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National School Resourcing Standards Board (NSRB)

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Submission - Review of the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings

Lutheran Education South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia Inc. (LESNW) as approved system authority represents Thirty Four (34) learning communities across three (3) states with ten (10) of these communities under the current ARIA+ Index (2011) recognised as either Outer Regional (6 communities), Remote (3 communities) or Very Remote (1 community). LESNW therefore appreciates and recognises the complex challenges associated with delivery of education in a regional setting and welcomes the NSRB's review into the existing regional loadings. In making this submission LESNW seeks to highlight the importance of the existing Size & Location Loadings to allow schools to deliver world class education to regional and remote communities.

Focus Questions 1: What are the elements specific to school location (i.e. not related to student characteristics such as socio-educational disadvantage, students with disability, low English language proficiency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students) that increase the cost of delivering education in these settings?

LESNW recognises that the biggest issue in regional areas is the tyranny of distance from the metropolitan precincts and the access to support services including transport. Whilst the issues vary from community to community the challenging elements generally fall into five (5) categories;

1. Staff Resourcing – A key challenge for most regional school communities is the ability to attract and secure long term competent and appropriately qualified staff to regional and remote areas. Many communities need to resort to offering higher salaries, relocation expense reimbursement, incentive bonuses and various allowances to entice staff to consider a regional posting when advertising for vacancies, something that metropolitan and inner regional communities wouldn't even need to consider.
2. Curriculum Delivery – This aspect relies heavily of the ability of the schools to access educational resources appropriate to meet the Australian education standards in a way that meets the needs of the students without disadvantage. In endeavouring to meet this expectation schools in regional and remote areas endeavour to provide access to school camps & excursions, teaching resources and online learning technology in the same manner that is available to metropolitan and inner regional communities. However, the costs associated with maintaining these opportunities for students comes at a significant additional expense to the schools through extended supervision, bus driver salary, bus maintenance and lost face to face contact for other curriculum subjects. A simple example for a school excursion to access public library resources, a swimming pool or similar could involve multiple hours of bus travel for a one to two-hour on-site visit.
3. Transport – Regional & remote schools may need to operate and maintain a fleet of buses to ensure students can get to and from school safely and access opportunities for excursions etc. Often there is a lack of commercial bus operator options, so schools have significant capital investment to ensure appropriate seating capacity for their student cohorts as well as ongoing maintenance compliance costs. It is not uncommon for a larger regional and remote schools to manage an annual bus operating budget of \$300K to \$400K.

4. Technology Infrastructure – Access to fast and reliable internet services is critical for onsite curriculum delivery and distant learning provision in this day and age. The National Broadband Network (NBN) is not available in many regional and remote communities which then requires schools to access at their own cost appropriate uncontended services which often requires significant capital investment and ongoing monthly charges for an appropriate connection (i.e. school to node/street, satellite, radio tower). Additional, hardware infrastructure and ICT technician servicing costs (due to travel) are also needed to mitigate against connection dropouts and maintain the standard that the community expects.
5. Access to Allied Health Services – Increasingly students and families are requiring access to disability and mental health services, but sadly services in regional and remote areas are often limited leaving schools to fund much needed wellbeing and disability support services internally. Often families struggle to access timely basic support which, because of limited treatment options, can then escalate into more significant issues and it is not uncommon for schools to finance psychological onsite professionals and other specialists to meet and maintain the needs of their broader school community.

Focus Questions 2: Are there additional elements associated with school size for smaller schools in regional and remote settings that increase the cost of delivering education over the costs for small schools in city areas (not related to student characteristics such as socio-educational disadvantage, students with disability, low English language proficiency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students)?

LESNW recognises that small schools irrespective of location are impacted by economies of scale in being able to meet the educational needs of students, meet compliance expectations and provide breadth of subject opportunities. Having recognised this, regional and remote schools also face the added pressures of funding capital infrastructure projects, providing attractive career pathways for staff, compensating staff for extra-curricular out of hours obligations and attracting technical expertise (i.e. most staff are required to be generalists across a broad range of roles).

Focus Questions 3: Is the dollar value of the current school location and school size loading appropriate to meet the educational costs specific to school location and school size?

LESNW recognises the additional funding assistance provided by the Government via the respective location and size loadings however generally the financial performance of schools located in regional and remote areas is more volatile than in metropolitan and inner regional areas. Schools in regional and remote areas are highly dependent on the fortunes of their local economies, population fluctuations and the impact of local reputation perceptions. Unfortunately, LESNW takes a holistic approach to the recurrent funding model and cannot provide a determination in isolation if the existing size and location loadings are sufficient to meet the educational costs of these schools.

Focus Questions 4: Are there elements specific to school location which have particular resourcing implications for certain types of schools in regional and remote areas, such as boarding schools and small non-systemic schools (as opposed to small systemic schools)? What are the elements?

LESNW operates two (2) primarily indigenous schools in remote areas; Crossways Lutheran School (Ageld: 2630) at Ceduna in South Australia and, Yirara College (Ageld: 14276) at Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Yirara College provides Boarding opportunities and also operates a separate isolated community campus at Kintore more than 500km West of the main Alice Springs campus (approx. 9-10 hours drive). Indigenous education provides its own separate challenges and it is recognised that funding through the existing Indigenous Loading provides some cost relief to meet the cultural needs of those communities, however, that loading does not provide relief from operating the boarding facilities at Yirara College.

Schools providing Boarding facilities in metropolitan or less remote areas generally are subsidised by the students and their families however Indigenous Boarding at Yirara attracts minimal compensation from Government agencies and families have limited capacity to contribute which creates additional stress on the school's finances.

Additionally, in the Yirara College example the Boarding costs are significantly high as the College's unique situation requires them to manage:

- fluctuating boarding cohort numbers due to the indigenous cultural and community events. Often student absences are notified at short notice making it impossible to change staffing rosters to maximise the supervision ratios under a required 24hr 7 days per week supervision model.
- incentives to attract suitably qualified and reliable supervisors however the volatile attendance requires flexible working hours which most staff struggle with which then creates higher than normal staff turnover and increased backfill recruitment activity,
- ongoing facility maintenance – often serviced by interstate technicians and down time caused by equipment delays are normal,
- aging infrastructure with limited opportunity to raise the significant capital required to modernise the facilities – for example Yirara College Boarding facilities are almost fifty (50) years old and recent quotes to upgrade the facilities require a minimum \$20 million investment which is restrictive.

Focus Questions 5: Is ARIA+ the most appropriate basis for classifying locations and applying to the school location loading? Should another measure be considered?

LESNW recognises that the existing ARIA+ scores used in the existing recurrent funding calculation model and similar measures like the Modified Monash Model (MMM) are being considered by the NSRB. LESNW believes that both methods are based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data and provide similar rankings for our regional and remote school communities however the ranking scales are noticeably different, that is, the ARIA+ scale is 0 to 15 whereas the MMM scale is 0 to 7. In this response LESNW is concerned that;

1. the existing Size and Location Loading formula or percentage weighting would need to change to accommodate the scale difference and avoid funding disadvantage, however it is unclear at this point what that formula calculation would be to achieve this. Further consultation with a sector working group and ABS experts to help identify an appropriate solution is encouraged,
2. current ARIA+ scores under the existing model are applied to the registered main location of the school. Where a campus location resides in an area which attracts a different ARIA+ or MMM score LESNW would request that the remote campus rating be applied to the whole school funding calculation. For example, Yirara College's (Alice Springs, NT) ARIA+ score is six (6) however their Kintore campus (Kintore, NT) located more than five hundred (500) kilometres to the west (near the Western Australia border) contributes almost twenty (20) percent of the total student cohort and has a ARIA+ score of fifteen (15) [ref: Map1]. Very crudely a more appropriate weighted ARIA+ score for the combined campuses may be equal to 7.8 (i.e. 80% of 6 for Alice Springs campus plus 20% of 15 for Kintore campus)?

Map1: ARIA+ (2011) Index Map – Kintore (NT)



<https://services.spatial.adelaide.edu.au/giscaportal/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=cc785550a33a4651a72921c2a6cda8c1>

Focus Questions 6: Are there new or emerging factors that should be taken into consideration when looking at the cost of education in regional and remote areas and/or small schools?

LESNW considers that the previous responses reflect the existing landscape and there is nothing additional to add at this time.

In conclusion LESNW appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback in this review process and welcomes any further opportunity that the NSRB makes available to help inform this review process.

Regards

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