertaken by a group of small schools in remote Queensland is to set up a moderation and planning process where schools get together on a regular basis and collectively set the criteria for assessment.

This process was started by the district office. The group principal brings together the ten schools in the region at the end of each term for two days and the schools devise their school strategies and planning together for the next term. They frequently look at areas such as spelling or maths, but mainly they focus on writing skills as the identified area requiring greatest attention in the region.

The schools plan the teaching units for the next term and as a group they produce writing exemplars for each year level and the criteria that will be used to assess students' work. They also discuss any issues or difficulties they had in the previous assessment period. This assists teachers to provide fairness and greater consistency in their assessment of students' work within multi-year classrooms and provides the teachers with a level of comfort that they are providing curriculum and teaching strategies appropriate to the year level of individual students. In essence, the two-day program broadens the base group for students' assessment to be moderated, from just within their own school, to within the schools in the region.

The two-day program also provides the opportunity for professional development that is difficult to obtain otherwise due to the distance of the community from where professional development is regularly offered, and in particular, the reduced capacity of very small schools to relieve teachers who attend professional development during school hours.

This was seen a particularly valuable for the case study school where the school only had two teaching staff who were both quite young and new to their positions. In absence of a 'staff room' or other regular forum for the deep conversations that occur between colleagues in similar professional situations, teachers otherwise miss out on learning from more experienced teachers. These moderation and planning days not only provide explicit professional development opportunities for teachers through guest speakers or short seminars, but also promote the conversations and the sharing of ideas between schools outside of the two-day program through email, phone calls and contributions to a wiki page.

Box 7: Examples of strategies to improve teacher quality in remote schools

...networking with other nearby schools

- In an effort to minimise costs as well as improve teacher quality, various small schools have developed ties with nearby schools to combine their professional development days. There are several examples where the whole region and all staff travel to one town. In one example from remote Queensland, the logistical costs for the day are funded by the Queensland Gas Company through their ‘community responsibility program’.
- Many of the small schools visited are using Connected Classrooms technology to enhance the syllabus offering the students and to allow teachers with particular specialties to offer their lessons to students at neighbouring schools, as shown above in Case Study #5.
- Another approach is shown by the Euraba Educational Centre, which is designed to cluster the education opportunities in the Boggabilla, Toomelah and Goondiwindi area so as they can share staffing, resources and broaden their curriculum offerings. In addition, the Centre provides curriculum and further training relevant to the local communities’ needs, i.e. business/industry/agriculture.

...establishment of professional learning teams

- Professional learning teams bring together teachers across the range of curriculum areas to focus on a single year group. Each team can focus on a small group of students and, within their year level, build effective instructional practices, monitor student achievement, develop individual learning plans, and focus on the engagement and well-being of students. This has been very effective for those students for whom improving behaviour, attendance and punctuality is an issue.

...providing effective mentoring for high performing graduates teaching in remote areas

- The Teacher for Australia program, under which high performing young graduates are selected for an intensive teacher education program and then placed in schools under supervision, has been accessed by small and remote schools. One remote Victorian school has attracted five participants in the program to the school. This approach has the advantage of bringing high-quality young teachers into the school along with external support for the teachers within the school who act as mentors for the young teachers. Hence the program is also an effective professional development experience for existing staff as well as extending the range and quality of the young teachers who come into the school. The principal at this school believes the program makes a substantial difference to both the motivation and the skills of existing staff as well as attracting quality teachers.

...leveraging technology to support development

- The On-line Teaching and Learning System (OTLS) provides schools with the means to plan, deliver, monitor and evaluate on-line and blended learning programs. Teachers have access to a range of teaching resources from different sources to assist with the development of lesson content.

...implementing numeracy and literacy streaming

- Some remote schools have introduced streaming across two age brackets in cohorts of ability: years 1-4 and years 5-12, with three classes based on ability in each bracket, rather than on year level. This has meant that teachers can better tailor teaching to student needs, and has led to an improvement in results.

...context specific professional development

- The Aboriginal Literacy Strategy (ALS) assists staff in Remote Teaching Service schools in Western Australia through the development of a consistent and sustainable pedagogy that is resilient to constant changes in school personnel. All staff in participating schools (including Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers and Education Assistants) receive ongoing training and support to assist them with delivering the minimum two hours per day of literacy instruction. In addition to the professional learning program, staff are supported by a visiting English Language and Literacy Consultant (ELLC) who provides localised support and advice.

...providing regular feedback

- Some remote schools visited have a regular feedback and coaching system for teachers. In one school, the principal visits each teacher's classroom six to seven times a year and make notes for areas of improvement in teaching quality. After the first session for the year, the principal holds discussions with each teacher on every element of teaching style. Subsequent discussions through the year focus on one or two issues that the principal decides need special attention school-wide, or the teachers can nominate something they wish to focus on. The system was challenging to implement, as teachers initially associated the deeper involvement of the principal as a sign that their performance was at issue. (A ratings system was originally developed but abandoned as it was seen as being deflating rather than empowering for staff). However, after a few rotations all staff were seeing the benefits. The system has also been used to allow teachers to sit in on their colleagues' lessons, helped to identify significant support people and promote discussions to share experiences. The program has been found to have the greatest impact for secondary classes, as there is typically only one teacher per year level for younger students.

...adoption of the Quality Teacher Framework

- A number of schools have fostered the Quality Teacher Framework into their curriculum which provides teachers with guidance across all subject areas. This is particularly important where there is a high turnover of staff to continue to deliver a consistent curriculum to students.

...providing opportunities for teachers to 'act up'

- Finding ways to motivate teachers to achieve their best can be challenging in a remote schools where teacher quality is hard to assess on the basis of statistics collected at the school level and where NAPLAN type measures may be a less useful indicator of student performance and success. In this environment teachers often respond well to opportunities to 'act up' or take on additional responsibilities to validate their performance.
-

6 Student engagement

Student connectedness to school occurs when students feel that they are a valued member of the school community and believe that adults in the school care about them. Greater student connectedness results in improved student interest and engagement in their schooling.

Student engagement in a remote context has a particularly wide application. It will often not be driven by academic performance or the presence of a gateway to further education, although many students in remote schools do strive for and achieve this. Engagement strategies need to make students want to attend and participate at school. Common approaches across remote schools are to find ways to teach students outside the classroom, or to open the eyes of students to a world beyond the school and local community, and to give students a tangible sense of purpose – providing genuine and sustainable opportunities to participate in the workforce and keep a connectedness to their culture and tradition.

6.1 Student engagement

Student engagement is attained through improved attendance and willingness to learn. In the small and remote school context, strategies to engage students are critical to better educational outcomes, given the prevalence of social, cultural and economic barriers to students participating and succeeding in school.

“We recently enrolled a student in Year 12 who had attended school for a total of about 2 months out of the past twelve years.” (Principal of a school in remote Western Australia)

Engaging students encompasses student-focused elements – such as practical measures to encourage school attendance, and student mentoring – as well as more structural, strategic approaches, such as creating and promoting pathways to further study and employment, developing relevant, engaging curriculum, and generating incentives for educational success. A number of programs successfully link participation in extra-curricular activities, such as participation in sport, social events and trips, as a way of increasing the incentive to attend.

Student accessibility to information and communication technology (ICT) is critical to their engagement levels. The ICT components of the curriculum work to take them beyond the boundaries of their own locality and access resources and students from across Australia as well as increase their international awareness. Examples of programs that involve ICT resources include pen pals between students in different remote schools. Many principals noted the importance of their school in maintaining a position at the forefront with regard to ICT developments for their students.

Another important strategy used by small and remote schools to engage students is to incorporate literacy and numeracy components of the curriculum using a more hands-on approach. This is particularly amenable to schools with a number of students with low literacy. Flexibility and creativity with curriculum components has positive effects in attaining student engagement in a number of small and remote schools.

Another emerging concept which is being used to increase student engagement is pedagogical progressivism. This means basing instruction on the needs, interests and developmental stage of the child. It promotes discovery and self-directed learning by the student through active engagement, for example, by having students work on projects that express student purposes and that integrate the disciplines around socially relevant themes. It entails promoting values of community, cooperation, tolerance, justice and democratic equality.

Student engagement

“I rely heavily on my network within other remote schools in the Pilbara and beyond to find out what curriculum materials and books are likely to be relevant to my students and contribute to their engagement with school.”
(Principal of a primary school in remote Western Australia)

One of the challenges to maintaining student engagement is the management of the pressures associated with peer scrutiny. The feelings of shame that students who are behind their classmates experience can be a powerful demotivating influence. This can be a particular issue where several school years are in the one classroom as older students can be significantly behind both their year-level colleagues and younger classmates.

Ensuring school curriculums are suitable for small and remote schools can also play a large role in increasing student engagement and performance. Strategies need to ensure school curriculums are responsive to the needs of the students and their age group, incorporate cultural aspects and are outcomes based.

Box 8: Example of what principals and staff told us about improving student engagement

...the importance of individualised programs

- The biggest advantage of a small school is its ability to give each student individual attention. Students should have individualised programs that suit their needs and abilities. Especially in multi-level classrooms, students may get bored or feel lost if they are too ahead or behind a standardised curriculum.
 - Different students have different strengths and weaknesses. Providing different learning paths helps to ensure students do not get frustrated or give up, simply because they have different learning styles.
-

...the need to interact with multiple teachers

- In small schools, a student may have the same teacher for four years. It is important to ensure students interact with multiple teachers throughout the term so as to experience different styles and techniques.
-

...the importance of encouraging attendance

- Students cannot learn if they do not show up. Provide rewards for attendance, such as facility access, extracurricular activity involvement, or leadership roles. Some students are provided accommodation at the school for two nights per week so that they can attend.
-

...the importance of feeling connected to the outside world

- Providing students with pen pals from other regions/states/countries helps to put a face to a faraway place.
 - Incorporating global issues into the curriculum allows students to understand that there is a larger world out there. Utilise technology to help students see that they are connected to the rest of the country and are not isolated simply due to geography.
-

...minimising feelings of shame

- The shame resulting from being at a lower level than classmates is highly corrosive to student engagement. In schools where a proportion of the population is transient students fall behind their classmates when they are out of school and travelling between communities and experience shame when they return to the classroom.
 - The “Books for Home” program allows students to choose books that they are able to read and they can claim that they are reading the book to younger family members.
 - Computer based learning programs allow us to provide tailored lessons to students who have fallen behind without exposing them to the scrutiny of their classmates. Given that we do not have the staff to provide one-on-one tuition this is critical for their engagement.
 - The local police, other community members and Regional Education Director (when he is visiting our school) come to our breakfast club, as do some students who have already had breakfast. All are welcome because it removes any sense of shame for the students.
-

...the impact of transience on students

- Poor student attendance as a result of parents not valuing education is not really the problem. However, travelling to the next community may involve a three week trip, and then it may be a week before the child is enrolled in the new school.
 - In the UK, transient families are required to nominate an adult who is responsible for continuing the child's education while the family is travelling. We appear to be unwilling to adopt similar strategies in Australia.
 - A grandmother recently said to a principal that their grandchild would not accompany their parents on a trip to another community because the school provides a good education. Changing perceptions in this way is a significant achievement for the school.
-

Student engagement

Case Study #6: One of many kitchen garden programs being used to engage students and teach across the curriculum

A school program that incorporates kitchen and garden elements into the curriculum to engage the children in education in innovative methods.

Years R-7
35 enrolments
0% Aboriginal
ICSEA of 1064 (+6% from national average)
NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average): Not available



This primary school has adopted the Stephanie Alexander Garden Kitchen school program. The school has received grants to build a kitchen and dining area as well as a garden that includes aquaponic plants, fruit trees, vegetables and a number of chickens and fish. The school has also built a pizza oven and a campfire facility.

To incorporate the kitchen and garden components as part of the curriculum, the students have access to education in the garden and in the kitchen for one hour each per week. A garden and kitchen educator takes children through this part of the curriculum.

The kitchen and garden components of the curriculum cover cooking, gardening, harvesting and looking after the animals, in addition to session on safety around the kitchen. Importantly, these curriculum components also incorporate literacy, numeracy and geography skills as the students identify the culture from which their recipes are from. As such, the students are learning without realising.

The Garden Kitchen school program has contributed to engaging the students in learning, particularly those who are not as strong, academically. Within the garden and kitchen components of the curriculum they have been able to shine, for examples two children won a recent cooking competition which included prizes for the school and for themselves.

Student engagement

Case Study #7: Literacy, cultural teaching, and confidence building through the creation and production of dance rap videos

Some remote schools have formed a dance rap group in which students write rap songs based on local customs or stories that are relevant to their experience, and then film themselves in a rap video. This is used as a way to teach Aboriginal customs, improve literacy, build student confidence, learn about technology, and develop leadership qualities as students travel across the country to perform.

Years K-12

89 enrolments

82% Aboriginal

ICSEA of 715 (-28% from national average)

NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average)

Yr 9: 511(+6%)

Yr 5: 383(+1%)

Yr 3: 310(+3%)



A principally Aboriginal, K-12 school in Northern NSW has taken a highly innovated approach to student engagement.

The school initiated the use of rap writing as a means of recording local stories, learning about digital media, increasing the engagement of students, and changing the perception of teachers about the ability of students to learn when students were often absent or despondent.

The first rap was written, filmed, and produced for Harmony Day to bring together all races with a title of “You Plus Me Equals Us”. The second rap confronted the issue of teenage pregnancy with the rap “Talk of the Town”, and the third was about reclaiming culture based on a Dreamtime creature of the spirit, called “Smile for Biami”.

These and other raps are available on YouTube and the rap group have performed at the School Spectacular and been the opening act at the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) Awards.

The school has no music, dance, or singing teacher and it began with the commissioning of a local studio to assist with the production and the involvement of a dedicated and determined Aboriginal Education Officer and a supportive principal.

The videos are made across the year groups and students give up their weekends and after school time to rehearse and develop the productions.

Some students have shown considerable improvements in NAPLAN results since the rap program as student manage to shift from the ‘shame’ of participating to having confidence in themselves and taking pride in their achievements.

For other students the impact has been more fundamental by bringing the most vulnerable of students back into the school because they want to be involved. These students are attending more, participating more, and seeing the school as part of their life experience.

Box 9: Examples of strategies being implemented to effectively engage students in remote schools

...implementing teaching formats that align to student interests

- Several schools are focusing on an expanded visual and performing arts program in order to engage students through mediums such as rap music which spark a high level of interest. First pioneered by a principally Aboriginal school in North West NSW (see Case Study #7) and being adopted more broadly, the strategy has promoted individual cases of academic improvement as a result of its students' involvement in rap groups through the music program. It has also been important to change the expectations of staff of what students can achieve.
 - Other programs include a 'Rock and Water' Program being implemented in remote South Australia, which focuses on students' physical and social development. Its inclusion of self defence exercises alongside communication skills development has been well received amongst students.
 - An initiative to address effective classroom and playground opportunities in order to achieve more productive classrooms was undertaken in two NT schools. Opportunities to communicate and practice newly acquired strategies were provided through staff meetings, with teachers using both verbal and non-verbal signals. Teachers have indicated that participation in the project has been a positive experience. The support of leadership (principals and senior staff) has been important to the project, as has the associated funding.
-

...providing learning environments outside the classroom

- Many schools are adopting a Stephanie Alexander Garden Kitchen program, in which students spend two hours a week developing their literacy and numeracy skills in a garden or kitchen context. The program has allowed lower achieving students to find success in an innovative learning environment. Similar programs include 'Kitchen to Garden to Kitchen Again' programs and 'Kids Cafe Programs', which educate students about healthy eating, the environment and life skills.
 - A remote school in North West NSW has a large agricultural plot which is planted and maintained by the students, and used to teach science (such as biology) and maths (measuring plot areas etc).
 - A predominantly Aboriginal, bilingual school in the NT has a program based around science, culture and caring for country, which is focused on hands-on, outdoors settings and the natural environment. The Junior Rangers program is integrated into Year 11 curriculum and runs alongside a program run by the local Aboriginal Council which manages land and sea country in the area. In this way, the program offers a pathway to employment and engages students by being relevant to local interests and opportunities.
-

Student engagement

...using technology to expand the curriculum

- Several schools are now making use of technology to expand learning opportunities. Described in NSW as Access Programs or the 'Valley of Schools' and in Victoria as Virtual Learning, the concept is to link classrooms across remote schools.
- In Victoria, the Virtual Learning program is provided in virtual time rather than real time so that schools can connect when it works for the schools timetable and to meet the students individual scheduling needs.
- The use of connected classroom technology has provided for a more engaging and broadened learning experience for students and also marks efficient use of resources.
- Some small schools are using their remote funding resources to fund virtual excursions (e.g. talking to NASA astronauts, speaking with Aboriginal groups from other countries) for its students through the Rural and Distance Education Centre. This again has proved to be a more engaging form of learning for students.
- Some remote schools are investing in providing close to one computer per student. This has helped to reduce the sense of isolation and has allowed parents to enrol their children from outside the jurisdiction, which has increased student enrolments as a result.

...using technology to expand social networks

- Some remote schools have set up a system of 'email pals' where students have an ongoing relationship with another student in a remote school. This is being used as an important way to keep students 'linked to the outside world'.

...making school fun

- Bringing the world to the school is an important strategy for one case study school in building student engagement. Ensuring that visitors regularly come to the school is one way of overcoming the drawbacks of isolation.
- A number of the schools we visited hold an annual school ball. This is a celebration for the entire school community, involves students from other remote schools in the region and helps to build school spirit. In one case, the school subsidised clothing hire for the students and ensured that the school's students from the nearby Immigration Detention Centre were able to attend the ball.
- One school has implemented a program to bring high profile 'role models' (such as from sports associations, franchises and corporate sponsors) to the school in order to promote education and healthy lifestyles. The role models engage with students, staff and community leaders and elders seeking to identify community role models to continue the program. A 'leadership development camp' is also offered as part of the program.
- The Small Schools' Network trialled a drama project in 2010 in which two teachers/actors worked with participants to develop an interactive drama workshop. The response was overwhelmingly positive with all students in schools working collaboratively within this unit.

...fun excursions that are not available to students at urban schools

- Remote schools do offer some opportunities for activities that are not readily available to urban schools. One school in the northern goldfields of Western Australia has acquired a sufficient number of bicycles to take the students on a 70km cycling and camping trip in the surrounding countryside.

6.2 Student health and wellbeing

Across a number of small and remote schools in Australia, the notion of student health and wellbeing was considered a critical issue that was addressed through the school curriculum as well as being prominent in the school ethos. There are a number of important reasons to address student health and wellbeing in small and remote schools including to:

- to attain student engagement in the curriculum
- increase student attendance
- remove barriers to accessing education, and
- address student health issues where access to health services is low.

Schools have implemented a wide variety of specific strategies in order to address student health and wellbeing.

Box 10: Case Studies: Implementing strategies to improve health and well being

...fostering local health clinic visits

- Several schools allow for weekly local health clinic visits to attend to students. This has proved to be highly effective in improving the health of students, which in turn increases their productivity and attention span. It has also had a positive effect on increasing attendance. Many students don't have access to healthcare facilities at home, and thus will come into school simply to receive a free clinic consultation.

...breathe, blow, cough

- Middle ear infections in students can be a major barrier to learning if not addressed. To combat the prevalence of these infections several remote schools hold regular fitness sessions designed to address risk factors and actively encourage 'breathe, blow, cough' programs. With an emphasis on fun, the program's activities have enhanced school pride, increased self-esteem in students and have contributed to a positive learning environment. This program is especially promoted across the Pilbara Education District.

...programs centred around nutrition and physical exercise

- A number of small and remote schools offer student programs that involve education around nutrition, cooking, garden, produce and active living. These programs are important to instil healthy habits in students. Often they will incorporate other curriculum aspects such as numeracy and literacy and they have the added benefit of increasing student engagement.
-

7 *Student readiness*

Ensuring that young children have a positive transition to schooling, and that older students see a purposeful path to employment or further education are an important function of all schools. Achieving this in a remote context is difficult and there are many strategies being employed by schools to achieve this.

Ready-for-school programs involving playgroup arrangements and parent involvement in schools are particularly important in remote communities where young children have little exposure to life outside of their own family. These initiatives are often used to provide access for young children to books and creative activities, health services and wellbeing information, as well as improve parent relationships with the school to create a supportive, rather than a defensive pattern of school engagement.

Successful school-to-work transition programs involve local communities and businesses and in some cases involve proactive job creation programs. Outcomes for students in successful school-to-work programs are very positive, with some of the most successful partnerships involving the most challenging students, although school retention rates can suffer as students find ways to achieve through work.

7.1 *The importance of student readiness*

The first five years of a child's life are a time of tremendous physical, emotional, social, linguistic and cognitive development, and the home environment plays a critical role in determining the extent of that development. Children from low-income families are more likely to start school with limited language skills, health problems and social and emotional problems that interfere with learning and studies show that these gaps are well-established by the time a child commences school. The larger the gap at school entry, the harder it is to close.⁴²

Research also shows that the greatest benefits from early childhood programs are achieved with those children who come from homes with the fewest resources and the highest levels of social and economic stress. The socio-economic composition of the communities that many small and remote schools serve means that many of their students come from the types of homes where early intervention is critical to ensuring that developmental gaps are reduced prior to starting school.

The concept of readiness is important not only when children enter school but also during the transitions from primary school to high school and from high school to vocational education, university or work. Getting students ready to make these transitions, and giving them every chance of being successful when they do so, is important.

For many students in remote schools, going to high school means going to boarding school, or a much larger school than the one in which they have spent their primary school years. Often these students move from a primary school which specifically caters for them as students to a high school serving the general population. Apart from being a difficult transition for the students involved, there are consequences for those left behind. This latter group of students often have few, if any, genuine post-school pathways available to them.

A recent report by the Pathways to Prosperity Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education makes the case for the development of robust multiple pathways to success as a way of ensuring better educational and post-school outcomes for young people. Having clearly defined pathways and preparing students for those pathways is important not only for the subsequent transition, but also for student engagement with and participation in schooling.⁴³ It is

⁴² Rhode Island Kids Count (2005)

⁴³ Pathways to Prosperity Project (2011) Pathways to prosperity: meeting the challenge of preparing young Americans for the 21st Century, http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2011/Pathways_to_Prosperty_Feb2011.pdf, pp. 10-11.

widely acknowledged that providing a clear, transparent connection between a student’s program of study and tangible opportunities in the labour market is critical to engagement and participation in secondary schooling.

Box 11: Example of what principals and staff told us about improving student readiness

...the importance of work readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School to work programs are vital to provide students with an “end result” that they can aim for
...making vocational education relevant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our students talk to students in other schools. As a result, they know that while these students are doing things like making pencil cases in woodwork class, they are out in the community working on projects that make a contribution to their community.
...pathways must be genuine and realistic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensuring the engagement of our secondary students is almost impossible without realistic, clearly defined pathways into the workforce.

7.2 Strategies for achieving readiness for school

Small and remote schools employ a range of strategies to help boost student readiness for school. Reflecting the over-representation of students from high-risk backgrounds in their student populations these strategies are often directed at providing an alternative developmental context to the family home. Early exposure to the school environment contributes to feelings of safety, making children more enthusiastic about attending school when the time comes. These programs also provide an opportunity for interaction in a different social setting which contributes to children’s social and emotional development.

Box 12: Case Studies: Examples of 0-5 initiatives being offered by remote schools

0-5 supported playgroups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A remote school in NSW runs a supported playgroups initiative to attract parents to bring young children to the school. Every second Monday the Aboriginal librarian comes into the room with books, which is often the only exposure pre-school children have to reading materials before school. There is also an Aboriginal Mobile Service that brings paints and other craft supplies into the room. The school provides a nutritional morning tea and lunch for the children, and a mobile health service visits as often as practicable. Other remote schools offer similar programs where playgroups are seen as an important part of school readiness rather than just childcare.
Childcare with educational programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One remote school in South Australia runs a childcare service on Monday. Children take part in games and learning activities in the morning with their mothers and then take part in kitchen and garden activities in the afternoon. At nominated times in the school term younger children partner up with students in the school and take part in classroom activities.

**Aboriginal
Kindergartens**

- An important and successful strategy designed to focus on Aboriginal children is early entry to kindergarten. Aboriginal children who turn four by December 31st are eligible to enrol, free of compulsory charges, in culturally inclusive and age-appropriate kindergarten programs provided through 29 metropolitan and regional Aboriginal kindergartens and all remote community schools in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Midwest and Goldfields.
- This initiative is aimed at improving early childhood learning for Aboriginal children to prevent them falling behind in the crucial early years of life. Culturally appropriate early childhood resource materials have been produced to support teachers to implement the framework. Language development services in education districts have been expanded to address the oral language learning needs of Aboriginal children in early childhood. (Kindergarten to Year 1).
- Key Benefits/Outcomes include that Aboriginal children are ready for successful participation and learning at school and that educators provide a culturally competent educational program for Aboriginal children.

**Aboriginal Early
Childhood
Initiative
Leadership Trial**

- Aboriginal Education has committed funding to 23 schools across the state for Key Speech and Language Leaders to support the Aboriginal Early Childhood Initiative and Language Guarantee. The aim of this initiative is to improve the language and literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students in K-1 and guarantees that Aboriginal students have access to Speech and Language Services in Western Australia.
 - The State-wide Speech and Language Service provides each identified school leader (teacher) with professional learning and ongoing consultation, mentoring and coaching to develop their capacity to support their classroom colleagues in the area of speech, language and literacy. The focus is on the critical oral language skills that underpin literacy development with consideration given to individual cultural contexts.
-

7.3 Strategies for achieving readiness for work

Many remote schools have specific programs in place to improve readiness for work. The critical common factor in these strategies was that they had to be built around genuine pathways into the workforce for students. In the absence of such a pathway students are unlikely to engage in either the readiness for work program or the general curriculum.

Successful school-to-work programs have been able to leverage industry employers in their local area, such as resource companies, local banks, electricity, water, and gas companies, or other offices environments, to provide resources and to develop genuine pathways into the workforce.

There are challenges to these arrangements as smaller schools can often lack the staff to be able to maintain the level of duty of care required to allow students to participate in projects in the community or at employer sites.

However, even the smaller remote schools were able to partner with other organisations to create genuine partnerships. For example, one school was in the process of initiating a partnership with the David Wirrapanda Foundation Plan 2day 4 20morrow Program, which is a collaboration between the Foundation and the Western Australian Central Institute of Technology to provide technical and life skills necessary for successful transitions into careers in the mining industry.

Box 13: Case Studies: Examples of strategies to enhance student readiness in remote schools

...incorporating the development of work skills into the curriculum

- A remote school in South Australia runs an Aboriginal & Torres Straight Islanders Program, in which all students (not restricted to ATSIIs) participate in simulation exercises in school hours. These range from practice calls to local business asking for work, allowing students to practice speaking in a formal business tone, to writing cover letters. The exercises are very effective in developing the students work skills. The program also links in with local businesses and artists to send students to workplaces once a week to practice their business schools in a work environment.

...creation of student employment opportunities on site

- One highly innovative school in Western NSW has developed its own 'Enterprise Park' to overcome the limits to training opportunities in the surrounding rural community. The Park generates student employment in the hospitality, construction, agriculture and tourism industries. It consists of several converted vintage rail carriages that have been refurbished and modified to provide accommodations (10 compartments, each with the ability to accommodate two guests), a functional commercial kitchen and amenities for guests. The project has been hugely successful from a commercial venture point of view. It is also on track in terms of achieving its goal in providing jobs and delivering training and skills to local children. As the initiative progresses further, it intends to deliver traineeships in hospitality and business administration as well as further employment opportunities. After the Park's first year of operation, the school had half of its year 12 students undertaking traineeships, with all those who participated continuing their training and/or finding work after the completion of school.

...providing student access to Vocational Education Programs

- Clusters of remote schools in Victoria are working as a single unit to deliver vocational learning that any one school would struggle to provide independently, referred to as VET partnerships. For schools in this cluster students travel to one of the schools for one day per week or join via video conference and virtual links for their 'VET day'.
- Some remote schools have formed partnerships with regional universities such as Charles Darwin University and the University of New England to provide VET courses in subjects such as automotive building, construction and kitchen operations.

...partnering with industry to provide pathways

- Many schools have structured Career Transition Programs which involve the fostering of partnerships with local businesses to provide students with the opportunity to do a traineeship in which they can learn industry skills and in some cases are able to earn units towards their final exams.
- Some remote schools in mining areas have entered into partnerships with local energy companies. One of these partnerships, referred to as the Secondary Engagement Project, is intended to provide clear direction for the school's secondary students by allowing them to work on projects in the community, rather than class based vocational education activities. The program has contributed to the notable increase in student engagement at the school and raised the status of the secondary school program in the eyes of the local community.
- One school situated in an oyster farming community has developed a two-year aqua course in conjunction with the local fishing industry, which develops industry relevant skills while achieving appropriate school education outcomes. The program has two full time staff and a boarding house for accommodation and has resulted in high attainment and employment rates for course participant.
- A remote NSW school has a variety of mini traineeship programs with local businesses where students attend the business site for four hours, one day per week. The local business assigns a mentor to work with the student and works with them full time during their stay. Successful traineeships have been established at the local branch of the Commonwealth Bank and Centrelink. Whilst undertaking these traineeships, students are working towards a Certification 2 in Business Services, and the traineeships are structured so that the activity qualifies for contributing to the Higher School Certificate.

Case Study #8: Working with industry partners to build stronger educational outcomes

The case study school is a forward moving school, located in the Pilbara Region of Western Australia about 300 kilometres from the nearest large town. The town in which the school is based has a population of 800 people. The main local industries include fishing, salt production and tourism.

The school has culturally diverse student population of around 140, 4 to 17 year olds with approximately 52% of the students from the Thalanyji, Yindjibarndi and Banyjima Aboriginal groups.

Years K-12 140 enrolments 57% Aboriginal	ICSEA of 793 (20.7% from national average)	NAPLAN 2010 Reading (% difference from like schools average): Yr 9: 6.4% Yr 7: -1.5% Yr 5: 3.4% Yr 3: 3.6%
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The school's isolated location makes it part of the Western Australian Department of Education Remote Teaching Service, where staff are appointed through a central merit selection process. It supports programs that provide equal access for remote students with their counterparts in major centres. This requires a focus on literacy and numeracy, science, general health programs and the use of technology in learning and teaching. The school is a fully inclusive teaching and learning environment where students who have learning difficulties and disabilities are fully included into the general school population and curriculum.

The secondary component of the school has traditionally been limited to a small number of students and staff, as a significant number of parents send their children to boarding school for secondary school. The secondary school cohort has been dominated by students who struggle to be engaged at school and who have seen few opportunities for employment at the end of their education.

The opportunity to tie the school's vocational and educational training for its secondary students to genuine pathways into employment has emerged as the development of offshore gas fields has increased interest in the town as a future service hub. The energy company with the major gas field interest in the area has been keen to build a relationship with the local community.

The Working on Employment, Learning and Development (WELD) program is intended to contribute to an engaging curriculum to help improve student retention and enhance future employability. With the aid of funding from the company, students undertake a range of programs to learn applied skills such as welding. In parallel the students complete and Certificate 1 in Engineering, through a partnership with TAFE. Students also undertake workplace learning, attend career camps and complete safety awareness and first aid training. An annual trip gives students an opportunity to learn about careers in the nearby energy and hospitality industries. Their participation in the Bush Rangers Volunteer Cadet program provides them with the opportunity to learn life skills.

A recent review of the school by Dare to Lead Program found that attendance in the secondary school was the best it had been in years, concluding that the program had been highly successful in providing some clear direction for secondary students.

The WELD program contributes to the school's overall attendance strategy that includes a Breakfast Club, the provision of lunches and uniforms to students and the appointment of a Family Liaison Officer. The changing economic base of the community is also influencing attendance as parent attitudes to the school have changed as the future employment opportunities become more obvious. Incentive schemes have also been put in place to reward sustained attendance at school.

8 Community engagement

Community connectedness to school is two-fold and involves schools being a community hub whereby community members have access to the school as a resource as well as the school actively promoting community participation in the school through targeted events and broader participation in the curriculum or school vision. These strategies work to promote the school as a valued part of the social infrastructure of a region.

Examples include bringing Aboriginal elders into the school to take students out to make didgeridoos or to learn about traditional painting and bush foods, bringing knitting groups into the school to knit scarves for the school uniform and establishing cooking groups to teach about nutrition and hygiene. As well as providing interest and mentoring opportunities for students, these initiatives also help build a positive image of the school in the eyes of the community.

8.1 The importance of community engagement

“We try to make reasons for people from the broader community to come onto the school grounds. When they see the school and the kids, they feel positive towards the school.” (Principal of a remote primary school in Northern NSW)

“The community is a very important resource for us. Small businesses and individuals have been very supportive of our school.” (Principal from a primary school in remote South Australia)

“Our school is very much in sync with community needs. The community and the school are very much intertwined as the school is more or less the community hub.” (Principal from a remote Northern Territory school)

Effectively linking in with the local community provides small and remote schools, their students and the wider community with a number of benefits. A small and remote school is often an important resource within its community for facilities as well as acting as a hub for community connectedness through organised events or by informal means. Through community engagement, students of small and remote schools gain access to a variety of community resources and adults as part of their education, which broadens their learning experience beyond the classroom. Schools have employed a number of innovative strategies that aim to engage with the local community. These differ in scope and level of formality.

Distinct from formal community partnerships, community engagement approaches simply seek to build relationships and support in the community, including with parents. This is essential to effective education in all settings, given the evidence that education is most likely to be successful where parents and schools deliver aligned messages to learners. This can be particularly important in remote communities, where there may be differences of views between schools and parents as to the objectives and value of education. In the Aboriginal context, this may be further complicated by cultural issues.

Achieving community engagement may also be a pre-condition or platform for more formal partnerships in the community, or for successful implementation of change within schools. This reflects the circumstances of many small and remote schools in communities where the school may play a proportionally large role in the life and interest of the community.

Many strategies implemented by small and remote schools highlight the role of community engagement in gaining community support for the work being undertaken by schools. Community engagement also works to build shared understandings and expectations about the role of schools.

Community engagement

Communities that perceive value in student learning and school outcomes are more likely to recognise schools as part of the social infrastructure. Strategies which aim to achieve this recognition and trust within a community are likely to benefit through increased collaboration and cohesion in the community. Opportunities to nurture and develop this relationship may present further opportunities that operate beyond the boundaries of the regular school environment, such as embedded staff and student tutoring and staff being well regarded as community members beyond their role in the school.

Box 14: Examples of what principals and staff told us about improving community engagement

...the importance of including Aboriginal culture

- The inclusion of Aboriginal culture at all levels of the school is vital i.e. language programs, curriculum, school grounds and local people employed in the school
- We are proud to have been able to involve community members to develop a curriculum for the local language and look forward to bringing it to the classroom for all students.

... the importance of bringing community members to school grounds

- We try to make reasons for people from the broader community to come onto the school grounds. When they see the school and the kids, they feel positive towards the school.
 - We bring in community volunteers where we can. It's great for the kids to have access to more adults and it's good to get the community to see and get involved in what we're doing.
 - The school is the focal point of the community. People come here to photocopy, to get their passports signed or they drop in for a chat.
-

8.2 The school as a hub for community members

Schools situated in remote communities serve as a resource that is more than a learning institution for students. Many small and remote communities have a low level of infrastructure so the school plays an important role in terms of its physical facilities as well as the staff being an important point of call for many community members.

Staff are very aware of the importance of their school in the community. In many instances, they set up the school resources so they can be easily accessed by community members, including those without children attending the school. A number of strategies are deployed with the aim of allowing the community to use the school as a resource.

Box 15: Case Studies: Strategies to build the school as a hub for community members

...providing the public with access to the school for community use

- One very remote school in far North West Queensland has created a community hub out of the school by having an 'open door' approach to the community's use of the school.
 - For a fee, the school is the local area photocopier, fax machine, and a place that provides dry board for passing tradesmen.
 - One of the classrooms is set up as a hairdressing salon for students to work towards a trade certificate and for the community to receive free services.
 - Students are involved in cooking in the school canteen which involves teaching health eating and hygiene, and community elders come in with bush foods to integrate bush tucker and cultural teachings into food preparation and service.
 - Students at the school can work towards a mechanics trade certificate by working on the local council trucks.
 - In the Northern Territory, one school, which is situated in a community three hours from the nearest town uses its kitchen as a 'rest and revival' stop for passing traffic. This school also uses an active barter system to bring services to the area (such as a dry nights' accommodation to apply trade tools to maintain school facilities).
 - A number of small and remote schools offer their kitchen and function room facilities to community groups, businesses or other organisations for professional development or
-

training days. Some small schools noted that they saw this as a good opportunity for their students to view learning as a life-long experience that adults as well as children engage in.

...ensuring that the school is in sync with community needs

- Offering childcare services to parents of current or future students at the school is an important service to the community. Childcare services were a gap in community services before the school stepped in. This provides relief to families, and also provides an opportunity for mothers to socialise and network with each other, and the staff in the school.
 - The school newsletter is an important publication in a number of small and remote schools. Generally, they are distributed beyond the families of current students to the wider community. Some schools include additional pages in the school newsletter that are dedicated to broader community news.
-

...ensuring that there is adequate staff visibility in the community

- Another way in which to establish the school as a community hub is to ensure that the community has adequate exposure to staff and ensuring that staff are visible in the community on a regular basis. A number of small and remote schools across Australia bring their staff into the community on a regular basis to engage with other community members. This can be informal, or formal. Some schools have utilised a driven or a 'walking school bus' initiative which gets staff out in the community daily to pick up children and bring them safely to school. The benefit of this strategy has been to effectively improve attendance of students.
 - Staff in small and remote schools often make themselves available to answer broader community questions. Being accessible is important as the staff are seen as a key resource beyond the school gates.
-

8.3 Active community participation in the school

Actively pursuing community involvement in the management of the school can also increase collaboration and cohesion within communities. Encouraging participation in decision making through involvement in groups such as the P&C will allow community members to take ownership and responsibility roles within the school.

Participation of in-kind work through activities such as fundraising, sporting events, canteen support and maintenance are also strategies that encourage community participation.

Additionally, involvement in educational programs has the effect of further increasing interest and involvement within the school. This approach can be highly beneficial as community members have prior experience in dealing with the unique challenges facing the school.

Community participation can also help to provide legitimacy and acceptability to other programs that greatly benefit students. For example, programs such as breakfast clubs have an obvious benefit in terms of ensuring that the nutritional needs of students are met but there is a risk that participating students will experience a sense of social stigma. Opening up such activities to others in the community, and particularly authority figures, can help to minimise this risk.

Annual or more regular school sponsored community events are often significant milestones on the community social calendar. In many schools, they attract both the families of current students as well as community members without formal connections to the school and serve to provide broader community cohesion beyond the immediate school population. These events are usually sponsored by local companies, raising funds for the school and strengthening community ties.

Community engagement

Case Study #9: Community events and festivals sponsored by the schools across Australia

Many remote schools around Australia organise annual or more frequent events that bring the community into the school, turn the school into the 'hub' of the community, and help to build positive relationships between the school and its local community.



Examples of the events run by remote schools include:

- Community celebration days associated with Harmony Day, the Apology, and National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC).
- An annual 'Dump Truck Pull', which is sponsored by a local mine and includes teams from the remote school and the community, which is a remote twist on the tug of war.
- An annual 'dog race' (the Great Nundle Dog Race) involving family-pet dogs from around the local area sponsored by the P&C, as well as the Nundle Go for Gold Festival held by the same school.
- Annual fundraisers for a different charity each semester brings community members to the school and has raised over \$2,000 in the past. The fundraisers are empowering to the community as the community becomes the donor body rather than the recipient of funds.
- Markets to sell produce grown at the school, giving students an opportunity to showcase their work and the community an opportunity to engage with the activities taking place as part of the school curriculum.
- School concerts which draw families from the neighbouring communities.

Engagement can extend to involve members in the school curriculum or to help develop the school vision. This has proven key in drawing upon the expertise of community members and has had the benefit of providing children role models additional to their parents and the school teachers. Examples are shown in Box 16.

As well as providing interest and mentoring opportunities for students, these initiatives also help build a positive image of the school in the eyes of the community.

Gaining community engagement can be particularly important for those small and remote schools serving Aboriginal communities as it provides the opportunity to influence parents' and care givers' perceptions of and attitudes toward their children's schooling.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has highlighted that the "involvement of Aboriginal parents in their children's education is one of the key ways in which the schooling system can be made more relevant to Aboriginal communities" and argued that improved engagement promotes greater self determination amongst Aboriginal parents, making them more inclined to take control of their child's education and utilise the resources available to them. ⁴⁴

⁴⁴ ATSIC (1999)

Box 16: Case Studies: Implementing strategies to cultivate community involvement

...regularly engaging with community groups

- One remote NSW school has local social groups come to the school as a way of sharing their craft with students and improving the perception of the school in the eyes of these groups. Examples include the involvement of the local pottery group and the local knitting group in the school.
-

...including individual community members in the curriculum

- Schools have leveraged the knowledge of community members that live nearby to enhance the classroom experience. For example, one school has taken children on an excursion to a senior community member's sustainable, organic garden to teach children about produce.
-

...including cultural programs in curriculum

- Many remote schools have a strong cultural aspect to their curriculum to encourage community involvement and awareness. One remote school in WA actively organises cultural camps and excursions to key community sites.
-

...involving community members in delivering school services

- At one remote Queensland school, three Aboriginal mothers have been hired as teachers' aides, whilst in another NSW school, an Aboriginal Educator has been appointed. The inclusion of Aboriginal parents into the system has had positive community side effects, with them the parent's going back to the community and reporting favourably on the school's role and performance. The appointment of an Aboriginal Male Educator in one school has allowed for a role model for Aboriginal students and has also freed up other teachers' time, allowing them to focus on improving teaching quality.
 - Another remote primary school in South Australia is engaging its staff and the local Aboriginal community to develop a curriculum for the local Aboriginal language for all students to learn. This strategy leverages upon a separate community initiative that provided funding for the language to be written and for a dictionary to be developed.
 - One school in remote WA initiated a plan in 2004 to have Aboriginal Teaching Assistants support Aboriginal students in achieving the same literacy and numeracy outcomes as non-Aboriginal students. In developing its strategic plan, the school consulted with parents, utilising relationships established by Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATAs). Community members are involved in the school day, sometimes participating in classes and preparing food. Engagement served to establish a shared sense of what the school is trying to achieve with its focus on literacy and numeracy. The strategy is steadily improving literacy and numeracy results against state-wide assessment and has fostered the development of strong relationships and engagement between community and school.
-

...building relationships between the school and key community agencies

- Some schools have established strong ties with community bodies such as Aboriginal Health. They are using these relationships to provide resources to help students develop skills on how to engage with the broader community. This has had a positive effect in changing community perceptions of Aboriginal students, significantly improving relations.
 - A central network was established in 2008 as a self help support network to a number of schools, where volunteer members take responsibility, as resource people, for topics of importance to the community. The network facilitates access to people with experience, knowledge and interest in issues and topics of educational importance. Providing school communities with access to a range of resources has resulted in improved quality of learning opportunities and learning outcomes of students in rural schools. One school hosts the community interagency meeting which is used by representatives of government service providers as a forum to discuss community issues.
-

Community engagement

...involving the community in the broader school vision

- The community worked with the principal and staff of one small school to develop the school motto through a series of workshops. This was an effective way to engage with the community and build trust with the school.
 - Some small schools have undertaken community perception surveys in effort to understand community needs and the community expectation of the school. It gives staff an idea of the community issues and how they relate to the school.
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Part 3: Key lessons for small and remote schools

9 Implications for all remote schools

An effective school is characterised by students who are highly engaged and performing well with the support of the local community under an effective leadership and a stable and committed staff.

These are the characteristics which small and remote schools should ultimately be seeking to achieve.

At any point in time, a single small and remote school will be somewhere on the path to developing the attributes of an effective school. A richer understanding of which strategies work and why they work needs to recognise this development path and identify the particular needs and challenges faced by schools at particular points along that path.

Small and remote schools are often based in communities that have small populations, a reliance on resource few industries, a sense of kinship, place, and mind, and a unique symbiotic relationship between schools and their communities.

Understanding these unique qualities can play a significant role in determining future curriculum design, curriculum implementation, teacher training, recruitment and retention strategies and enhancing community development in small and remote areas.

An effective school enables students to develop their physical, personal and social skills while addressing all aspects of their community and cultural needs. Developing knowledge across all dimensions in a manner best suited for the cohort of local students enables them to develop application skills such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork. In attaining these skills, students can progressively develop the basic competencies as well as connectedness to work and/or further education. Skills which are essential in providing a foundation for the development of effective adults.

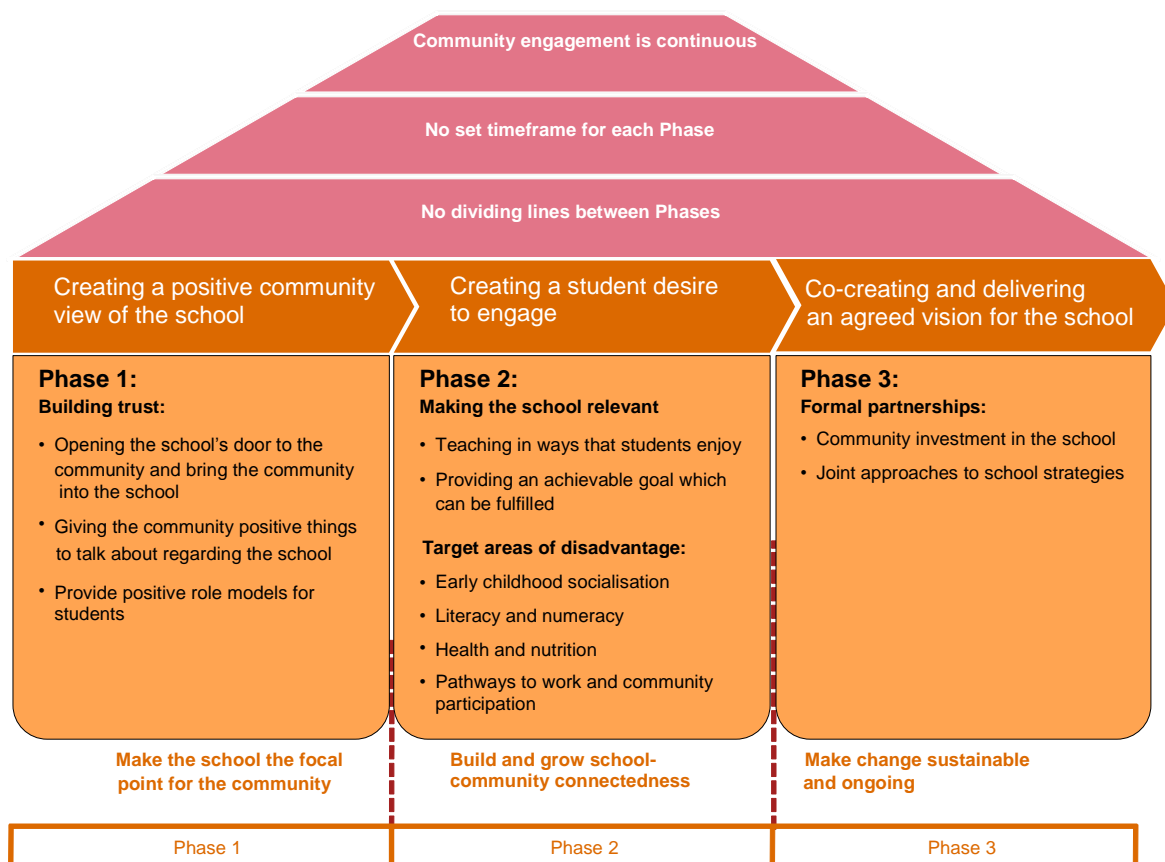
9.1 A holistic, evolving approach is required

A consistent theme emerging from this review is that the real power to influence outcomes for students in remote schools comes not from individual strategies but from the collective transformational effect of multiple initiatives operating in unison.

The effective set of initiatives also needs to change over time, with earlier strategies becoming self-sustaining and acting as the building blocks upon which subsequent strategies can be implemented.

These Phases are illustrated in Figure 10 and outlined below.

Figure 10: Key Phases along the pathway to a successful remote school



9.1.1 Phase 1: Creating a positive community view of the school

An initial level of community engagement with the school needs to be established to give the school a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the community. This initial level of engagement supports the first step on the part of the school to improve attendance. The challenge for schools at this point in the continuum is that building engagement with the community is often a slow process involving the development of trust between individuals from the school and the community. High rates of turnover among school staff contribute to the drawn out nature of this process.

9.1.2 Phase 2: Creating a student desire to engage

Initial improvements in attendance provide the school with the opportunity to increase student engagement. It also provides the opportunity to more tightly target those causes of low attendance for individual students over which the school can have an influence. These causes include nutrition, health and social disadvantage. Schools are now able to work on students' desire to be at school and their capacity to get to school on a regular basis. The provision of relevant curriculum plays an important role in generating engagement, as does the ability on the part of the school to offer tailored programs for children who, while in the same year group, are often at dramatically different levels of achievement.

For schools with secondary school students, identifying and developing genuine post-school pathways appears to be the single most important strategy for improving engagement. For schools with primary school aged students, initiatives that help children to see school as a safe and welcoming place are important. The most effective strategies for achieving this involve a focus on early childhood programs, providing opportunities for socialisation. However, where such programs are not offered, or have not previously been available to children enrolling at the school, the small class sizes and multi-year classrooms in many small schools facilitate the delivery of effective programs.

Schools should also be deepening their level of community engagement through initiatives that bring parents and community members into the school, and take the school out into the community. Achieving these outcomes plays an important role in supporting attendance and student engagement initiatives within the school. Bringing parents and community members into the school enhances the role of the school as a community institution and contributes to a sense of ownership. It can also play an important role in creating an air of normality around some of the programs that are focussed on increasing students' capacity to get to school and learn effectively while there. Taking the school out into the community makes a significant contribution to the development of pride in the school amongst staff and students.

9.1.3 Phase 3: Co-creating and delivering an agreed vision for the school

The final stage of development on the pathway to becoming a good school is characterised by high levels of community engagement. In some cases, this extends to a formal agreement between school and community about the partnership that will exist between them. Such agreements can extend to the planning, delivery and evaluation of the education services being provided by the school.

Effective agreements of this type are difficult to generate unless the development of trust between school and community through informal mechanisms and the process of bringing the community into the school are well advanced.

Schools that make it to this final stage make significant contributions, not only in terms of outcomes for their community's children, but also as significant contributors to the growth and development of the community as a whole.

Strategies developing effective leadership, improving teacher quality and addressing resource constraints are important supporting initiatives at each stage of this pathway to becoming a good remote school.

Importantly, the dividing lines between Phases are not clear cut. For example, nutrition and health strategies are of benefit in both the initial and final Phase of the pathway because they address needs that are not isolated to the school. However, the ability of the school to effectively implement these programs exists once an initial level of attendance is achieved and the impact of those programs increases as attendance becomes more regular.

In addition, the ability of a small and remote school to move along this pathway depends not only on the resources, support and leadership available to the school but also on the circumstances of the local community.

9.2 Benefits need to be seen

Students, parents and the wider community engage with schools because of the benefits that this engagement brings. The successful strategies that we have examined recognise this, and create returns to engagement where they may not have previously existed.

It is important that students, staff, parents, and communities see the benefits of school initiatives to maintain support and keep relationships going.

This is demonstrated by programs that reward student behaviour and attendance. Initiatives that provide recognition and rewards for students who meet attendance targets for the week, the term and the year create a payoff for students (and a cost if they fail to attend school without good reason). Some of the strategies highlighted in this report are contingent on student behaviour, such as access to the rap programs or camps to regional universities. Many students respond well to these incentives, keeping track of their own attendance levels and recognising the potential cost of a period of absence from school when the end-of-year school camp or opportunity is approaching.

The role that incentives play in creating a successful strategy is also apparent in a number of other strategies and programs that we have examined, including:

- 'breakfast club' programs where staff, general student body and community members participate so that the students who most need assistance with their nutritional needs are not deterred from attending because of the risk of social stigma
- vocational programs that create genuine pathways to work after school with a resulting significant improvement in secondary student engagement
- the success of a school's own enterprise park in creating employment opportunities for students and an entertainment option for the local community.

Small and remote schools looking to implement strategies to improve outcomes for students need to understand the opportunities they have for creating value for students, parents and the community through engagement.

9.3 The characteristics of successful strategies in each area of strategic need

9.3.1 Achieving effective leadership

In a remote school environment, effective leaders use their skills to address a number of areas of critical need, including:

- encouraging staff to achieve their best and managing the 'respectful tension' that exists between principals and staff
- fostering a culture of pride in the school and its students: pride in the schools achievements, pride in the association of staff and students with the school, and an optimism about what can be achieved
- anchoring the school in the wider community
- providing some continuity of staff and executives over time
- effectively supporting staff, ensuring that they feel valued and are receiving a unique development experience.

The truth is that being the leader of a remote school can be hard work. Long hours and having to perform duties that would not necessarily fall to the principal of larger urban schools are the norm. Success requires that principals are highly self-motivated, passionate, and put their vision for the school first.

Without these attributes, it is difficult to maintain a culture of continual improvement within the school and to begin thinking about 'next practice' while still implementing best practice.

Ensuring that staff, students and the community take pride in their school is a key step in creating a positive school environment. The process of successfully building this pride can be facilitated by a number of initiatives, including:

- improving the school's facilities and physical environment
- maintaining a supply of school uniforms and other apparel such as jumpers and shoes to ensure that school dress standards can be maintained without excluding students whose families are unable to afford or procure particular items
- building leadership skills amongst older children through programs offered by external providers and school activities
- engaging in meaningful community projects.

Ultimately, schools who successfully build pride do so around a school ethos of being forward looking, aspirational, and embodying a sense of initiative and community.

Anchoring the school in the community requires that school leaders not only take the school to the community but also to bring the community to the school. This is most effectively done when it is part of the day-to-day culture of the school but discrete strategies can assist in establishing this culture. The most deep cutting strategies involve a

fundamental transformation of the face of education within the community. This requires the first step to be formal involvement of the community in the process of building the vision for the school.

Many remote schools do have a small number of staff with extended service in the school. However, the reality is that tenures within what are often hard to staff schools are often kept short as a matter of policy to ensure that remote schools can be staffed effectively. Within this broader context, some successful remote schools rely on long serving non-teaching staff, for example Aboriginal Education Officers, to play an important role as custodians of the school's corporate memory and maintain longstanding relationships with the school's students, their families and the wider community.

Principals in small and remote schools are particularly reliant on an extended leadership team that incorporates teaching staff. These staff need to receive effective ongoing professional development related not only to their role as teachers but also as leaders within the school.

9.3.2 Building Teacher Quality

Successful strategies to build teacher quality begin with attraction and retention. Within the broad parameters of recruitment and staffing policies school principals have sought to raise the profile of their school and highlight the challenges they face in staffing their schools through principal's organisations and the media. Some principals also try to be proactive in recruitment, building links with universities to allow them to target final year students considering where to work during the practical component of their studies.

Giving young teachers the opportunity to experience teaching in a remote school is a practice that is also encouraged by programs put in place at a jurisdictional level. Early exposure to the life of a teacher in remote schools provides an opportunity to create realistic expectations and dispel some commonly held negative perceptions. From a new teacher's perspective these programs can help to mitigate the culture shock that some teachers experience when starting in their first remote school.

Such programs can be highly successful, with around three quarters of participants in one program being encouraged to apply for jobs in rural and remote schools.

Nonetheless, the provision of accommodation and financial and non-financial incentives remain important strategies for improving attraction and retention in remote schools. These core strategies have been successfully supplemented by efforts to recruit locally, including recruiting Aboriginal staff, to fill front-office, teaching and teaching support roles.

When new teachers do arrive, an effort is required on behalf of the school to ease them into their new role. Many schools have invested in formal induction programs, although for schools with small staffing complements finding the time remains a real issue. Induction programs need to be supported by on-going mentoring of new staff and in some cases, mentoring has been extended to include roles for community members as mentors.

Once a new teacher has been brought to the school there is a need for strategic professional development. A key feature of successful strategies is the tying of professional development to performance measurement, feedback and coaching that is reflective of the circumstances of the small, remote school.

The majority of principals and teachers we spoke to during the case study visits acknowledged the limitations inherent in much of the performance information available at the school level. One way in which remote schools can deal with this issue is to collaborate with schools in their region on assessment and moderation to overcome the challenges inherent with very small class sizes. This approach may also have merit in regions where a significant proportion of all students move between schools. In these circumstances school-specific metrics are particularly limited as year cohorts can change entirely between assessment points.

Coaching and mentoring networks are being used to provide professional development for both coaches and those receiving the coaching. Learning teams within schools bring teachers responsible for different curriculum components together to focus on specific year groups within the school. In-class assessment of performance by principals and peers and commitments to quality frameworks are all examples of strategies being used by the schools visited as part of the case study program.

With relatively small staffs, remote schools often require their teachers to teach across multiple school years and subjects. There are a wide range of development programs available to teachers, although the challenge of covering staff absences and the cost of travel means that they do not have access to the same development opportunities as staff in schools in major cities and regional centres. However, there are strategies that can go some way to bridging the gap:

- reducing professional development costs through partnering with nearby schools to combine professional development days
- seeking funding contributions from local business
- the increasing use of information technology to deliver curriculum for students, allowing an experienced teacher to deliver course material. This effectively increases the staff available to the school and also provides opportunities for staff development for teachers in the receiving school who may be unfamiliar with particular learning material.

9.3.3 Engaging Students

Our research suggests that engaging students and ensuring that they remain engaged is the area of strategic need that offers the greatest return for effort for small and remote schools. Once students are regularly attending school, and engaged while they are at school, other strategies and programs can be used to address existing educational, social and health disadvantages. Furthermore, attendance and engagement are clearly mutually reinforcing. Once students are at school and being engaged, the incentives that exist for not attending school are reduced and exposure to engagement strategies increases.

Getting students to come to school in the first place requires different strategies for different age cohorts. For children of primary school age, ensuring that school is seen as a safe environment is an important goal. Young children in remote communities often do not have the opportunities for the socialisation required to prepare them for school that are available to children in cities and larger towns. Opportunities for this socialisation are particularly limited for the children of families who have transient lifestyles associated with following work opportunities or cultural norms.

Given the lack of early childhood programs in remote communities, many schools have become the providers of playgroups and kindergartens for their communities, providing a mechanism for developing the social skills and familiarity with the school environment.

For children and young people of high school age, attendance and engagement rely heavily on the existence of genuine pathways to work or further education. Often in partnership with local employers and community sector organisations, schools are actively creating these pathways where none previously existed, or at best were extremely tenuous. Providing real opportunity to high school aged students is proving to be highly effective in building student engagement in many schools.

Regardless of the age of the students, successful remote schools continue to focus on attendance as an important outcome. They do so through combinations of strategies that are mutually reinforcing, including:

- following up with parents and carers when children are absent
- targeting nutrition, health and well-being to reduce the frequency of illness

- tailoring learning to very small groups, and where resources allow, to individuals, allowing for catching up opportunities through ways that minimise feelings of shame
- putting in place structured programs of rewards for maintaining and improving attendance.

Successful strategies for building engagement once students are attending school include providing relevant curriculum aligned to student's interests, expanding learning environments to outside the classroom, exploiting the benefits of technology for expanding the curriculum that can be offered, taking advantage of ready access to the natural environment and ensuring that some of the fun activities available to students in the city are available to students in remote schools.

9.3.4 Getting students ready

Student engagement and student readiness are closely aligned. As we have noted above, appropriate socialisation of young children is an important prerequisite for ensuring that they are able to cope effectively with school and many remote schools offer early childhood programs that not only meet community need but also provide an opportunity for this socialisation to occur.

In the case of high school students there is obviously a greater focus on achieving readiness for work of further education as part of the curriculum. However, small and remote schools are also implementing strategies that provide students with the life skills and labour market skills that they will need to successfully make their post school transitions. Successful strategies include:

- exercises that simulate real-life work situations, such as telephone calls and writing cover letters
- developing commercial activities ranging from cafés to holiday accommodation that provides students with real-world training opportunities in communities where such opportunities may be limited
- partnering with local employers to allow legitimate VET projects to be undertaken and to identify opportunities for traineeships and apprentices.

Community sector organisations are often important partners that provide additional life and professional skills development to complement the activities of the school.

9.3.5 Bringing in the community

Building and maintaining community engagement and support for the school is a constant theme in the strategies that small and remote schools adopt. When this support and engagement is obtained it contributes to better outcomes for many of the other strategy areas that we have identified above. Community engagement makes it easier to build pride in the school and opens up alternatives for resolving resourcing challenges. Gains can be made in student engagement due to the enhanced sense of the relevance of the school and staff attraction and retention is made easier.

To genuinely build effective community engagement, strategies are required that bring the community into the school to complement the school's external engagement with the community. The parent group is a key community cohort in this respect, but many schools have actively sought to broaden the range of community members who come into the school. This is being achieved by opening up the school's facilities for wider community use, meeting the need for common spaces and facilities that often exist in remote towns and communities, sponsoring and hosting community events, and ensuring that staff members are visible in and around the community.

Efforts are also being made to integrate the school as an institution in the community, rather than as an institution separate from the community. Expanding the curriculum to include Aboriginal culture where this is relevant to the local community, is a key strategy and is complemented by the employment of local community members.

Ultimately, community engagement can be formalised through agreements between the school and the community that creates obligations for both groups. These agreements are the outcome of significant discussion and negotiation and follow the building of trust between school and community over a period of time. Building this trust often takes place in multiple informal settings.

Appendices

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Appendix A *Bibliography*

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Appendix B Terms of reference

- This project aims to identify innovative strategies and models of best-practice, which lead to improved literacy and numeracy outcomes, higher attendance and graduation rates, improved teacher retention and leadership etc. in small and remote schools in low socio-economic status (SES) communities within the Australian context.
- The objective is to identify innovative strategies that have been successfully employed, those that could be successfully employed in the Australian context from an overseas experience and under what circumstances individual strategies are expected to be successful.
- There is a focus on strategies that address:
 - attraction and retention of quality teachers and leaders including innovative strategies to recruit and retain local people to teacher education pathways
 - leadership development that drives improved school performance
 - effective practices, reform models and curriculum delivery approaches that lead to sustained improvement, both in an Aboriginal and non Aboriginal context
 - community education practices in Aboriginal remote and rural communities that build community capacity in working with schools, supporting educational objectives and building effective partnerships between school and the community
 - strategies for sustained school improvement in attendance, literacy and numeracy, retention and parental engagement.

Appendix C Overview of strategies

Summary of strategies that target – Effective leadership

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Key Dimensions of Effective Leadership for Change	South Africa	√	√			√			
Leading Aligned Numeracy Development (LAND)	Various	√	√			√	√		
Leading Across Effective Small Schools Program (LAESS)	VIC	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
The development of leadership capacity through collaboration in small schools	UK		√		√	√	√	√	√
The schools with teaching principals project	QLD		√		√	√			
The Bush Tracks project	NSW		√			√	√		
Aboriginal Leadership Group	NT		√	√		√			√
Changing Teaching Practices in Rural	USA	√	√	√	√		√	√	

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Schools									
The Professional Development Needs of Rural High School Principals: A Seven-State Study	USA		√			√			
Collaboration: The Driving Force for Success	USA	√		√		√	√	√	
Sustainable Leadership in Small Rural Schools: Selected Australian Vignettes	Australia			√		√			
Instructional Coaches: Lessons from the Field	USA		√		√	√	√	√	√
Doing More with Less: Teacher Professional Learning Communities in Resource-Constrained Primary Schools in Rural China	China		√			√	√	√	√
The Leadership Challenge: Improving Learning in Schools.	Australia	√	√			√	√	√	√
Facilitating high achievement; High school principals' reflections on their	USA	√	√			√			

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
successful leadership practices									
Working against ourselves: decision making in a small rural school district	USA					√	√	√	√
Successful school principals in small schools	Australia					√	√	√	√
Context counts: Viewing small school leadership from the inside out	Australia					√			
The role of school leadership in attracting and retaining teachers and promoting innovative schools and students: Review of Teaching and Teacher Education	Australia					√	√	√	√
Effective Leadership in Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances	UK			√	√	√			

Summary of strategies that target – Teacher Quality

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
No Child Left Behind	US								
Beyond the Line – School Executive Program	NSW		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Beyond the Line – School Community Visits	NSW		√	√		√	√	√	√
Immersion Experience in Alaskan Native Community Cultural Life	Alaska		√		√	√			
Rural Education Field Trip	WA		√		√		√	√	√
Rural Teaching Program	WA		√				√	√	√
Nigerian Primary Education Improvement Project	Nigeria		√			√	√	√	
IPAR Project			√	√		√			
Bunumbu Project	Eastern Region of Sierra Leone		√	√	√	√			
BUNTEP Project	Canada		√	√					
Australian Aboriginal and Islander	NT		√	√					√

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Teacher Aide In-service Program									
Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP)	QLD	√	√						√
Grey Nomad Teacher Employment Strategy	Regional QLD		√	√		√			
First Time Principals' Induction Program	NSW		√		√	√			
Teacher Relief Scheme	NSW		√						
Rural Educators Network	VIC		√		√	√	√		
Priority Country Area Program	QLD	√	√	√	√			√	
Teachers of Tomorrow	US		√					√	
Student	WA	√	√	√	√		√	√	
Teacher Rural Experience Program									
Benedict College's Minority Access to Teacher Education (MATE) program	South Carolina		√			√			
Principal Attraction:	St. Patricks School		√			√			

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Principal mentoring program	NSW								
Principal support program									
Professional Learning facilitated by ACU - Leaders transforming learning and learners (LTLL)									
Study Support Scheme									
Teacher Attraction:									
Diocesan Early Employment Program (DEEP)									
Graduate Support Program incl. Teacher Accreditation support									
Teacher housing, rental subsidy and isolation allowance									

Summary of strategies that target – Improving teacher quality

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Grow your Own	US		√	√	√				
Community-based Mentoring Model	QLD		√	√		√			
Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP)	WA		√		√		√		
Pacific Rim Resource Strategy	US		√			√			
21st Century Learning	NT		√			√		√	
Northwest Initiative for Teaching & Learning	Newport Heights	√	√		√	√			
Quality Assurance and the Quality of University Teaching	Australia		√	√					
State Policies to Improve Teacher Professional Development	USA	√	√	√	√				

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Conceptualising and Evaluating Teacher Quality: Substantive and Methodological Issues	Australia	√	√						
Teach for America: A Review of the Evidence	USA		√						
Creating Highly Qualified Teachers: Maximizing University Resources to Provide Professional Development in Rural Areas	USA		√	√	√				
Leading for Quality: Questions about Quality and Leadership in Australia	Australia		√						
Working Backwards Towards Curriculum: On the Curricular Implications of "Quality Teaching	NSW	√	√						

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through professional development, access to mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Getting Our Best Teachers into Disadvantaged Schools: Differences in the Professional and Personal Factors Attracting More Effective and Less Effective Teachers to a School	Australia	√	√				√	√	√
An Integrated Professional Development Model for Effective Teaching	Netherlands	√	√		√	√			
Getting from Here to There: The Roles of Policy Makers and Principals in Increasing Science Teacher Quality	USA	√	√	√	√	√			
Case Study of Leadership Practices and School-Community Interrelationships in High-Performing, High-Poverty,	USA	√	√	√	√	√			

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Rural California High Schools									
Rural Differences in Student Achievement: The Effect of Student Perceptions	WA	√	√						
Professional Learning Communities Restorative Practice Program First Steps reading, writing & number courses	St Patrick's School NSW		√		√	√			
Online Literacy marking training District CAP Initiative (NICE)	Coonamble High School		√						
Country Area Program	Girilambone Public School		√						
National Partnership Support Teacher Individual Education Plans (IEP)	Zeehan Primary School TAS		√		√				

Summary of strategies that target – Student engagement

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through increased professional development, access to coaching & mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Teaching maths as a social activity	Alaska								
Maningrida Community Education Centre	NT								
Cowell Area School, oyster industry curriculum	SA								
Role models WA – Up 4 It program	WA	√		√			√	√	√
West Coast Eagles – Kicking Goals	WA								
Small Schools' Drama Project	NT								
Peaceful Playgrounds	NT								
Education for a Sustainable Future in the You Yangs,	Geelong								
Peers Early Education Program (PEEP),	UK								

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Western Cape College – Bound for Success	QLD	√		√	√		√	√	√
Honey Art Readers	Central Australia	√	√					√	√
GurrindinDalmi Community Based Play	Katherine	√		√	√				√
Yipirinya School	Alice Springs	√	√	√		√	√	√	√
Reading Recovery, Flying Start, Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS)	Various	√		√			√	√	√
Productive Pedagogies Project	QLD	√	√						
Questioning the Author Strategy: An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement with Text.	Florida	√	√						
Striving Readers Projects	US	√					√	√	
It's Not OK to	VIC	√		√					

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Be Away: Student Attendance Support Kit is									
Louisiana School Turnaround Specialist Program	Louisiana	√	√			√		√	
ESL Pedagogy	Cairns West State School QLD	√	√				√		√
Targeted support for Aboriginal & disadvantaged students using Bridges, Lexia & ICT	Zeehan Primary School TAS	√		√			√	√	
Targeted support for Aboriginal & disadvantaged students using Bridges, Lexia & ICT	Zeehan Primary School TAS	√		√			√	√	

Summary of strategies that target – Student performance

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through increased professional development, access to coaching & mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Euraba Educational Centre	NSW & QLD	√		√	√		√	√	√
Explicit Teaching in Literacy and Science – Driver Primary	NT	√	√			√			
Next Steps in Literacy	NT	√	√		√	√			
River Region Writing Bridges,	NT	√	√		√				
ICT Kopu Project	NZ	√	√		√				
Facilitating Community Access to Information Technology through Schools,	WA	√	√	√					
Western Cape College	QLD	√			√				√
The Global Gateway	UK	√	√		√				
Catch the Future	Various	√	√			√	√	√	√
Gateways to Literacy	NT	√	√	√			√	√	√

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Mobile Preschool Pilot Program	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islands	√		√			√	√	√
High achievers program	Aboriginal schools	√			√				√
National Accelerated Learning Project (NALP)	NT, WA, SA, QLD	√	√		√				
Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS)	QLD, TAS, SA, NT, NSW, WA, VIC	√			√		√	√	√
Dare to lead	WA	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Gladstone Industry Partnership	QLD	√	√		√				
Developing skills to teach remote Aboriginal students in the basic number understandings	QLD	√	√		√		√	√	√
Emerging Scientists	VIC	√	√		√				
Marine & Environmental Education	Kangaroo Island	√		√	√		√	√	√
Multi-age class	Bourke Primary	√	√			√	√	√	√

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groupings Reading Recovery Express courses 'Stages' - staff teams Literacy Program Homework Centre Aboriginal Education Assistants	School NSW								
The Learning Assistance Program	Augusta Park Primary School SA	√			√		√	√	√
In-Class Tutoring Program	Moruya Public School NSW	√					√		
Maths In Context	Moruya Public School NSW	√					√		
Bullroarer Program	Moruya Public School NSW	√					√		
Cluster learning communities Working partnerships with Newcastle	St. Patrick's School NSW			√	√				√

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University Training for Aboriginal elders & community members to provide support within the classroom for attendance & literacy Parent education classes Provision of allied health services									
Partner School Planning	Mountain Heights School TAS				√			√	
“Best Start” Kindergarten Assessment	Swansea Primary School TAS	√						√	
Program for International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Numeracy Improvement/Literacy Improvement program Partnership	Cape Barren Island School TAS	√		√	√				

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with UTAS in
action research
in online
Aboriginal
education

Summary of strategies that target – Community engagement

	Area/ Region	Student engagement focus through measures to improve student engagement and learning outcomes	Teacher quality focus through increased professional development, access to coaching & mentoring and involvement in decision making.	Community engagement focus by promoting educational relationships, community participation and involvement in educational outcomes	Partnerships & networks focus through greater collaboration between teachers, students, parents, the community & other schools	School leadership focus through staff engagement, managing change and community leadership roles	Low SES schools focus where communities are faced with inter-generational poverty and poor social inclusion	Lower literacy & numeracy focus where schools are performing below the basic national standards	Predominantly Aboriginal context where a large cohort of students are from Aboriginal backgrounds
Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL)	UK								
Central PACAP Patrons and Champions Project	QLD								
La Grange Remote Community School – Attendance strategy	WA								
St Joseph's School – Strategy Plan and Aboriginal Teaching Assistants	WA								
School-Community Library Project in a Remote Rural Area in South Africa	South Africa								
Parents as Teachers (PAT)	NSW, ACT	√		√	√		√	√	√
Early Access to Success in Education (EASE)	USA	√		√	√		√	√	√

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Aboriginal Parents' Factor: Successful Early Learning at Home and School (IPF)	Australia wide	√		√	√		√	√	√
Bidi Bidi Centre and Programs	Mount Magnet	√		√			√		√
Bridging the Gap	Sydney	√		√	√		√	√	√
Reading for Life	NSW, VIC, WA, QLD, TAS & NZ	√		√	√		√	√	√
'Developing skills to teach remote Aboriginal students in the basic number understandings' 45	Qld		√	√			√		√
'Facilitating community access to Information Technology	WA	√			√				

45 Tytler, R., Symington, D, Smith, C. Rodrigues, S. (2008), An Innovation Framework based on best practice exemplars from the Australian School Innovation in Science, Technology and Mathematics (ASISTM) Project, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

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through Schools'46									
'Every Child is Special' - Integrated community-based program	Qld	√		√					√
'Moving On' - whole-of-community mentoring program for teachers	Qld		√	√					
Badu Island State School - Year 8 Transition Program ⁴⁷	Qld	√	√	√	√		√		√
Doomadgee State School ⁴⁸ - engagement community through 'cultural days', personal relationships with community members, and community-	Qld	√		√			√		√

⁴⁶ MCEETYA Taskforce on Rural and Remote Education, Training, Employment and Children's Services (2000), available online at

⁴⁷ 'What Works. The Work Program' (2010) website maintained by Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, <<http://www.whatworks.edu.au/dbAction.do?cmd=homePage>>

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based teaching aides									
Warrego Primary School - Integrated school and community program tailored around horsemanship	NT			√			√		√
Retired Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (REVISE): A Support Program for Home Tutors	SA	√		√				√	
Aboriginal Cross-Cultural Awareness	TAS			√					√
The Marlak Mereny and Koorin (Bush Foods and Medicines) Project	Merredin Senior High School WA	√		√					√
Parents as Partners program	Coonamble High School				√		√	√	√
Career mentors to work with students &	Mountain Heights School			√			√	√	

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families

