



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS

*Inquiry into Regional, Rural and Remote
Education*

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The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the voice for parents of young people in our nation's public schools. With 2.5 million students in our nation's public schools we have a vested interest in ensuring they have equity of access to education and equity of opportunity to build on their strengths and develop their skills. We are recognised as the peak national body representing parents of children in public schools.

The Review will investigate:

- *the gap in educational achievement between regional, rural and remote students and metropolitan students*
- *the key barriers and challenges that impact on the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote students, including aspirations and access issues*
- *the appropriateness and effectiveness of current modes of education delivered to these students, including the use of information and communications technology and the importance of face to face regional, rural and remote education provision*
- *the effectiveness of public policies and programs that have been implemented to bridge the divide*
- *the gaps and opportunities to help students successfully transition from school to further study, training and employment*
- *innovative approaches that support regional, rural and remote students to succeed in school and in their transition to further study, training and employment.*

As an organisation, ACSSO welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Rural, Remote and Regional Education. We also would like to thank Professor Halsey and his team for taking the time to meet with ACSSO's President and CEO on August 7 and for his time in speaking with ACSSO's Board on August 12.

ACSSO has an extensive policy for Rural Education based on the premise that:

1. There is a responsibility for governments to ensure adequate resources to provide for the educational needs of students in rural and remote areas.
2. The guiding principle for all education provision in rural and remote areas must be the preservation and enhancement of the community.
3. Government subsidies must be targeted to create opportunities within communities rather than to assist people to leave. This approach assists the community to maintain its ethos and prosperity by retaining its population and by providing employment.
4. There must be a recognition that:
 - (a) Students in rural and remote areas of the nation have an absolute right to high quality public education, and governments have a responsibility to ensure this provision.
 - (b) The quality of education in rural and remote areas must not be affected by lack of resources, limited or costly access to services, climatic conditions, or professional, social and physical isolation.
 - (c) funding decisions must reflect the priority of local provision to meet local need.

ACSSO Policy

H.7.1 ACSSO supports the principle of differential funding

H.7.2 Governments should ensure the delivery of high quality educational services to rural and remote communities by:

(a) providing resources to expand itinerant teacher services, consultancy services and counselling services for children in rural communities;

(b) exploring a variety of ways to increase curriculum options, in particular, those available in senior schooling;

(c) ensuring that opportunities to undertake vocational education and training are equitably available to rural students; remove the barriers to students moving between school and post compulsory education options and avoid duplication of services and resources.

(d) providing targeted funding for professional development for teachers and parents in isolated schools;

(e) ensuring health services, including mental health services, are available to the same extent in rural areas as elsewhere.

(f) providing access for students with disabilities and learning difficulties to support services, support teachers, guidance officers, occupational therapists, speech language pathologists and physical therapists.

H.7.3 To ensure the needs of geographically isolated students are met governments should provide:

(a) opportunities for students studying at home by distance education to work, socialise and learn with other students in residential facilities to supplement home learning.

(b) consultation about support for the role of parents in distance education, including regular professional development

(c) a telecommunication system which ensures reliable and prompt access to distance education programs and resources

ACSSO board gave considerable feedback during the August Board meeting in a teleconference with Professor Halsey however, in response to the questions contained in the discussion document. In addition, ACSSO provides these comments.

Raising achievement

Research clearly indicates that a significant proportion of students living in regional, rural and remote communities are not achieving key educational milestones, including in the early years, through school and into post-school transitions.

Evidence also claims that gaps in achievement between young people living in major cities and other parts of Australia, increases as they progress through school. A study prepared for the Mitchell Institute in 2015 revealed:

- *The proportion of very remote students who meet the requirements at each milestone is between 19 and 48 percentage points **lower than for the Australian population as a whole***
- *Students living further from cities are **less likely to catch up** once they are off track at a milestone.*
- ***Rural and remote students have reduced access to education services** compared to metropolitan students. These students attend school less frequently, are less likely to go to university and are more likely to drop out if they enrol.*
- ***Remote students have less positive dispositions towards school on every measure** (belonging, self-confidence, purpose and perseverance) than their regional and metropolitan peers.*
- ***Vocational education and training (VET) is an important pathway** for regional and remote students, though very remote participation is low. Nearly one third of remote and outer regional students undertake an apprenticeship or traineeship.*
- *Remote communities are home to one-quarter of Australia's Indigenous population. As a consequence, the educational challenges faced in remote areas have a **disproportionate impact on Indigenous Australians.** ¹*

¹ Educational opportunity in Australia 2015 was prepared by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University for the Mitchell Institute.

Questions

Curriculum and assessment

The curriculum opportunities for students in rural and remote areas are restricted with limited direct access to specialised teachers, resources or support for their learning. Jurisdictions need to provide resourcing and professional learning to unpack the curriculum for teachers and parents

There is also an increased number of multi – aged classrooms students and teachers are under pressure to 'fit' everything in. This presents a challenge that is often compounded by staff being required to teach out of their area of expertise and the more limited availability of learning support.

Resolution to some of this can be found with the provision of the curriculum online - however with satellite technology being the main mode of delivery for most small schools and distance education classrooms, speed, latency (delay) and limited data plans have a huge impact.

Families are also limited to their access to other services and in particular, services which would enhance a young person's journey through education such as occupational therapy; speech therapy; and mental health support. Some work has been started in Western Australia in connecting

Participation in extracurricular activities are pose a challenge not just because of cost because of costs, but due to limited access. These opportunities are highly important as they assist in developing a range of skills and assist in connecting with post school participation in work and the community.

Incorporation of community identities and events into the curriculum of rural and remote schools will foster collaboration and positive learning experiences for all those involved and provide meaning for students. Schools and their staff need to be encouraged and supported in integrating with their local community and its history.

NAPLAN online could provide a much better assessment for students with the staggered questioning. Some of our Directors report a lack of "specialist staff" to assist with the support and intervention for remote schools and particularly those on school of the air.

As this applies to the Australian curriculum there are fewer issues for F-10, than exist in the senior years. In Queensland, where a new assessment regime will be in place by 2019 which will introduce an element of external examinations. There is a real need for continuing professional development.

There are also large numbers of home tutors (generally mothers) who teach up to three year levels daily and need significant continuing professional development to learn and deliver the new curricula.

In 2014, NSW Department of Education and Communities launched their blueprint for action with regard to rural and remote education

https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/our-reforms/rural-and-remote-education/rr_progress_update.pdf

This included:

- A new virtual secondary school (Aurora College) to expand curriculum options for students in rural and remote schools and provide gifted and talented secondary students with access to extension courses and selective classes. The first students enrolled in 2015
- A network of specialist centres will bring together coordinated interagency health and wellbeing services through a single point of contact. Each centre reflect local needs. The specialist centres are located in Broken Hill, Tamworth, Wagga Wagga and Dubbo.

In Wagga Wagga schools came together for HSC subjects to thrash out ideas, particularly in English and History.

The Darling Downs South West Professional Learning Hub (DDSWPLH) situated in Roma, Queensland is currently coordinating a very successful program with several universities and the Kelvin Grove Teaching Centre for Excellence in Brisbane, which aims to promote teaching in rural and remote areas and equips selected preservice students with the experience and knowledge to succeed in these schools. This model should be replicated across regions.

Teachers and Teaching

Teachers require an early understanding of the various facets involved in teaching in

rural and remote communities, and this understanding needs to be fostered prior to the commencement of their teaching career.

Attracting and retaining staff is very challenging in rural and remote areas, with often a large turnover of school leaders and teachers being disadvantageous to students and their families. In some jurisdictions, for example the Northern Territory, we understand that in some areas principals are offered one year contracts to attract them to the school. This makes it extremely difficult to embed any consistent focus in the school or provide a sense of purpose to the community regarding education. Small schools continue to be the training ground for inexperienced teachers wanting to climb the career ladder.

Many rural and remote areas struggle to find relief teachers and regulations hinder this search. We believe that all preservice courses should include a core unit on teaching in regional, rural and remote areas. This may even promote teaching in these areas and offer an opportunity for a new experience for the graduate teachers.

These schools provide opportunities for teachers in professional growth across the board, however often they are placed with little knowledge of the realities of teaching in a multi-age classroom and the skills required for such a setting.

Accessing professional development opportunities can be extremely difficult for staff in regional, rural and remote areas because of cost, transport, time and a limited staffing pool to provide relief. While some of this can be done on-line, the value of "face to face" opportunities is also important, as these provide the opportunity to build deeper relationships that can be drawn on for support.

Currently, Queensland is developing several professional learning hubs (four at present, see Roma for example) which are doing ground-breaking work in attracting pre-service teachers to rural areas. A combination of direct visiting and the use of ICT conferencing is bringing professionals together.

The key is to ensure that all teachers, whatever the location, are afforded equal opportunities for professional development. The effective use (and reliability) of ICT could make this possible.

In remote areas, it should be noted, it is often teacher aides (School Learning Support Officers) who are the most constant presence in the school, but their ongoing professional development may not be prioritised.

Retaining teachers in these areas is often problematic. Quality housing needs to be available with access to internet technology.

Today, a teacher, particularly a new graduate, cannot be expected to move away from family and friends without reasonable access to reliable high speed internet and the relevant equipment with which to maintain contact. Unfortunately, internet connection is somewhat fragmented and often unreliable. Financial incentives or promotional opportunities could support and encourage teachers to work in rural and remote areas.

Remote Area Incentive Schemes or equivalent exist in most jurisdictions, "Boomerang" transfers ensure return to regional and metropolitan locations.

Practical initiatives, such as providing teachers in remote areas with the opportunity for a second uplift of furniture and possessions after six months within the community, as opposed to a one-off uplift when they first move there, could help create a greater sense of permanency for these staff. If staff have not worked in such areas before they may have a very limited awareness of what is available there, hence what they should consider taking. The opportunity to have a second uplift could help address this and contribute to staff feeling more settled and at home in remote areas.

Parent organisations in Qld including P&Cs Qld and the ICPA (QLD) are establishing formal relationships with Higher Education Institutions who are pre-service providers for teachers.

There is also some concern with the Independent Public Schools (IPS) initiative with schools having the ability to select their own staff that some teachers will be loathed to apply for remote locations. This view is currently being expressed in Western Australia where there is the greatest growth in IPS.

Leaders and Leadership

Rural and remote schools account for over 4000 of the 9000 schools across the country, and are among the most complex and challenging due to great distance from the centre of a city. Many of the small schools in particular, are led by first-time Principals who have little to no experience in country areas, but are seeking the experience as a principal. In these small schools, Principals are often the main teacher and trying to have a balance between administration duties and teaching workloads is extremely challenging.

The administrative workload of a small school is the same whether they have 10 students or 80. There needs to be a rationalization or even reduction so that the learning needs of rural and remote students can be a priority. Cluster schools need to work together to share the burden wherever possible, and mentors are vital in order to offer advice on priorities. The upskilling of teachers from an early stage in their career with a focus on the particular skillsets required to lead a country school is essential. In Queensland, for example, the program "Take the Lead" (QLD) has had some success in preparing prospective principals for their role in a small school. However, there is a need for increased rigour around such programs to ensure individuals are totally prepared and appreciative of their role in the school and the community.

The Country Education Project² recommendations regarding the development of targeted induction and support programs for educational leaders and new graduates working in regional, rural and remote areas is quite comprehensive.

This project recognises the complexity of the role of a principal in these areas and recommends establishing and/or supporting the development of formal and informal networks between leaders. These groups are essential for support. A focus both for induction and ongoing support should include principal wellbeing.

School and Community

Rotter's (1966) construct of an internal locus of control; a belief that one's rewards in life are the result of your own choices, efforts and capabilities; as opposed to externals, with a belief in luck, chance and the effect of other people on events in their life.

² Country Education Project: <https://cep.org.au/>

How do we encourage RRR students to grow a sense of inner locus – essentially where they feel in control of their own future... rather than an outer locus where there is a feeling of being a victim of circumstance and fate...³

A small school is the hub of any rural and remote community. It is often the meeting place for the community. Schools are increasingly engaging with community via social media and video sharing apps with appropriate security levels depending on the nature of the content.

Non-urban students are often motivated by a need to return to their home base and contribute to their region in addition to showing appreciation, Provision of readily accessible dedicated fiscal, social and mental support to help them with further education/apprenticeships post-secondary is paramount to success as many will need to complete in isolation from family support.

Rural and remote communities are always keen to maintain the young people in their towns and surrounding areas – they are necessary to retain essential services such as schools and bus runs. Programs which supports students remaining in their community whilst they are studying wherever possible could provide a lifeline to a community, as well as stability and success for a rural student.

Motivation of young people in rural, remote and regional education requires the provision of a wide selection of subject options including VET, quality teaching, quality boarding facilities in regional centres.

Philanthropic sector support in rural and remote education could play a vital role in ensuring students continue down their chosen career path potentially assisting with accommodation, scholarships, internships and travel expenses. These expenses make transitioning out of the community extremely difficult, particularly when there is a need to travel back in vacation times or in times of family need. ICT providers would be extremely useful in this area.

³ Rotter, J 1966 'Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcements', *Psychological Monographs*, vol. 80, no. 1, Whole No. 609.

Information and Communication Technology

ICT could be the greatest enhancer and possible equaliser for rural and remote communities however it was quite evident at the recent ICPA Federal Conference in Alice Springs that it was a major issue.

There has been insufficient action to ensure a whole of government approach to ICT in the our rural, remote and regional areas. This issue is huge and need addressing immediately. Currently schools and families are receiving responses that are quite piecemeal.

The NBN Sky Muster satellite has gone some way to improve connectivity for rural and remote distance education classrooms. "Skymuster" needs reviewing to streamline its potential. Due to security issues the satellite is currently unavailable for rural and remote small schools in Queensland.

We are aware there are also examples in Queensland where government schools within half a kilometre of a Catholic school have huge disparities in speeds.

ICT is a vital factor in the education of students in regional, rural and remote schools and the gap between their metro counterparts continues to widen due to the unreliability of the internet connections in country Australia.

In an ideal world, the use of video conferencing and virtual classrooms where a student in a rural and remote setting can virtually join a class in a large mainstream school has the capacity to revolutionise outcomes and potential. It would allow schools with low student numbers to offer a full curriculum therefore giving students and families a viable alternative to boarding school. It would minimize the effects of subject specialists not being available in smaller centres. Virtual classrooms are possible, and exist in some jurisdictions, provided that the infrastructure exists and the appropriate orientation and induction is provided to users.

This has the follow-on effect of families staying in small communities, which has many benefits.

There has been an attempt to connect small schools with mobile service where possible, however there remain several schools across Queensland which have no mobile service, or minimal mobile coverage with antennae and powered boosters.

Lack of co-ordination, direction and appetite by governments both state and federal, to adopt a whole of government approach to the issue and to fund it. Rationalisation is necessary. Presently in Queensland, for example, "Skymuster" is available to families, but not to small schools, there have been real problems with rollout consistent with NBN.

The main barriers to ICT are a lack of reliable service, limited data downloads/uploads and slow speed, particularly for the satellite service. Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) is inadequate on satellite internet due to latency (delay) issues, which creates a significant barrier to fully interactive web conferencing educational opportunities. The vast distances and small population means that mobile service is not practical or economically viable to install in some areas.

The issue of ICT connectivity is raised at every state parent conference, and government responds with equivocation, most recently at the WACSSO conference in Perth 19,20 August and the ICPA conference in Alice Springs – early August. There is a pressing need for the Federal government to work with the jurisdictions particularly in to address this major shortcoming.

Entrepreneurship and schools

Facilitating engagement between entrepreneurial organisations and school/s to foster collaborative relationship and the establishment of common visions and goals is a key to young people's success. Entrepreneurial skills are particularly important in the 21st century to support young people's ability to secure and retain employment, as well as to generate their own employment opportunities.

This is very limited in many rural and remote communities to small populations and current drought conditions. For these sorts of programs to be implemented in these communities, large businesses and organisations would need to focus on forming partnerships with schools which would then provide opportunities and financial assistance to aid students in their endeavours.

Initiatives such as the Mitchell Institute's entrepreneurial learning in school's project⁴ which has recently been trialled with 23 schools across Victoria and NSW, including some in regional and rural communities, can also support student engagement, enhance confidence and increase the likelihood of students staying at school beyond Year 10.

This project aims to support young people to develop the key capabilities of creativity, curiosity, resilience and resourcefulness which are necessary for success in the 21st century. The pilot involves each school identifying a key issue in their school or community that students are then supported through a student-centred learning approach to develop solution/s for, over multiple months. Projects have included starting a community garden to grow food and supporting unemployed people to grow and prepare food; building a website so students can upload assignments so ideas can be shared across the school and to other schools; starting small businesses to recycle and create work experience opportunities.

Kid Clubpreneur (<http://clubkidpreneur.com/>) is an entrepreneurial program that is tailored for young people in upper primary using small groups of young people). This program whilst not terrific for distance education would work well in a small rural or remote school.

Often students from small rural and remote communities relocate into regional or urban areas to further their aspirations, be it through university, TAFE or a specific employment opportunity. Having lived in rural communities all their lives, these students can find it difficult to transition, and support to smooth that transition is essential. The type of support would vary these could be addressed with mentoring programs, partnerships between schools, communities and training organisations, financial and accommodation assistance.

Improving access—enrolments, clusters, distance education, boarding

Access to quality education in rural and remote communities is an extremely high priority to families, and often dictates where they will reside. Options for geographically isolated students to access their education varies depending on location, financial constraints and personal preference. While Distance Education and boarding school is the most viable

⁴ Yong Zhao's Entrepreneurial Learning in Action <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/event/yong-zhaos-entrepreneurial-learning-in-action/>

option for some, the local primary and secondary schools are a vital component to educational access for any small community.

Transport remains a major challenge in most regional, rural and remote communities. Even when transport to school is available, it is usually not available or is very costly for extra-curricular or careers and work experience opportunities.

Seven shires in Queensland do not even have a secondary school available to them. Low enrolments usually mean a full curriculum cannot be offered via face-to-face delivery, thereby hindering subject selection and curriculum opportunities.

Governments need to invest in the provision of a rigorous curriculum through a variety of modes – distance education and virtual classrooms are a possibility. Partnerships need to be forged between larger metro high schools and those in rural and remote areas, whereby students are sharing knowledge and resources and experiencing valuable discussion with a larger peer group.

NSW schools have a connected classroom in 1,600 schools – co-operation and careful planning could enable students from remote schools and even in other jurisdictions to participate in subject areas by means of these connected classrooms⁵

Clusters can be very useful, but they should not necessarily be based on Departmental regions or even state/territory boundaries. Sister school relationships could also be further explored, including between metro and non-metro schools.

Diversity

Education in remote communities provides of a space where learning is valued, and where parents and community are welcomed as participants in all aspects of school life, as well as being the facilitator of a student's future hopes and dreams. The Red Dirt findings are consistent with the values of many rural and remote communities. These findings would also apply to urban learning communities.

⁵ Connected Classrooms <http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/about-the-department/our-reforms/innovative-education-successful-students/schools-of-the-21st-century>

It is realistic to expect that education in remote communities can and should provide all students with the opportunity to pursue their passion. The role of education in remote communities is little different from that in larger centres; it simply requires more innovative and imaginative strategies.

Educational success sees students who can leave school with the skills, knowledge and tools for the next step in their life journey. This means providing a curriculum which relates to students from all demographics. It is imperative to create and sustain a vibrant and high-quality learning environment for rural and remote students in order to retain them within the classroom and maintain their investment in their own education.

Technology and the skills to work digitally are essential today, unfortunately connectivity in rural and remote communities hinders accessibility to the latest digital advances for these students. STEM is now seen as a priority in education across the Australian Curriculum, ironically communities are hampered by poor internet service and speeds.

Students need to see that their communities are valued and supported, and it is through that perspective that they can be encouraged to remain in these areas rather than moving to urban areas. Rural communities and students need to have access to adequate support services in the form of Allied Health, Learning Support and Mental Health Service to ensure the educational journey is supported and successful for all involved in the process. Support to the student and families living in rural and remote delivers the message that the community is important. It gives the student a willingness to participate and achieve whilst feeling valued.

Transitioning beyond school

Boarding options for rural and remote students at VET providers would encourage participation. There is strong evidence to show that one of the primary reasons rural and remote students do not engage in either post-secondary learning or upskilling via a trade is the difficulty in relocating to access those opportunities with no familial support. Provision of facilities assists in negating some of those challenges. The adoption of flexible approaches to the way the learning/practical components are structured could encourage participation, retention and course completion. Supporting students to relocate, due to a shortage of relevant businesses in their local area, through partnerships

with relevant parties to allow the completion of practical course components would be welcomed.

Enshrining in policy, flexibility in assessment would allow greater engagement by students with disabilities allowing them to contribute to their own, and society's, communal and economic wellbeing. Building in support services to minimise the impact of their disability, where practical, would also promote uptake of VET opportunities.

Provision of affordable, on campus accommodation specifically for remote and rural students would assist these. A process for determining eligibility for such accommodation should not be reliant on students results but on the factors obstructing their access,

The establishment, and ongoing commitment, to decentralised learning centres whether they be for VET or Tertiary learning, would reduce student costs and encourage participation.

Conclusion

It is essential for our nation to have vibrant, innovative and accessible education for all young people across the nation – the achievement gap between urban and non-urban students are of concern.

In the paper "Rural jobs: synthesis of recommendations, strategies for employment in rural areas: Rural Jobs Consortium – Warren et al the following comments sum up:

Securing education and training for rural areas inhabitants wherever they live

- To build and restore primary education structures
- To increase the offer and reduce the economic barriers to upper secondary education so as to continue the labour started in basic education and provide sufficient skills and knowledge for further studies
- To boost vocational training and education and to gear the training offer towards rural areas specific labour market needs
- To balance the uneven distribution of higher education institutions across regions, and to improve the territorial cohesion through knowledge by promoting high quality on-line education and training and encouraging vocational universities and technological institutes to open investigation lines and training hubs in rural areas in order to attract enterprises and create synergies locally

- To fight dropping out and to make education and training offers attractive and accessible to rural areas young people
- To encourage and support lifelong learning at all levels, both for workers and for public and private leaders

Warren, et al (2010, p.112)⁶

The issue for rural, remote and regional education is complex – for the schools they lack economy of scale – this inhibits not only curriculum delivery but purchasing power, access to specialist staff, casual relief thus making them unable to provide the full range of options for students. Often the fact that students are quite a distance from the school also hinders attendance.

For the student accessing distance education or school of the air these issues are further compounded. As a nation we are aware of it – we must now find the resources to address it.

As a final comment - It is important when this report provides recommendations it be accompanied by a cost benefit analysis – the fear is if not the recommendations could be dismissed as unrealistic and unaffordable

⁶ Warren, M and others 2010 'Rural jobs: synthesis of recommendations: strategies for employment in rural areas' Rural Jobs Consortium, EU. <<http://www.region-limousin.fr/ruraljobs/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/ruraljobs-final-publication.pdf>>

