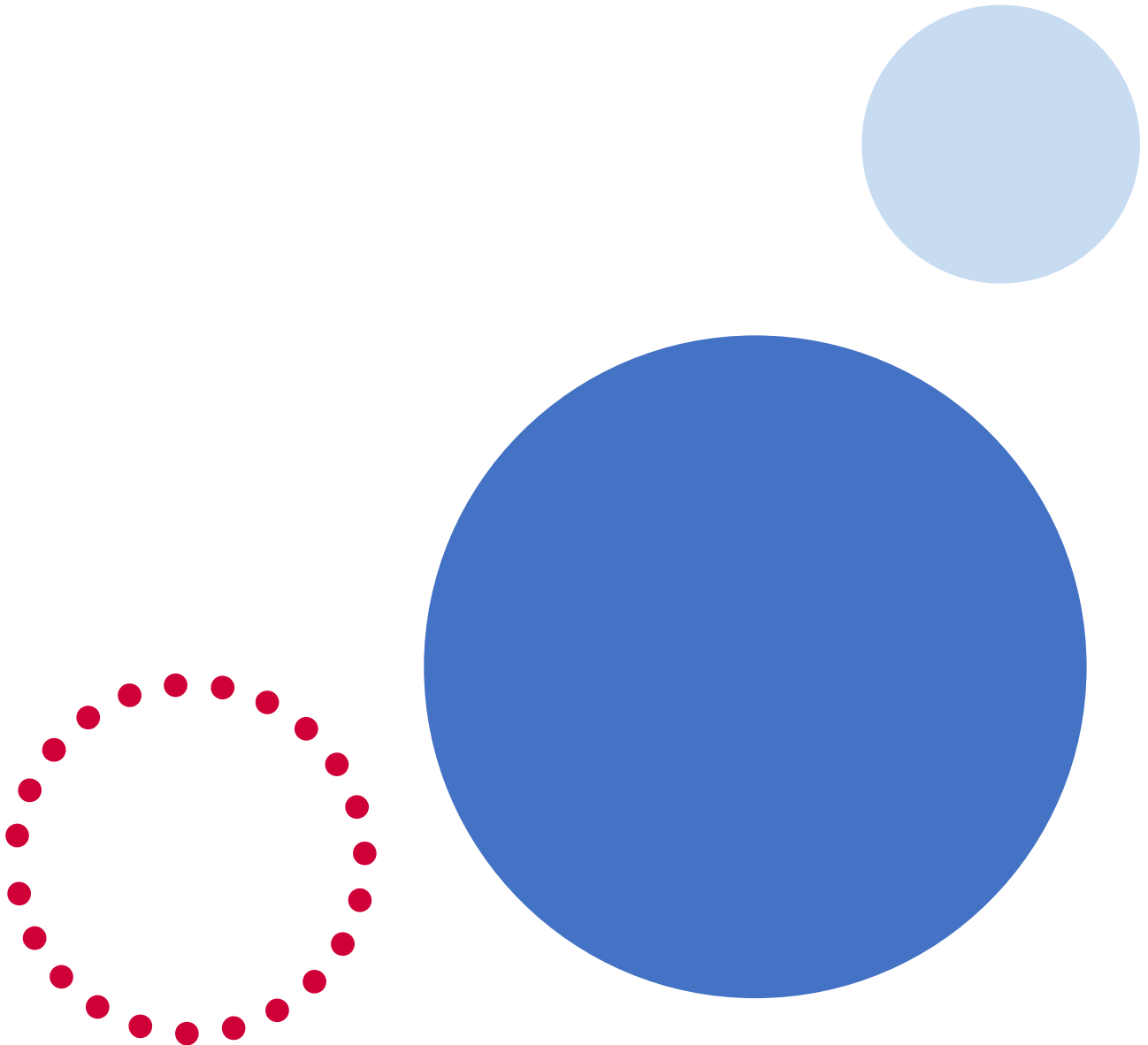


# Submission on the Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings





**The Hon Sarah Mitchell MLC**

Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning  
Deputy Leader of the Government in the Legislative Council

Mr Michael Chaney AO  
Chair  
National School Resourcing Board

DGS20/2966

By e-mail: [NSRBsecretariat@education.gov.au](mailto:NSRBsecretariat@education.gov.au)

Dear Mr Chaney

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the National School Resourcing Board (NSRB) Review of the Regional Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) Loadings (the Review). The NSW Submission to this review is attached to this letter.

The NSRB has an important role in providing independent oversight over Commonwealth school funding and the operation of the *Australian Education Act 2013*, including reviews of loadings under the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

NSW funding for both government and non-government schools is tied to the Commonwealth's school funding model. Any changes to the SRS will have a direct impact on both NSW funding and Commonwealth funding to NSW schools.

Therefore, NSW has a strong interest in being a partner in this and all future reviews, and welcomes all opportunities for transparent, regular and meaningful consultation.

If you would like to discuss this submission, please contact Ms Kathleen Forrester, Executive Director Reform and External Relations on 0477 556 477 or [kathleen.forrester2@det.nsw.edu.au](mailto:kathleen.forrester2@det.nsw.edu.au).

Yours sincerely

**Sarah Mitchell MLC**  
11 November 2020

# Table of contents

- Summary ..... 4**
- General discussion ..... 6**
  - Key challenges in regional and remote areas ..... 6
  - The NSW funding model ..... 7
  - The ongoing need for system flexibility ..... 7
  - The need for a collaborative review process ..... 8
- Response to the focus questions ..... 9**

# Summary

The New South Wales (NSW) public education system is the largest in Australia, and one of the largest in the world. There are 2,210 government schools and 805,673 students across the State. In 2019 there were 999 government schools in regional and remote NSW,<sup>1</sup> approximately 45 per cent of all government schools.<sup>2</sup> This includes 594 inner regional, 352 outer regional, 37 remote and 16 very remote schools.<sup>3</sup> There were 204,945 students outside major cities, making up 25 per cent of the NSW government school population.<sup>4</sup>

In the NSW non-government sector, there were 951 schools in 2019 with 425,966 students. This includes 311 schools outside major cities, making up 33 per cent of total non-government schools, of which 12 were remote or very remote schools.<sup>5</sup> 35 per cent of schools managed by Catholic Schools NSW (CSNSW) were outside major cities and 29 per cent of non-systemic schools represented by the Association of Independent Schools NSW (AISNSW). There were 89,571 students outside major cities, making up 21 per cent of non-government school students in NSW.

A May 2020 report by the NSW Department of Education's (the Department) Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) indicates that students in regional and remote locations generally exhibit lower levels of academic achievement, attendance rates, engagement and transition to further study compared to students in metropolitan locations.<sup>6</sup> It is critical that schools in regional and remote locations receive necessary funding to address the gaps in outcomes between students in regional and remote, and metropolitan settings.

Both the Commonwealth and NSW allocate additional resources to schools in regional and remote settings. Since NSW signed the Bilateral Agreement with the Commonwealth in 2018, total NSW funding for government schools (and non-government schools since 2019) has been tied to the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Therefore, changes to the SRS base amount or loadings may impact total NSW funding to both government and non-government schools.

---

<sup>1</sup> For consistency in this submission, the phrase 'regional and remote' refers to areas termed 'inner regional', 'outer regional', 'remote' and 'very remote' in the *Australian Education Act 2013* (Cth) and the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+).

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020) *Schools and students: 2019 statistical bulletin*, <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Schools-students-2019-statistical-bulletin.pdf> Table 4, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid Table 18.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Curriculum (2019) *Assessment and Reporting Authority School Profile*, <https://www.acara.edu.au/contact-us/acara-data-access>.

<sup>6</sup> Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020) *Evaluation of the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint – Final Report*, NSW Department of Education, <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Rural-and-remote-evaluation.pdf>.

NSW does not allocate funding to government schools according to the SRS or associated loadings such as the size and location loadings. NSW has a nuanced and localised approach to the allocation of funding to schools using its Resource Allocation Model (RAM), which includes a base school allocation, equity loadings and targeted student funding. Remote and/or isolated schools receive additional operational funding through a specific location allocation. The State requires a high degree of flexibility and autonomy to manage funding decisions in a complex, large-scale and diverse system.

Focusing on what Approved System Authorities currently spend on educating students in regional and remote settings only gives a picture of historical investment, and does not indicate what actually needs to be spent to support these students to achieve educational outcomes in the current environment. The National School Resourcing Board (NSRB) should use the research and evidence collected from the Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings (the Review) to identify the actual cost required to meet the resourcing needs of educating students in a regional or remote school, relative to a school which is funded at 100 percent of its total SRS. Based on this research, the NSRB should ascertain whether the current SRS size and location loadings are adequate or whether they need to be refined. This approach would reflect how the loadings were originally constructed, by considering the additional resources required by regional and remote schools, and assessing if the loadings remain relevant and appropriate to meet the needs.<sup>7</sup>

NSW supports the requirement that the NSRB will provide recommendations that consider the financial impacts on Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, and that at least one budget neutral option will be provided for changes to loading settings.

---

<sup>7</sup> Gonski D., Boston K., Greiner K., Lawrence C., Scales B., Tannock P. (2011) *Review of Funding for Schooling- Final Report* <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf> 153.

# General discussion

## Key challenges in regional and remote areas

NSW recognises that educational disadvantage in Australia is a systemic problem. In Australia, the link between student background and educational achievement is stronger than those in other OECD countries with high quality education systems.<sup>8</sup> Students in regional and remote areas often do not benefit from the same educational opportunities and experiences as students in metropolitan areas.<sup>9</sup> In addition, regional and remote schools experience difficulty with recruiting and retaining high quality teachers and school leaders, and there is an over-representation of less experienced teachers and school leaders.<sup>10</sup>

Having a highly competent teacher workforce is critical to raising the achievements of students and facilitating their transitions to further study, training and employment. The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (the Halsey Review) recognised that attracting and retaining school teachers and leaders at regional and remote schools are major challenges across many education systems.<sup>11</sup> Schools often invest significant time and resources into the induction and training of early-career staff and may not receive long term benefits from doing so, as many teachers transfer to other locations once eligible.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, schools and students may contend with multiple factors that interact in complex ways and may compound the effects of educational disadvantage.<sup>13</sup> For example, a remote school may face higher costs than a metropolitan school in accessing services or technology for a student with a disability.

These challenges are faced by both the government and non-government sector in NSW. In 2019 there were 951 non-government schools in NSW. Of these, 33 per cent were outside major cities and 40 per cent were classified as either small or very small under the

---

<sup>8</sup> Holden R. and Zhang J. (2018) *The Economic Impact of Improving Regional, Rural & Remote Education in Australia: Closing the Human Capital Gap*, UNSW Gonski Institute for Education, [https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gonski\\_Institute\\_Report\\_Cost\\_of\\_Education\\_Gap.pdf](https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gonski_Institute_Report_Cost_of_Education_Gap.pdf) 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020) *Evaluation of the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint – Final Report*, NSW Department of Education, <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Rural-and-remote-evaluation.pdf>, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Department of Education and Training (2018) *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: Australian Government Response*, [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian\\_government\\_response\\_accessible\\_30\\_may.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/australian_government_response_accessible_30_may.pdf) 8.

<sup>12</sup> Halsey J. (2018) *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education- Final Report*, Department of Education and Training, [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218\\_independent\\_review\\_accessible.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218_independent_review_accessible.pdf) 44.

<sup>13</sup> Holden R. and Zhang J. (2018) *The Economic Impact of Improving Regional, Rural & Remote Education in Australia: Closing the Human Capital Gap*, UNSW Gonski Institute for Education, [https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gonski\\_Institute\\_Report\\_Cost\\_of\\_Education\\_Gap.pdf](https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gonski_Institute_Report_Cost_of_Education_Gap.pdf) 8.

*Australian Education Act 2013* (Cth). While NSW is the minority funder of non-government schools, the factors contributing to educational disadvantage mentioned above have cross-sectoral impacts. The NSRB should consider consulting with key non-government stakeholders such as CSNSW and AISNSW on specific challenges faced by the sector.

## The NSW funding model

NSW distributes funding to government schools using the RAM. This is a needs-based funding arrangement consistent with the requirements of section 78(5) of the *Australian Education Act 2013* (Cth). The NSW RAM goes beyond the Commonwealth's SRS model, by supporting the unique NSW context and system characteristics, as well as providing funding for central costs and both national and state initiatives and reforms. Through the RAM, NSW funds a base school allocation, equity loadings and targeted student funding.

In NSW, in addition to tailored staffing allocations, remote and/or isolated schools receive additional operational funding through a specific location allocation. This recognises that some isolated schools are disadvantaged because it is more difficult to interact for professional learning. Additional funding is provided to counteract this remoteness.<sup>14</sup> In 2020, NSW has delivered additional funding to approximately 1,000 government schools through the location allocation in the RAM.<sup>15</sup> Additional sources of funding include the equity loadings for Aboriginal background and socio-economic background, which deliver substantial funding to students in remote locations.

It is important to note that, while NSW does fund an additional amount for location of a school through the RAM, this is only one of many ways that NSW meets the additional costs of schooling in regional and remote settings. Additional costs are addressed through staffing costs and various staffing incentives as well as a number of programs aimed at meeting the needs of regional and remote students.<sup>16</sup>

## The ongoing need for system flexibility

The Commonwealth Government should continue to provide Approved System Authorities with a high level of autonomy and flexibility in determining how to distribute Commonwealth funding through their needs-based funding arrangements. The NSW student cohort is extremely complex, with diverse and overlapping needs. With a diversity

---

<sup>14</sup> 'Remoteness' is defined as distance from population centres, and presents an additional cost in terms of access to goods and services. 'Isolation' is defined as a disadvantage resulting from distance to other schools and education resources.

<sup>15</sup> NSW Department of Education (2020) *Location*, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/schools-funding/resource-allocation-model/base-school-allocation/location>

<sup>16</sup> A list of staffing incentives and benefits are shown in Table 1 in this submission.



of settings and demographics in NSW, the SRS national model would not be appropriate to apply at the more nuanced State level allocation of funding.

## The need for a collaborative review process

A strong consultative approach with States and Territories in this Review will add value to the NSRB's work and strengthen the national consensus on needs-based funding. This is crucial given that the Review impacts all jurisdictions in Australia, with State and Territory school funding commitments for both government and non-government sectors being tied to the SRS. A robust consultative review process that includes all States, Territories and other Approved System Authorities will help to ensure public confidence in the NSRB's output and any changes to the SRS that flow from the recommendations of this Review.

Noting that the NSRB has a work plan with an upcoming body of work, the NSRB should avoid a piecemeal approach of reviewing individual SRS loadings in isolation. The SRS loadings interact in nuanced ways, given the many overlapping factors of educational disadvantage in schools. The need for a full review of both the SRS per student amounts and loadings every four years was noted by recommendation 15 of the 2011 Gonski Review Report.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the need for a coordinated approach to supporting regional communities was also identified in the Napthine Review,<sup>18</sup> which highlighted key stakeholders such as state and territory governments, local governments, community organisations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.

---

<sup>17</sup> Gonski D., Boston K., Greiner K., Lawrence C., Scales B., Tannock P. (2011) *Review of Funding for Schooling- Final Report* <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf> 171.

<sup>18</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2019) *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy*, <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/53035> 56 ('Napthine Review').



# Response to the focus questions

1. What are the elements specific to school location that increase the cost of delivering education in these settings?

Given the overlap of elements and issues associated with school location and school size, NSW has provided a combined response to the first and second questions below.

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?

## **Costs of delivering education must be considered in their broader context**

When looking at elements that increase the costs of delivering education in regional and remote schools (such as school location and school size), each school must be considered within the context of its broader community. Regional and remote communities are diverse, and the relative cost importance of certain factors will differ for each community. The broader community's size, wealth, proximity to other communities, access to transport and climate can all directly impact a school's costs of providing education, but also indirectly through the ability to attract and retain staff. The combined and compounding effects of each of these factors can have a complex impact on costs of a school.

## **Major additional costs for regional and remote schools**

From a costing perspective, the major elements specific to school location that increase the cost of delivering education in regional remote settings include:

- staffing (direct school-based staff and support staff)
- information and communications technology (ICT) (further detail is given in the response to focus question 6)
- costs of specific regional and remote programs, such as those identified in the table below.

## **A key challenge for regional and remote schools is meeting staffing requirements**

Higher staff turnover rate, a transient workforce, a higher proportion of inexperienced teachers and a lack of expertise in certain subjects have been recognised as persistent issues for regional and remote schools nationally.<sup>19</sup> These issues can be compounded by

---

<sup>19</sup> Downes, N. & Roberts, P. (2018) 'Revisiting the schoolhouse: A literature review of staffing rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia 2004-2016', *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 28(1): 31-54, 33.

the small size of a school.<sup>20</sup> NSW makes available a range of incentives, both financial and professional, to teachers in regional and remote government schools (see Table 1 below).<sup>21</sup> Incentives are designed to increase the potential pool of quality teachers, executive leaders and principals looking to work in regional and remote NSW public schools, while also improving the retention of staff once they are located in these schools.

**Table 1 – NSW staffing incentives and benefits applied to regional and remote settings**

Element	Description
<b>Rural teacher incentive</b>	From 1 January 2019, teachers working at eligible schools have been able to receive a Rural Teacher Incentive, dependent on the remoteness of the school.
<b>Retention benefit</b>	Teachers working at specified schools with 12 months or more of continuous service may be eligible for an annual retention benefit payment. Eligible teachers may receive up to 10 retention benefit payments.
<b>Recruitment bonus</b>	Principals may be able to apply for a recruitment bonus. These can be offered to increase the attractiveness of temporary teaching positions of four terms or more and permanent positions in applicable regional and remote schools or applicable Connected Communities schools.
<b>Climatic allowance</b>	NSW pays an allowance to teachers who are appointed to schools which are located in the Western Division of NSW as compensation for extreme summer temperatures. Teachers appointed to some schools may be eligible for a cold climate allowance. NSW has also extended the Drought Entitlement Maintenance Program until 2023. This program provides assistance to regional and remote schools to help support and retain a baseline number of teachers. <sup>22</sup>
<b>Isolation from socio-economic goods and services allowance</b>	NSW pays an allowance to teachers who are appointed to schools which are located in areas of the state that do not have immediate access to various goods and services. Eligible schools are listed in 10 groupings depending on the degree of isolation.
<b>Relocation subsidy</b>	Some newly appointed teachers are eligible for a relocation subsidy on first appointment.
<b>Rental subsidy</b>	Available to temporary and permanent teachers and executive staff at 50-90 per cent of rental costs.
<b>Experienced Teacher Benefit</b>	From 1 January 2019, certain proficient teachers who are currently in a position at particular rural and remote incentive schools and Connected Communities schools qualify for an experienced teacher benefit, payable for up to five years.

<sup>20</sup> Garret Z., Newman M., Elbourne D., Bradley S., Noden P., Taylor J. and West A. (2004) 'School Size: A systematic review', *Research Evidence in Education Library*, EPPI-Centre, University of London, Mok. M and Flynn M. (1996) 'School size and academic achievement in the HSC examination: is there a relationship?', *Issues in Educational Research* 6(1): 57-58, Lamb S. and Glover S. (2014) 'Educational Disadvantage and regional and rural schools', *Quality and Equity: What does research tell us? Conference proceedings*, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 65-71.

<sup>21</sup> Further information can be found at <https://www.teach.nsw.edu.au/find-teaching-jobs/choose-rural/benefits-and-incentives>.

<sup>22</sup> See Horn, E. (2020) 'NSW government extends drought recovery teacher incentives', *The Daily Advertiser*, <https://www.dailyadvertiser.com.au/story/6985485/teacher-retention-program-extended-for-drought-recovering-schools/>.

Element	Description
<b>Transfer Points</b>	Transfer Points are allocated to permanent teachers for each year of service in a school, with different schools attracting different transfer points. These points are accumulated during a teacher's service and used to prioritise an application for transfer.

### **Additional costs are associated with addressing isolation and reduced opportunities for professional development, collaboration and networking**

NSW's Rural and Remote Education Blueprint for Action (the Blueprint) highlights that isolation and school size has broad impacts on a school, including access to educational resources, professional development, networking and knowledge sharing with other institutions. The Department's evaluation of the Blueprint, published in May 2020, includes results of analyses of student education performance indicators (Best Start Kindergarten Assessment, attendance, retention to Year 12, NAPLAN, and ATAR) by school location.<sup>23</sup> The evaluation found that direct financial incentives are just one factor that may attract teachers to regional and remote schools, and that consideration should be given to further sources of support such as incorporated professional learning, curriculum planning support, personal and wellbeing support, better access to transport and amenities.<sup>24</sup> Currently, NSW offers up to four additional professional development days to teachers of regional and remote government schools in recognition of additional travel time needed to reach training centres.

### **Various other factors can lead to increased costs for delivering education in regional and remote schools**

- **Transport and travel:** The proximity of a school to major cities and regional centres and transport impacts availability and cost of goods and services. Regional and remote schools may incur additional travel costs to access off-site services and opportunities for students, as well as professional development for staff. It can also contribute to the cost of in-school services from providers not located locally.
- **Climate:** Climatic factors are specific to location. NSW has a very diverse climate and regional and remote areas can be subject to costs of addressing extreme or sustained heat or cold. This impacts operational costs (for example, utilities usage) and staffing costs.
- **Costs of meeting specialised needs:** The relatively smaller population or isolation of regional and remote communities may mean economies of scale are unavailable for a

<sup>23</sup> Due to the historical nature of the data, the Blueprint used the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Remoteness Classification to define schools as rural and remote. The MCEETYA classification includes metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote categories, with the last three groups considered as rural and remote.

<sup>24</sup> Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020) *Evaluation of the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint – Final Report*, NSW Department of Education, <https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Rural-and-remote-evaluation.pdf>, 26.

school in accessing networks and services for students with complex needs. This can affect delivery of education to gifted students and students with disabilities or behavioural issues, and providing a sufficiently broad range of curriculum opportunities.

### 3. Is the dollar value of the current school location and school size loadings appropriate to meet the additional costs specific to school location and school size?

In answering the question of adequacy, the NSRB needs to consider the size and location loadings relative to the average metropolitan school with minimal levels of disadvantage. Regional and remote schools face many costs that are unique to their setting. There are also costs that are incurred by all schools (such as staffing) but are higher in regional and remote settings compared to metropolitan settings. The NSRB should collect evidence of the costs associated with educating students in these settings. Collecting historical spending data from Approved System Authorities will not answer the question of adequacy, as this information will not show what should be spent to help students in regional and remote settings achieve their full potential.

This approach would align with findings of 2011 Gonski Review Report<sup>25</sup>, that the loadings be periodically reviewed to ensure they remain relevant and appropriate and that they contribute to improved outcomes over time.

NSW does not fund government schools according to the SRS. NSW uses the RAM to deliver funding to schools rather than the SRS, and regional/remote factors are included in several allocations and programs. The NSW funding model extends beyond providing base and loadings and includes costs that may not be fully captured through a model based on the SRS, but are still an essential part of running schools and large systems.

Most jurisdictions are not yet funding their government schools at 100 percent of the SRS. The SRS loadings are based on a benchmark amount for a school which is receiving all the funding it needs to meet the required educational outcomes (that is, 100 percent of the SRS). The adequacy of the size and location loadings cannot therefore be determined without regard for the adequacy of the total funding available to a school.

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

NSW does not propose a specific alternative for ARIA+ at this point in time.

---

<sup>25</sup> Gonski D., Boston K., Greiner K., Lawrence C., Scales B., Tannock P. (2011) *Review of Funding for Schooling- Final Report* <https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/review-of-funding-for-schooling-final-report-dec-2011.pdf> 171.

NSW notes that the definitions of classifications in section 13 of the *Australian Education Act 2013* (Cth) do not align with ABS Remoteness classes, even though they use similar terminology. This has the potential to cause confusion.

NSW uses a range of measures to classify school location, such as the geographical structure based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) for statistical reporting and publication. In terms of specific location-allocations, schools are classified using the ABS Remoteness Structure and informed by ARIA+. NSW location-related funding also considers isolation, as calculated by the enrolments of and distance to the five nearest schools (as measured by road).

### **The NSRB would need to weigh the pros and cons of using alternative measures**

ARIA+ is widely used and recognised as a nationally consistent measure of geographic remoteness. However, there are other relevant classifications that measure the socioeconomic make-up of populated areas. As noted in the NSRB's Issues Paper for the Review, these include the ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD), Indigenous Relative Socio-Economic Outcomes (IRSEO) and ABS non-Indigenous SEIFA (NISEIFA). These measures may provide useful information on access to services that are impacted by socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage, which ARIA+ does not include. However, particularly with regards to SEIFA, there are risks of overlap with the Commonwealth's SRS low socio-educational disadvantage (SES) loading and the data that informs it.

## **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?**

There are several new and emerging factors relating to the cost of education and regional and remote areas and/or small schools, some of which are explored in more detail below. These factors include:

- Boosting the supply of high quality teachers.
- Access to reliable and cost-effective information and communications technology (ICT) services, including for distance education.
- Impacts of climate change.
- Population trends.
- Student attendance, particularly due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. Attendance is a key challenge faced by regional and remote schools, and student mental health may contribute to student absences and disengagement.
- An increasing need to support the wellbeing of students, due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19.
- Culturally safe schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

## **Boosting the supply of high quality teachers**

Boosting the supply of high-quality teachers is a key priority for NSW, including meeting the demand and supply needs in regional and remote NSW public schools. Within regional and remote NSW, financial and non-financial incentives play a key role in attracting and retaining teachers. The Department has commenced a review to assess current incentives to government schools to ensure optimisation of available resources, with a report due towards the end of Term 4 2020.

## **Technology is a vital emerging factor for regional and remote settings**

The Halsey Review identified that location is a critical factor in providing students with access to cost-effective, dependable and high-speed ICT.<sup>26</sup> This issue affects not only schools in remote and regional locations, but also students studying via distance education and home-schooling. The availability and cost-effectiveness of ICT in regional and remote areas is crucial to promoting access to education. The digital divide is one of the most significant drivers of closing the gap between metropolitan and regional/remote schools, to provide equitable access to educational resources.

NSW has identified 'Digital and ICT' as a critical enabler for driving productivity, improving frontline service delivery and expanding economic opportunities (especially in regional communities) across the State. As part of the Schools Digital Strategy,<sup>27</sup> the Department is providing additional support to 1,002 schools in regional and remote areas that are identified as suitable for a digital Direct Intervention under the Digital Restart NSW Fund. Through a phased implementation of the Rural Access Gap (RAG) program,<sup>28</sup> the Department aims to build the digital capacity, efficacy and capabilities of regional and remote NSW public schools. This has the potential to benefit some 20,000 teaching staff, 210,000 students and 6,590 administrative support staff.

## **Long term population trends for school-aged children**

In NSW long term population projections indicate that the NSW school aged population outside the Greater Sydney Region will not increase materially and could decline.<sup>29</sup> This has the potential to further reduce the size of schools in regional and remotes areas and exacerbate cost disparities.

---

<sup>26</sup> Halsey J. (2018) *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education- Final Report*, Department of Education and Training, [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218\\_independent\\_review\\_accessible.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218_independent_review_accessible.pdf) 20, 67.

<sup>27</sup> Further information can be found at [https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/en/home/about-us/strategies-and-reports/schools-digital-strategy/strategy-resources/documents/00\\_Schools\\_Digital\\_Strategy\\_-\\_How\\_it\\_will\\_be\\_delivered.pdf](https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/en/home/about-us/strategies-and-reports/schools-digital-strategy/strategy-resources/documents/00_Schools_Digital_Strategy_-_How_it_will_be_delivered.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Further information can be found at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/campaigns/schools-digital-strategy/rural-access-gap>.

<sup>29</sup> Informed by analysis of NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2020) *Population Projections* <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/Research-and-Demography/Population-projections/Projections>.



## Student wellbeing and the role of schools in the community

The NSRB should consider that regional and remote schools face new or emerging hidden costs that are unique or increased in comparison to metropolitan schools. These include the need for additional mental health and wellbeing support for students, increased community reliance on schools and broader responsibilities for educators and principals. These factors impact not only educational outcomes, such as student attendance and engagement, but also the cost of delivering education, for example through workforce turnover. The Review will benefit from identifying the full breadth of education costs of regional and remote schools, including hidden costs.

A 2019 Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students found that this was the case in Victoria. It recognised that regional and remote communities face higher concentrations of disadvantage and support more students with experiences of trauma than metropolitan areas. The Panel found that number of students with mental health concerns in Victorian regional and remote schools is increasing, and that these issues are presenting themselves earlier in students' lives.<sup>30</sup> As a result, schools in these areas were becoming an increasingly important resource in their communities.<sup>31</sup>

Further, as outlined in the Halsey Review, principals in small schools and regional and remote areas often face greater pressure in their role in light of various other responsibilities they may have to take on.<sup>32</sup> Principals in such schools may be required to balance their responsibilities for the quality of teaching and learning with an extensive range of other duties, such as organising school transport and taking on local community leadership positions outside of school.<sup>33</sup>

NSW schools have played an important role in local communities in the face of the 2019/2020 bushfire season, the COVID-19 pandemic and other major events that have had an effect on student and community wellbeing. During the 2019/2020 bushfire period, the Department partnered with a range of organisations to deliver evidence-based wellbeing initiatives in bushfire affected schools. Through a partnership with Mackillop Family Services, the Department has trained a number of facilitators. Each term, NSW public schools are provided with a list of programs available and can select based on individual school need.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students, *Recommendations for the Minister for Education on improving educational outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria*, VIC Government [https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ExpertAdvisoryPanelforruralandregionalstudents\\_Report.pdf](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ExpertAdvisoryPanelforruralandregionalstudents_Report.pdf) 26.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 25-26.

<sup>32</sup> Halsey J. (2018) *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education- Final Report*, Department of Education and Training, [https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218\\_independent\\_review\\_accessible.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/01218_independent_review_accessible.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Further information about the NSW Department of Education's response to the 2019/20 bushfire season can be found at <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/school-safety> and <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/school-safety/advice-to-assist-parents-teachers-and-students-following-recent-fires>.