28 August 2017

Emeritus Professor John Halsey

Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

Review Secretariat

Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

*Emailed to: IRRRRESecretariat@education.gov.au*

Dear Professor Halsey,

**Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education**

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the federal government’s Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education.

For the purposes of this submission, AHISA has chosen to use the location descriptions of the Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) system, that is, ‘Major City’, ‘Inner Regional’, ‘Outer Regional’, ‘Remote’, and ‘Very Remote’. This system has been adopted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and is used to define the location of schools on My School profiles and in the reporting of NAPLAN results by geolocation. Use of the ASGC therefore allows for correlation of any AHISA data with Australia’s National Education Evidence Base.

Central to our submission is a presentation of findings from two surveys of our members: one survey canvassed the views of those who lead schools located in areas classified as ‘Inner Regional’, ‘Outer Regional’, ‘Remote’, and ‘Very Remote’, with or without accommodation arrangements for students; the second survey was of members who lead ‘Major City’ schools which make education provision for students from regional or remote areas through boarding, hostel, home stay or other accommodation arrangements.

We also include a section on innovative educational provision for Indigenous students, drawing on examples provided in AHISA’s two-part submission to the ongoing House of Representatives Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.

Yours faithfully,

***(Mrs) Karen Spiller***

AHISA National Chair

Principal of St Aidan’s Anglican Girls’ School, Qld

Further inquiries may be addressed to AHISA’s Chief Executive Officer, Ms Beth Blackwood, telephone (02) 6247 7300; email ceo@ahisa.edu.au.

**About AHISA**

The primary object of AHISA is to optimise the opportunity for the education and welfare of Australia’s young people through the maintenance of collegiality and high standards of professional practice and conduct amongst its members.

The membership of AHISA Ltd comprises Principals of 430 independent schools. Its members lead schools that collectively account for over 430,000 students, representing 11.5 per cent of total Australian school enrolments and 20 per cent of Australia’s total Year 12 enrolments. One in every five Australian Year 12 students gains part of their education at an AHISA member’s school.

AHISA’s members lead a collective workforce of over 40,000 teaching staff and some 25,000 support staff.

Almost one-third of AHISA’s members (30 per cent) lead schools with boarding facilities.

The socio-economic profile of AHISA members’ schools is diverse. Almost 23 per cent of members lead schools with SES scores below 100 and 17 per cent lead schools with an SES score above 120. Most AHISA members (60 per cent) lead schools with SES scores in the middle range of SES scores, that is, 100-119.

AHISA believes that a high quality schooling system in Australia depends on:

* Parents having the freedom to exercise their rights and responsibilities in regard to the education of their children
* Students and their families having the freedom to choose among diverse schooling options
* Schools having the autonomy to exercise educational leadership as they respond to the emerging needs of their communities in a rapidly changing society.

**1 | The ‘opportunity gap’**

In this submission AHISA uses location descriptions as defined by the Australian Standard Geographic Classification (ASGC) system: ‘Major City’, ‘Inner Regional’, ‘Outer Regional’, ‘Remote’, and ‘Very Remote’. This system has been adopted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to report NAPLAN results by geolocation and is used to define the location of schools on My School profiles. Use of the ASGC therefore allows for correlation of AHISA data with other findings based on ASGC classifications.

For ease of reference, ‘regional and remote’ is sometimes used as a collective term to denote the four non-‘Major City’ categories.

AHISA is aware that terminology and the understandings that inform it are important in discussing issues relating to location. For example, there is a view expressed in research literature that terms such as ‘regional’ and ‘remote’ risk ‘constructing non-urban locations as inherently deficient and marginal’.1 There is also a view, as expressed in the *Red Dirt Education* compilation report2, that the term ‘disadvantage’ in relation to remoteness is ‘a Western construct that has been developed to give a sense of privilege to the values, knowledges and ways of being that are not rooted in the context of remote Australia’ (page 7). Reid, White, Green, Lock, Cooper and Hastings3 (drawing from the earlier work of Apple4), write that ‘to focus only on disadvantage can breed a certain fatalism – the idea that “it is impossible to change schools unless the social and economic relations of wider society are transformed first”’.

Making explicit the assumptions that can inform definitions of terms and their use is also a live issue for AHISA members who lead schools in ‘Remote’ or ‘Very Remote’ locations. For example, one respondent to AHISA’s member surveys commented that a lack of aspiration for tertiary education or family/cultural obligations could not be assumed as having a negative impact on the educational experience of students from very remote areas and that time taken by students to meet family and cultural obligations, for example, should be viewed and supported as valuable and positive.

In her article *From inequality to quality: Challenging the debate on Indigenous education*5, Professor Elizabeth McKinley urges caution in use of the term ‘achievement gap’ and argues for use of the term ‘opportunity gap’ instead:

Debates focusing on the achievement gap tend to place an emphasis on contextual factors, such as the role of poverty in educational inequality and aggregate achievement – an argument that spirals quickly into blaming students and families, or gives schools and teachers permission to find comfort in the status quo. The idea of the opportunity gap removes the focus from locating ‘the problem’ in the person and focuses on the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources – expert teachers, personalised attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and quality information sources – that support learning at school and home.

With particular regard to the education challenges of Indigenous populations, the OECD in its recent report, *Promising practices in supporting success for Indigenous students*6, warns of the need to avoid deficit thinking, ‘which infers that Indigenous cultures and students are lacking and assume that the task is to rectify their shortcomings and failings’. The OECD also points out, however, that ‘focusing on important disparities and shortcomings when they occur should not be mistaken for deficit thinking’:

The important point is to avoid analyses that assume that the challenges reside primarily or exclusively with the Indigenous populations themselves, do not have implications for the non-Indigenous populations and do not recognise the diverse rights, strengths and positives of the Indigenous communities . . . In addressing the meaning of success, we would emphasise that it is not about privileging one world view at the expense of another, but rather of properly recognising Indigenous cultures, values and perspectives while laying the foundations for young Indigenous students to be able to participate actively in the wider society and economy and the global world (to walk in both worlds).

AHISA supports Professor McKinley’s preference for use of the term ‘opportunity gap’ as a term that allows for recognition of the capacities and strengths of people and institutions that can be drawn on to bridge opportunity gaps. AHISA also agrees with the OECD that identifying disparities or differences is a necessary precursor to addressing ‘opportunity gaps’.

AHISA’s submission does include references to achievement gaps, not only because some of the available research presents data analysis using this terminology, but also because achievement gaps can be useful and important pointers to opportunity gaps. Similarly, any use of the term disadvantage in this submission should be understood in the context of indicating an opportunity gap.

In this submission, AHISA outlines challenges to the provision of educational opportunities for young Australians from or in regional and remote areas as identified by its members and how these challenges are being addressed in members’ schools. We have deliberately adopted the term ‘challenge’ because we believe it helps capture the entrepreneurial spirit and moral purpose that inform innovative approaches to educational provision that are adopted, adapted or developed in AHISA members’ schools.

***Measuring the opportunity gap***

Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) has created an Educational Disadvantage Index, derived from indicators relating to ‘access, performance and outcomes’, with data sourced from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), ACARA, NAPLAN, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census and the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection. (Note that the Index is used to identify ‘the extent of inequality in educational opportunities by locality’; that is, ‘disadvantage’ is equated with opportunity gaps.)

BCEC’s report, *Educate Australia fair? Education inequality in Australia*7, presents the results of application of the Index across Australia and therefore provides a useful overview of opportunity gaps in regional and remote areas. As BCEC draws on the same data as sources reported in the Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) Discussion Paper, it is not surprising that the BCEC report confirms a widening of the educational opportunity gap the further students live from major cities, with the most extreme opportunity gap experienced in ‘Very Remote’ areas:

* Of the 50 most educationally disadvantaged areas in Australia, most are located in very remote regions in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia
* Educational disadvantage increases the further children live from major cities, with a large jump in the prevalence of children experiencing one or more, or two or more, developmental vulnerabilities (as defined by the AEDC) in very remote areas
* Children living in very remote areas are three times as likely as those living in major cities to be developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains
* Children living in the most advantaged areas on average achieve more than double the score in NAPLAN tests in reading, writing and numeracy than children living in the most disadvantaged areas
* Government funding for school level education is weighted towards areas of greatest educational disadvantage, with schools in areas of greatest educational disadvantage receiving on average $24,100 per student in funding from public and private sources
* In terms of access to higher education, the equity ratio for Australia overall is around 0.65; the ratio drops to 0.38 for those from remote areas.

The BCEC report is important in that it identifies the high risk of compounding educational disadvantage in very remote areas (an issue addressed later in this submission in the section on Indigenous education). The report also highlights area-specific differences in educational opportunity gaps and suggests that these differences ‘invite either different solutions, or, at least, a flexible suite of programs and initiatives that can be weighted differently depending on the local environment and needs base’.

AHISA supports this latter proposition for flexibility in programs and initiatives to address opportunity gaps. Policies that are targeted at school education must take into account that schools are more than a collection of classrooms or discrete groups of students: schools are unique communities which, while they may share common challenges, will need to address these challenges in ways that are best suited to the school community if interventions are to be effective.

**2 | AHISA member surveys**

In preparation for this submission, AHISA invited members who lead schools in regional and remote areas and those who lead ‘Major City’ schools with residential arrangements for students from regional and remote areas to complete online surveys. The surveys aimed to identify challenges in educational provision and discover how schools were responding to those challenges.

***Survey 1: Schools in regional and remote areas***

Noted above is the BCEC finding that there are ‘area-specific differences in educational opportunity gaps’. Responses to the AHISA survey suggest that differences in educational opportunity gaps may also be school-specific and dependent on a range of factors, as are responses to those gaps. For example, while staff recruitment is noted as a difficulty for many schools in regional and remote areas, for some the greatest difficulty is in the recruitment and retention of boarding house staff rather than teaching staff.

The nature of the challenge and the circumstances of the school determine available responses. For example, some schools seek to remedy the challenge of staff recruitment by recruiting staff from overseas under various visa arrangements, while one school in a ‘Very Remote’ area was undertaking training of and employing Aboriginal community members to meet staffing requirements to deliver sections of the curriculum.

| **TOP MENTIONED FACTORS HAVING A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON SCHOOLS’ EDUCATIONAL PROVISION** | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **INNER REGIONAL** | **OUTER REGIONAL** | **REMOTE** | **VERY REMOTE** |
| Difficulties in teacher recruitment | Difficulties in teacher recruitment | Difficulties in teacher recruitment | Difficulties in teacher recruitment |
| Depressed local economic conditions | Depressed local economic conditions | Depressed local economic conditions | Costs or levels of resourcing (that may have an impact on subject offerings, access to subjects via distance education or other providers) |
| Costs or levels of resourcing (that may have an impact on subject offerings, access to subjects via distance education or other providers) | Costs or levels of resourcing (that may have an impact on subject offerings, access to subjects via distance education or other providers) | Limited or no access to ancillary services such as occupational therapy or speech therapy | Limited or no access to ancillary services such as occupational therapy or speech therapy |
| Limited or no access to government-subsidised student transport | Cost of staff | Limited or no access to mental health services | Limited or no access to mental health services |
| Limited capacity for fundraising | Limited capacity for fundraising | Limited capacity for fundraising | Insufficient broadband width (eg for video conferencing) |
| Difficulties accessing teaching relief staff | Difficulty accessing relevant PD for teaching or teaching support staff | Limited subject offerings | Intermittent or unreliable internet access |

While limited or no access to ancillary services or mental health services was mentioned by at least some schools in all areas, as would be expected, it is clearly a greater issue the greater the distance schools are from service hubs.

Limited or no access to medical services, ancillary services or mental health services could also present as a staffing challenge, with a flow-on effect in providing for students. One respondent mentioned that a teacher visiting such a service might need to travel several hours to take up an appointment, entailing an overnight stay. With no relief staff available, this then had an impact on remaining staff who may have to cover their colleague’s two-day absence.

| **TOP MENTIONED FACTORS HAVING HAD OR CONTINUING TO HAVE A NEGATIVE IMPACT**  **ON THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE/ASPIRATIONS OF STUDENTS** | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **INNER REGIONAL** | **OUTER REGIONAL** | **REMOTE** | **VERY REMOTE** |
| Depressed local economic conditions | Depressed local economic conditions | Depressed local economic conditions | Health issues eg hearing disability |
| Limited further education or training opportunities in the local community | Lack of aspiration for tertiary education | Lack of aspiration for tertiary education | Lack of part-time employment opportunities for school-aged students |
| Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community | Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community | Limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning | Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community |
| Absenteeism | Limited cultural facilities in the local community | Health issues eg hearing disability | Limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning |
| Dislocation from family | Dislocation from family | Absenteeism | Limited access to quality primary schooling opportunities |
| Student’s home environment | Absenteeism | Language difficulties | Language difficulties |

Of interest is that ‘Lack of aspiration for tertiary education’ appears to be viewed as a greater challenge for schools in ‘Outer Regional’ and ‘Remote’ areas in terms of having a negative impact on the educational experience or aspirations of students. While lack of aspiration for tertiary education or training need not be viewed as a ‘deficit’, it should be noted that remoteness has been identified as limiting further educational opportunities and therefore occupational opportunities for people in ‘Remote’ and ‘Very Remote’ areas.8

*Transitions*

All those responding to the survey who are Heads of schools in ‘Inner Regional’, ‘Outer Regional’ and ‘Remote’ locations mentioned ‘Visiting university open days’ as a strategy commonly used by their school to motivate students, support students in realising their aspirations or to support their transition to further education or training. For schools in ‘Very Remote’ locations, arranging student exchanges with city-based or overseas schools and arranging specialist VET placements were the most mentioned strategies.

Student exchanges arranged with city-based or overseas schools were also a commonly used strategy for ‘Outer Regional’ and ‘Remote’ schools. Schools in ‘Inner Regional’ locations were more likely to draw on a wider range of strategies, including allowing students time for attendance at elite athlete training or other elite academic or sports events, arranging specialist VET placements, operating a buddy scheme with alumni, bringing in guest speakers or mounting specialist programs run by the school’s careers adviser. Another strategy mentioned was supporting students to acquire the necessary bridging skills to enable them to access tertiary options.

Although AHISA’s survey samples are not representative in terms of overall educational provision in Australia, it is interesting to note that no Heads of schools in ‘Remote’ or ‘Very Remote’ locations reported their school as being a Registered Training Organisation (RTO). This may be indicative only of the size of the schools and not necessarily related to remoteness. While a small but still significant proportion of schools in ‘Outer Regional’ and ‘Inner Regional’ areas are RTOs, only schools in ‘Inner Regional’ areas reported as offering up to Certificate IV level.

While certified VET offerings in schools were not necessarily broad in terms of industry sector coverage, with some schools concentrating only on those offerings that offered support in transitioning to apprenticeships or work within the local community (such as Building and Construction, Automotive, Metals and Engineering, Primary Industries), schools used external RTOs to augment their offerings. Some schools used external RTOs for all VET provision.

*Curriculum*

In relation to curriculum delivery, Heads leading schools in regional or remote areas mentioned several strategies adopted to address challenges to meet the needs of their students, including (in order of number of mentions):

* Accessing online courses
* Using external vocational education and training providers, including industry providers
* Using video conferencing
* Participation in agricultural shows
* Offering subjects with a regional application, such as agricultural science, marine studies
* Linking curriculum with localised projects
* Offering co-curricular programs with a regional focus such as equestrian eventing, shooting, diving
* Establishing a school farm
* Transition programs during the first years of boarding to bridge literacy and numeracy gaps
* Partnering with other schools or across campuses to expand subject options
* Accessing government-provided distance education courses
* Offering an Indigenous language
* Creating links with regional universities.

One Head mentioned the school created its own courses to promote school engagement, such as short-term creative projects in visual art, craft or graphic design that would allow students to experience success in education and in a school environment. Another Head mentioned the school had established ‘Academies of Excellence’ for students in Years 7 to 10. The Academies are built on students’ interests such as robotics, coding, drama, music, science and agriculture and involved a 10-week (term) project.

*Individual learning needs*

Survey respondents reported a range of strategies were adopted to meet students’ individual learning needs, including:

* Personalised learning plans for students, which may include the student’s own learning goals
* Accessing other providers, including distance education and online courses
* Ongoing evaluation of assessment data to determine interventions
* Small class sizes
* Tutoring or homework ‘boot’ camps or homework clubs – before school, during lunch or after school, offered by school staff, older students or undergraduate university students
* Accessing mentors from the community or alumni
* Literacy and numeracy specialists available to help all students
* Teachers offer after hours online tutoring for students who are interstate or overseas on elite athlete training programs
* A ‘stage not age’ approach to choosing electives and senior secondary subjects
* Teacher professional development on differentiated teaching and learning
* Provision of a Learning Support teacher, to assist classroom teachers to modify programs and develop individual learning plans
* An Aboriginal education worker to support each subject offered
* Extended library hours.

One Head mentioned the school was considering the introduction of day boarding to assist families whose children needed additional academic support, so that they could easily access after-school co-curricular activities, homework and tutoring support and after-school snacks and an evening meal.

*Using ICT to enhance educational provision*

While integration of ICT in classroom practice was reported as a challenge for some ‘Remote’ and ‘Very Remote’ schools, overall, schools in regional and remote areas rely on connection to the internet and digital technologies as a key means to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’ and to expand their educational offerings and meet individual learning needs. This could be in the form of providing an opportunity for one or more students to access a senior secondary course via distance education, providing extension work for gifted and talented students through access to MOOCs, or offering students the opportunity to complete an online Certificate or Diploma course as a specialist elective.

One Head mentioned the importance of courses in digital media and graphic design among strategies to support student engagement with school.

Some Heads reported their school was accessing programs, platforms and learning management systems such as Google Classroom and SEQTA, noting that digital media also provided an important way to connect and communicate with the community, including through live streaming of school events. One Head reported the school was investigating virtual reality and artificial intelligence options to enhance educational offerings for students.

Online course delivery is also seen as an important means of overcoming time and cost challenges in delivering professional development for teachers.

*Quality teaching*

Heads mentioned a number of strategies supported a high quality teaching workforce in their schools, including (in order of number of mentions):

* Mentoring or coaching of staff, including development of a teacher-mentor role
* Providing access to online professional development courses
* Offering salary/conditions inducements
* Partnering with other schools to create collegial teacher professional exchanges, including short-term placements
* Exchanges
* Offering time release for postgraduate studies
* Recruiting staff from overseas
* Linking with initial teacher education providers.

With greater national promotion of and therefore more interest in teacher certification, offering professional development opportunities was mentioned not only in the context of supporting teaching quality but also as important in recruiting and retaining staff. One Head mentioned the school had created two leadership positions for experienced teachers – Director of Quality Teaching and Learning, and Head of Professional Development and Teacher Accreditation. One Head mentioned that the school allowed teaching staff to select professional development courses according to their greatest perceived need or interest, including courses in youth mental health and restorative justice or teachers might choose to complete VET courses in which students had also expressed interest.

*Connecting with community*

Almost all respondents mentioned that their school’s facilities were accessible to the community in some way, either for use of facilities such as sports or performing arts facilities, for cross-cultural exchange or volunteer service, for course provision to the wider community or even to supply basic needs for food and shelter. One Head mentioned classes for teaching the local Indigenous language were open to the community, while another Head said the school’s students taught Aboriginal cultural dance and didgeridoo to younger students in other schools. Another Head mentioned the school was open for extended hours six days a week, 51 weeks of the year to provide for students and community youth in terms of food and shelter.

Of interest is that 40 per cent of respondents reported their school had purpose-built facilities to serve both community and school needs.

Most respondents also mentioned their school linked with the community through service learning projects to enhance community wellbeing or through linking teaching of the curriculum with community projects, or through participation in community festivals or programs.

Over a third of respondents reported the school invited Aboriginal elders to offer cultural programs or teach language, in a voluntary or paid capacity.

*Entrepreneuralism*

Survey responses indicate that local economic conditions and a lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local area have an impact on students’ aspirations. However, responses also indicate that schools in ‘Inner Regional’ and ‘Outer Regional’ locations are already adopting or preparing to adopt a greater focus on supporting entrepreneurial activity among students – a strategy raised in the IRRRRE Discussion Paper. While some Heads mentioned an existing focus on entrepreneurship in the secondary Business Studies curriculum, others gave examples of programs or ventures established or supported by their school which was either related to or separate from the Business Studies curriculum, including:

* Encouraging students to engage in social entrepreneurialism
* Making it a requirement for students studying the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) to establish ventures to raise money for attendance at a VCAL camp
* Making it a major assessment task for Year 11 Business Studies students to create a business proposition which they then present to a panel of business professionals from the local community (in the style of the TV program, *Shark Tank*)
* Using a Conservation and Land Management course as a platform for growing trees for the community and land care organisations
* Establishing a student run café to put into practice financial literacy skills
* Making and posting YouTube clips on learning a language other than English
* Helping young mothers develop a business in partnership with their Aboriginal elders in fabric design and clothing and fashion accessories.

*Challenges for principals*

Responses to the survey show that staff recruitment and retention is the greatest professional challenge for principals of regional and remote schools, followed by (in order of number of mentions):

* Inadequate funding
* Difficulty accessing resources
* Lack of resources
* Housing for staff.

Other issues mentioned include gaining community buy-in for academic programs, dealing with local community issues such as domestic violence and managing teacher professional development because of the high costs of travel and accommodation and the lack of relief teachers.

One school is considering applying for certification as a provider of certified professional development of teaching staff to overcome the time/cost challenges staff development represents. However, as with expanding the range of course options for students, online delivery is see as a viable option to ameliorate the difficulties of staff development.

The most commonly mentioned personal challenges for principals were (in order of number of mentions):

* Professional isolation
* Difficulty accessing professional development or further education opportunities
* A lack of work/educational opportunities for partner/children
* Distance from family
* Distance from health/medical services for self or family.

***Survey 2: Schools in ‘Major City’ locations providing for students from regional and remote areas through residential programs***

Students from regional and remote areas living away from home to attend school – whether that school is also located in a regional and remote area or is in a ‘Major City’ location – may access a variety of residential arrangements, including boarding, hostel accommodation, home stay arrangements, government-funded social housing options or private arrangements. The most common residential arrangement for students reported by Heads responding to either of AHISA’s surveys was boarding at school.

Students living away from home to attend school face significant challenges.

| **TOP MENTIONED NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON STUDENTS’ AWAY-FROM-HOME EXPERIENCE**  **(IN ORDER OF NUMBER OF MENTIONS)** | |
| --- | --- |
| **MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS** | **REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS** |
| Academic achievement gap | Dislocation from family |
| Dislocation from family | Academic achievement gap |
| Cultural transitions (eg bush to city) | Limitations of home to boarding school transition processes |
| Lack of or limited cultural support | Cultural transitions (eg bush to town) |
| Lack of family support | Language differences |

Heads noted a number of factors – past and present – that may contribute to educational opportunity gaps for students from regional and remote areas living away from home.

| **TOP MENTIONED PAST/PRESENT FACTORS HAVING A NEGATIVE IMPACT ON**  **EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE/ASPIRATIONS OF STUDENTS LIVING AWAY FROM HOME**  **(IN ORDER OF NUMBER OF MENTIONS)\*** | |
| --- | --- |
| **MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS** | **REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS** |
| Limited access to quality primary schooling opportunities | Depressed local economic conditions |
| Depressed economic conditions in student’s home community | Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their local community |
| Limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning | Limited further education or training opportunities in the local community |
| Lack of aspiration for tertiary education | Lack of aspiration for tertiary education |
| Lack of employment opportunities for school completers in their home community | Limited cultural facilities in the local community |
| Language difficulties | Dislocation from family |
| \*Some respondents noted the difficulty of responding to this question as there could be significant disparities in the prior educational and life experiences of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students living away from home | |

Heads reported that their schools adopted a range of strategies to help overcome the challenges experienced by students living away from home.

| **STRATEGIES TO HELP STUDENTS LIVING AWAY FROM HOME**  **OVERCOME PERSONAL & EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES**  **(IN ORDER OF NUMBER OF MENTIONS)** | |
| --- | --- |
| **MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS** | **REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS** |
| Targeted literacy and numeracy teaching/tutoring | Targeted literacy and numeracy teaching/tutoring |
| Visits by school staff to students’ homes | Specific curricular or co-curricular offerings to appeal to boarding students |
| Buddy system with day students or city families | Buddy system with day students or school families |
| Facilities for students to Skype with parents | Visits by school staff to students’ homes |
| Long-term relationships with Indigenous communities | Facilities for students to Skype with parents |
| Programs for cultural and language recognition and support | Long-term relationships with Indigenous communities |
| Accommodation for students’ parents while visiting their child | Collection of students from their home communities at the beginning of each academic year or each term |

Other strategies reported by Heads included:

* Collecting students from their home communities
* Transition programs involving students’ previous teachers and schools
* An online transition program for Year 6 students entering boarding in Year 7 to support networking with other incoming boarding students and which also support academic preparation
* Cultural training for staff and student peers
* Employment of a school Boarding Liaison Officer
* Employment of a full-time Indigenous Program Coordinator
* Employment of Aboriginal education workers
* Instituting a strong Indigenous cultural program, including a dance program
* Visits to towns or communities from which students come rather than to students’ homes
* Live streaming of school events so that they can be viewed by boarding students’ parents
* Funding and engaging boarding students in a laptop program prior to their entering the school.

In terms of delivering *curriculum* to meet the needs of students from regional and remote areas, Heads of schools with residential students in ‘Major City’ locations reported most innovation occurred in the creation of transition programs aimed at bridging literacy and numeracy gaps experienced by students in their first years of boarding. Other strategies to meet the needs of boarding students include:

* Inviting Indigenous elders to offer cultural programs or teach language
* Using external vocational education and training providers
* Accessing online courses
* Offering cocurricular programs with a regional focus eg equestrian eventing, shooting, diving
* Linking curriculum to regional/remote area circumstances
* Participation in agricultural shows.

Heads of schools in ‘Major City’ locations also reported a range of strategies to support the *individual learning needs* of residential students from regional and remote areas, including:

* Individual learning plans
* Tutoring programs, including specialist subject mentors
* Pre-tutoring prior to students entering the school
* Intensive tutoring in Years 7 and 8 to help boarders bridge any achievement gap
* Tutoring/mentoring by alumni
* Appointing Aboriginal university students to work with Aboriginal boarders after school.

***Recommendations to government***

Survey respondents were invited to note any recommendations they would make to governments for programs or services that would make a tangible difference to the quality of education their schools could offer to students from regional and remote areas. All suggested recommendations are listed below. (The Review should be aware that, depending on the state or territory, once a student enters a non-government school they may lose significant entitlements such as free access to government support services, adding considerably to the cost of education for children attending non-government schools.)

| **RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT**  **(IN ORDER OF NUMBER OF MENTIONS)** | |
| --- | --- |
| **MAJOR CITY BOARDING SCHOOLS** | **REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS** |
| * Full funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students irrespective of the SES of the school they attend * Federal or state/territory government capital funding for new residential facilities or facilities refurbishment * Full and free access to government-provided services for students with disability, such as speech therapy, irrespective of the school they attend\* * Full and free access for students to government-funded mental health services, irrespective of the school they attend * Free access to government-provided distance education courses for students from regional, remote and very remote areas irrespective of the school they attend * Introduction of by-passing laws in all jurisdictions so that students attending boarding schools in other states/territories are eligible for state recurrent funding * Increased federal recurrent funding for boarding students * Extending Abstudy to cover the cost of parents coming to Year 12 graduation or valedictory events * Funding to cover the cost of additional academic support out of school hours, particularly in literacy and numeracy skills | * Federal or state/territory government capital funding for new residential facilities or facilities refurbishment * Free access for students to government-provided distance education courses * Full funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students irrespective of the SES of the school they attend * Free access to NBN Co’s Sky Muster distance education satellite service * Federal government loan subsidies for capital expenditure * Reduction of local government rates, fees, charges * More housing for transient youth * Access to grants to cover programs such as keeping young mothers at school * Support for ICT resources and maintenance * Funding for transport (buses, fuel, drivers) to collect students and return them home * Increased funding for regions experiencing economic stress * A review of the ABSTUDY application and approval processes * Increased support for students with disability, especially in areas where services are non-existent or under-resourced * Recognition of the role independent schools play in providing educational choice in regional areas * Recognition that independent schools may be the sole provider in some remote areas |
| \* It was reported that some students enter secondary boarding with hearing or language difficulties that were not diagnosed in their home location and may need intensive ‘catch up’ support. | |

**3 | Focus on Indigenous education**

In 2016-17 AHISA made a two-part submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs in the 44th Parliament. That inquiry was resumed in the 45th Parliament and is yet to deliver a final report. AHISA’s submissions are published at <http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Indigenous_Affairs/Educational_Opportunities/Submissions> and included as appendices to this submission for the convenience of the Review.

Both parts of AHISA’s submission aimed to provide further substance to points on educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students raised by the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council in its submission to the Inquiry:

* The value of trialling small-scale innovative models
* The value of autonomous leadership in the development of innovative, creative responses
* The value of city-remote school partnerships.

AHISA’s submission to the Inquiry also supports findings of the Productivity Commission as reported in *Indigenous Primary School Achievement* and noted on page 42 of the IRRRRE Discussion Paper, that ‘for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be successful, a culture of high expectations in schools, strong student-teacher and community relationships and support for culture are particularly important – all underpinned by strong school leadership’.

Below we set out key learnings described in the submission.

**Part 1** of AHISA’s submission drew on articles describing the provision of Indigenous education in AHISA’s members’ schools as published in AHISA’s biannual journal, *Independence*. Highlighted were practices found to be successful in supporting retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in city boarding schools, key features of relationships between city independent schools and remote Indigenous communities and challenges in on-country provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Factors found to have contributed to the success of residential programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas attending city schools include:

* Sensitivity of school communities to the cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is important in helping students develop a sense of belonging at school
* Efforts by schools to promote and celebrate Indigenous cultures and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the expression of their home cultures are important in helping students maintain their cultural identity
* Developing trust through long-term relationships between schools and remote Indigenous communities helps students transition to city boarding schools
* A higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within a school can augment students’ sense of belonging
* The commitment of school leaders underwrites program innovation and success
* The school’s ethos and values inform the development and implementation of strategies to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students socially and academically
* High expectations of students as a component of the ‘academic press’ that has been shown to contribute to overall student achievement in independent schools is also a factor in the achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas attending metropolitan boarding schools on residential scholarships
* The holistic care of students in boarding houses – where attention to the physical and emotional wellbeing of students is as important as academic studies – and the provision of safe learning environments are contributing factors to the success of scholarship programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
* Establishing post-school pathways supports the long-term success of metropolitan residential programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from regional and remote areas.

Looking at examples of regional schooling provision, one article illustrates how, in regional areas, between-school collaboration can be a viable option for increasing educational opportunities for Aboriginal students. The Armidale School, Armidale, NSW, has built a relationship with Minimbah Primary School in Armidale (designated ‘Inner Regional’) which encompasses student-to-student mentoring (secondary TAS students mentoring MPS students), sharing of facilities and shared sporting and cultural opportunities. Of note is that this collaboration also includes teacher professional exchange and support.

The IRRRRE Discussion Paper notes staffing as a persistent challenge for regional and remote schools and that a ‘persistent aspect of staffing rural schools is a belief (which influences practice) that “the country is a good place for a teacher to start their career but not to devote their career to”’ (page 24). The Discussion Paper also notes the issue of high staff turnover.

Professor McKinley notes that ‘the challenge for Australian education is to place in front of each and every Indigenous Australian child, every day, quality teachers and quality teaching’.9 The OECD’s *Promising practices in supporting success for Indigenous students* report finds that, at the system level, ‘supporting teachers and leaders to develop awareness, capability and confidence’ is an initiative that should be included ‘in any strategy to improve the education experiences of Indigenous students’, while at the individual school level, ‘quality and effectiveness of teaching’ should be a basic focus to improve education experiences’.

Provision of teacher professional exchange and support as a means to enhance educational opportunities for students is also a feature of a collaborative relationship between the Perth-based Christ Church Grammar School and the ‘Very Remote’ Yakanarra Community School in Fitzroy Crossing, WA, described in Part 1 of AHISA’s submission to the Inquiry. A similar collaboration, between Woodleigh School on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula (‘Metropolitan City’) and the ‘Very Remote’ Wugularr community, south-east of Katherine in the Northern Territory, is described in Part 2 of AHISA’s submission to the Inquiry. As well as student exchanges, Woodleigh School’s relationship with the Wugularr community entails teacher exchanges, to help build the teaching capacity within Wugularr School.

Some of the examples of programs outlined in Part 1 of AHISA’s submission to the Inquiry also illustrate learning partnerships between ‘Major City’ or ‘Inner Regional’ schools and schools in ‘Outer Regional’ to ‘Very Remote’ areas, as referred to on page 45 of the IRRRRE Discussion Paper, further supporting the proposition that between-school collaborations are a viable option for increasing educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Christ Church Grammar School and Yakanarra Community School use digital technologies to share classes, augmented by a student visitation program. Secondary students from ‘Major City’ independent schools with established connections with remote Indigenous communities will typically mentor primary aged students while visiting those communities, or help present educational programs. An example is the delivery of science projects by a teacher and students from Trinity Grammar School in Kew, Victoria, to students in the Gunbalanya community in west Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Student attendance and retention are also key issues for schools providing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Featured in Part 1 of AHISA’s submission to the Inquiry is an article on Macleay Vocational College, South Kempsey, NSW (‘Inner Regional’), outlining the school’s strategies to support the attendance, retention and academic success of Aboriginal students who experience multiple educational challenges, including:

* Provision of transport to support attendance
* Provision of breakfast, recess and lunch vouchers as many students do not have regular food sources.
* Provision of financial rewards for attendance in the form of a ‘refund’ on fees
* Assignment of a teacher to ‘walk around duty’ to help students stay on task and ensure students are able to make a positive step forward no matter the challenges they have brought with them to school
* Providing learning incentives, eg scheduling popular classes at the beginning of the week so that students start the week off with their best attitude
* Provision of courses with a health requirement as an incentive for students to reduce their addictive behaviours; for example, a certified scuba diving course as part of marine studies
* Building students’ confidence as learners by establishing opportunities for students to experience success
* Supporting students’ efforts to give back to the wider community, for example through fundraising walkathons
* Building trust by engaging with the community and its needs, not just students and their needs
* Building students’ sense of place and belonging by opening the school to the community and elders.

**Part 2** of AHISA’s submission covers innovative approaches to educational provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, both on-country and out of country, developed by AHISA members’ schools:

* Melbourne Indigenous Transition School, Richmond, Victoria: A one-year residential and academic program to assist students from regional and remote communities to transition successfully to city boarding schools.
* Woodleigh School, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria: Assistance in program development and teacher professional learning for a ‘Very Remote’ community school, plus primary-level student exchange (already mentioned above).
* Wesley College, Melbourne, Victoria: Establishment of a senior secondary school, Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School, that provides on country provision for Aboriginal students and for which Wesley College serves as a remote campus. (Yiramalay/Wesley Studio School is near Fitzroy Crossing, WA, and is designated ‘Very Remote’ by ACARA.)
* Gawura School, Sydney, NSW: Establishment of a primary school for Aboriginal students living in Sydney within the site of St Andrew’s Cathedral School, Sydney CBD (‘Major City’).
* Darkinjung Barker College, Wyong, NSW: Establishment of a regional primary campus of Barker College, Hornsby, NSW to serve Aboriginal students within the Wyong region. (Wyong is designated as a ‘Major City’ location.)

The innovations described in Part 2 of AHISA’s submission10 support the finding reported in the *Red Dirt Education* compilation report, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in remote areas want their young people to be ‘strong in both worlds’ (pages 23, 55). Further, Part 2 of AHISA’s submission records the view of independent school leaders that there must be a preparedness for ‘two-ways learning’ on the part of education providers if cross-cultural efforts are to be successful, sustainable and have their greatest impact.

Of interest in the Gawura and Darkinjung Barker models is the focus on K-6 provision, which is proving successful in overcoming the challenge of any compounding of educational disadvantage from early learning through to secondary schooling. Key features include:

* A focus on literacy numeracy, cultural awareness and socialisation
* Support for close kinship connections between students and maintenance of family groupings
* Celebration of cultural identities
* Adoption and teaching of an official Aboriginal dialect for the school
* Working together with families
* Attendance supported through collection and return to home transport.

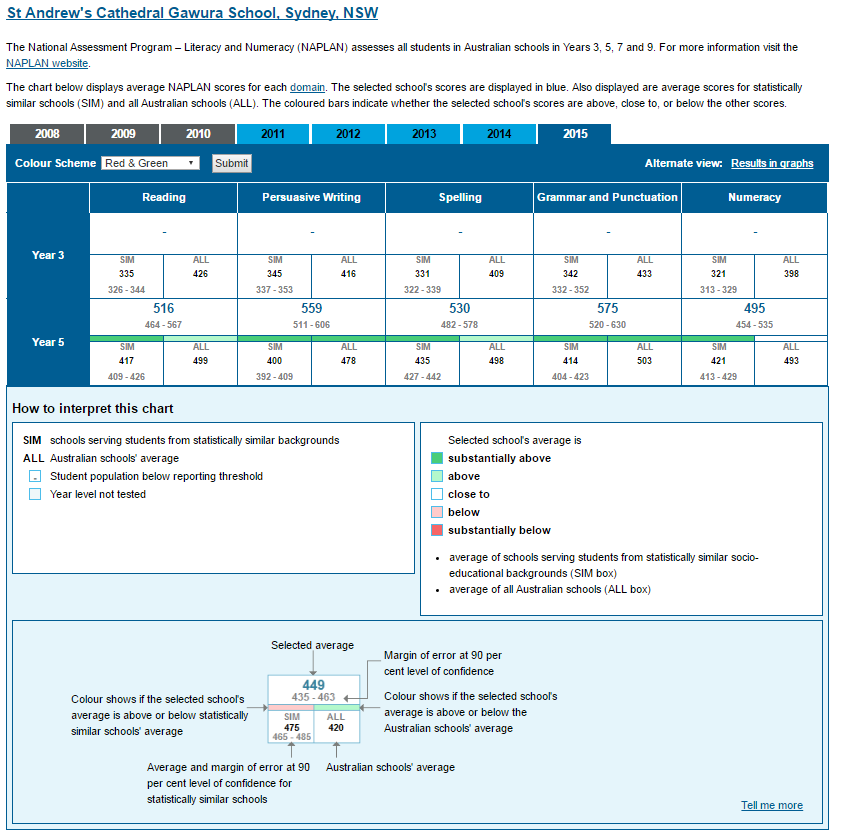
At Gawura, any lack of home facilities or support is balanced with compulsory attendance at the School’s Aboriginal Homework Club two to three afternoons per week.

Darkinjung Barker College was established in 2016 in conjunction with Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council. Success indicators from its first year of operation include:

* Overall, students gained between 1.5 and 5 years in academic achievement
* In reading, 61 per cent of students commencing in February 2016 in Years 1 to 5 were diagnosed as having a severe reading comprehension problem according to the York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (YARC) scale. By November 2016, no students in this group measured as having a severe reading comprehension problem: 38 per cent had a moderate reading problem; 38 per cent measured as ‘average’ readers; 15 per cent measured as ‘good’ readers; and 8 per cent achieved an ‘excellent reader’ score in reading comprehension.
* In spelling, 56 per cent of students commencing in February 2016 in Years 1 to 5 were diagnosed as experiencing severe difficulties (that is, the students’ academic performance was at or below the fifth percentile for his or her year of schooling) according to the Dalwood Spelling Test. By November 2016, only 19 per cent of students were still diagnosed at this level: 37 per cent were diagnosed as ‘borderline’; 12 per cent were ‘average’ for their school year level; 6 per cent were ‘above average’; and 25 per cent measured as having ‘superior achievement’ (that is, with scores at or above the 95th percentile for the student’s school year level).

Success indicators at Gawura include:

* Attendance rates of 93-94 per cent
* Entry of Gawura students into Year 7 at St Andrew’s on an equal footing – academically and socially – with students of all other ethnicities
* In 2015 Gawura’s average NAPLAN scores were well above those of statistically similar schools (that is, schools with similar students)
* Since 2012, 10 Gawura students have graduated Year 12 from St Andrew’s Cathedral School and entered university courses in law, fine arts, teacher education, nursing and business management.

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Further learnings from the leaders contributing to AHISA’s Inquiry submission include:

* Residential secondary schooling provision in ‘Major City’ locations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities is desired by many Indigenous families for their children
* The academic and cultural challenges faced by students from remote communities coming to city boarding schools are immense; a residential transition school linked to destination schools, providing targeted literacy and numeracy programs and social and emotional development programs, can help provide a cross-cultural bridge for students and build strong peer networks
* Positive outcomes depend on relationships between independent school communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are built on trust and respect
* Professional assistance for teachers in remote community schools provided by city-based teachers can reduce professional isolation and improve practice in remote schools
* Digital technologies are important in assisting continuity of teacher professional exchange between city/regional and remote schools, and for building relationships between children and between staff in geographically distant communities
* There is no one-size-fits-all solution to increase educational opportunities in remote communities: partnerships between city schools and remote schools and communities require flexibility and the freedom to generate collaborations that are the most beneficial and which reflect the needs and capacities of those involved
* Leadership by principals and school boards is essential if visions, ideas and goodwill are to be realised
* Student exchanges begun at primary level have powerful immediate and long-term effects; friendships between students in culturally diverse communities are easily formed and, because of the age of the children, typically engage whole families
* On country provision gives students a sense of cultural place and safety and provides a platform from which mainstream educational programs can be attempted
* Educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, delivered on country or in metropolitan schools, must be culturally appropriate
* On-country provision supports student retention
* Experiential or ‘hands on’ learning programs attract students who may have become disenfranchised from school education
* Success in experiential programs inspires confidence to attempt academic programs
* Valuing the language of Aboriginal students is an important part of having a culturally strong school
* The success of cross-cultural educational provision depends on the strength of the relationships and partnerships that support it
* The willingness of those in these relationships and partnership to make long-term commitments underwrites the success of innovative ventures in Indigenous education
* Trust between schools and Indigenous communities can only be built over time and requires taking account of the views of Aboriginal people in the development of educational programs for their children
* Staff members of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent are critical as perceived advocates and go-to people for parents and students in independent Indigenous schools
* Stability of staffing in independent Indigenous schools is vital because of the relational nature of trust building
* Education cannot be separated from social, health and housing issues; leaders of independent schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must be prepared to work with families, not just students, especially to address the issue of regular school attendance
* High profile Aboriginal leaders who are prepared to act as passionate champions and advocates of independent Indigenous schools can be essential in supporting the sustainability of the schools
* Initial and ongoing liaison with community and parent groups is essential to lay the foundations of home-school partnerships and preserve the integrity of the cultural environment of schools serving Indigenous students
* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities appreciate working with independent schools because of the opportunity it gives them to influence the shape and delivery of the education program, including the cultural environment in which their young people learn.

The OECD notes that ‘practices that benefit Indigenous students also benefit non-Indigenous students’.11 Some of the ideas contributed by school leaders to AHISA’s Inquiry submission for government sponsored programs to support creation of educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in regional and remote areas may therefore be of interest for closing the opportunity gap for all students in regional and remote areas, including:

* Seed funding for ‘pop up’ schools in regional and remote areas; for example, pop up schools to deliver specific programs in STEM subjects. These ‘schools’ could deliver short courses to students and professional learning for teachers
* Funding to support teacher exchanges and ongoing collaborative professional development of teachers in remote community schools
* Capital funding for schools willing to establish teacher visitation programs to remote communities to build teacher accommodation in these communities, suitable for short and longer-term stays
* Funding to facilitate teacher secondments between ‘Major City’ and schools in remote areas.

**4 | Releasing and supporting innovative practice in schools**

AHISA welcomes the expressed focus of the Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education to identify innovative practice. AHISA has been concerned for some time that the narrative of ‘failing schools’ in Australia – based largely on narrow interpretations of Australia’s performance on international tests and often used to create a platform for policy intervention – has created a policy blind spot to the innovative ways in which schools are responding to rapidly escalating social and technological change in general and the needs of their immediate communities in particular.

Just as ‘deficit thinking’ should not blind policy makers to the capacities of regional and remote communities or lead to the uncritical adoption of metrocentric notions of ‘success’, deficit thinking about schools should not blind policy makers to the adaptive and entrepreneurial capacities of schools to develop, adopt and adapt innovative practice to meet the evolving needs of students and communities.

As can be seen from the history of innovation in Australia’s independent schools, many of the education practices taken for granted today have been introduced not by government imperatives but by school leaders demonstrating entrepreneurial qualities such as vision, strategic foresight and a healthy tolerance for risk. These practices include:

* Careers advisers
* School counsellors
* Outdoor education programs
* Pastoral care programs
* School chaplains
* Service learning and character formation
* Internationalism and global student exchange.

Independent schools have also been leaders in the use of technology in education. For example, Australia’s first one-to-one laptop program was introduced by Methodist Ladies’ College in Melbourne in 1990, 27 years ago. The first virtual reality learning space for primary students in Australia, zSpace, opened at Barker College, NSW in 2016.

Independent schools have also entered into collaborative partnerships with universities to forge innovations in pedagogy and educational programs. In 2005, Bialik College in Victoria entered a five-year-long collaboration with Project Zero at Harvard Graduate School of Education and helped birth the Cultures of Thinking approach to teaching and learning of which it is a world leader today. The first FabLab maker space in Australia opened at Lauriston Girls’ School in Victoria in 2014, in collaboration with Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education. In collaboration with Oxford University in the United Kingdom, Tara Anglican School for Girls in NSW built a research grade optical telescope and offers an astronomy program linked to Oxford’s Global Jet Watch telescope program.

This collaborative enterprise also extends to social and emotional learning. Girton Grammar School in Bendigo, Victoria partnered with Yale University to introduce its RULER Approach program of social and emotional learning to Australia. Schools such as Geelong Grammar School in Victoria and St Peter’s College in South Australia are recognised world leaders in positive education, that is, the merging of positive psychology with teaching and learning, working in collaboration with Professor Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. Schools such as Anglican Church Grammar School in Queensland are also working with Swinburne Institute of Technology in the application of Emotional Intelligence to teaching and learning.

Truly innovative enterprises will always be ahead of government policy making and this is amply evident in schools. For example, by the time the Education Council had released its National STEM School Education Strategy 2016-2026 in December 201512, a number of AHISA members’ schools had already moved to incorporate the arts in their delivery of STEM in an approach that has earned the acronym STEAM. Often incorporating innovations from the ‘maker movement’, STEAM reflects the emerging practice in industry of linking design to engineering at early stages of new product development. Some schools are now giving a greater profile to action research in their STEAM projects, adopting the acronym STREAM.

This proactive approach to education provision also extends to post-school transitions and teacher professional development. AHISA members’ schools have forged innovative practices and collaborative partnerships with local governments, the business sector and universities to create diverse pathways for students, to help students transition more smoothly to post-school education and training and to make teacher professional development more accessible outside of major metropolitan areas. For example13, by:

* Taking advantage of the need for facilities refurbishment to partner with universities to establish on site research-grade scientific laboratories
* Sharing resources, facilities and library services with nearby universities
* Allowing students to study university subjects while still at school
* Acting as a regional satellite university campus to offer units of university study to students and to staff (including students and staff from other schools)
* Partnering with other training organisations and industry for study options and work experience in vocational education and training.

In previous sections in this submission we have described innovations in educational provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the ways in which AHISA members’ schools are addressing challenges in provision for students from regional and remote areas, whether they are attending ‘Major City’ schools or schools located in regional and remote areas. We urge the Review to consider recommending that the Australian Government establish a national Schools Innovation Fund as a means to leverage the entrepreneurial capacity of schools and support and encourage Australian schools to exercise and develop innovation in educational provision.

Grants under the Schools Innovation Fund could be competitive and open to schools, clusters of schools and/or school systems and schools partnering with outside organisations such as universities.

AHISA has promoted this concept in other submissions to government. While, ideally, such a program should be broad-based so that schools can engage with those issues they deem priorities in their communities, it would also be possible to tie such a Fund to government-mandated priorities, such as improving student engagement in STEM or improving retention rates of students in regional and remote areas.

A successful precedent already exists for such a model. A program of competitive, direct-to-school grants was administered on behalf of the Australian Government by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) under the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP). The Becoming Asia Literate: Grants to Schools (BALGS) program operated between 2009 and 2012 and attracted 2,000 applications. During the life of the program, some $7.2 million was disbursed on 335 projects among 521 schools.

The evaluation of the BALGS program, published by AEF in 201314, offers valuable insights into how direct-to-schools grants can be effectively managed to meet government objectives. Outcomes of the program, which covered both primary and secondary schools, included:

* Enabling sustainable change and innovation
* Enabling curriculum renewal and refreshing pedagogy
* Building teacher capacity, within and beyond the school
* Developing teacher-leaders to drive and support curriculum innovation
* Engagement with research to develop evidence-informed practice
* Building strategic collaborations and sustainable partnerships within and between schools.

Importantly, the program enabled schools to engage in innovation and build professional practice irrespective of where the schools were on the practice continuum, and to develop practices that met the specific needs and contexts of the school.

Other features worth noting are:

* Project proposals were assessed, scored and ranked by independent assessors in the states and territories. Schools which won grants were obliged to follow accountability procedures and guidelines, make progress reports and develop plans for the sustainability of the funded projects.
* Over 12 per cent of registrations in the program were from clusters of two to four schools, indicating a high level of interest among schools in developing communities of practice.
* For successful proposals, on-call professional learning support was available to steer schools through the process of project design, implementation and review.

The BALGS program demonstrates that, due to the increasingly collaborative nature of the teaching profession, the impact of supported projects extends well beyond individual school communities. The program also demonstrates the return on investment to government. This is significant, given that the scheme would not be open-ended in terms of either money or time.

As the IRRRRE Discussion Paper notes:

Innovation is often thought of as something which is ‘brand new’ or particularly special and big. An innovation, however, can also be something that is quite small, relatively subtle, cost neutral overall but which delivers a significant impact. (Page 8)

The extent of an innovation’s impact will depend very much on its ‘fit’ with the community in which it is to be embedded. Supporting schools by giving them the autonomy to introduce those innovations which they can first envision and which they believe they then have sufficient confidence, courage and people power to pursue could deliver significant gains for students and communities in regional and remote areas. 

**NOTES**

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2 Guenther J, Disbray S & Osborne S (2016) *Red dirt education: A compilation of learnings from the Remote Education Systems project*. Alice Springs.

3 Reid J-A, White S, Green W, Lock G, Cooper M & Hastings W (2012) TERRAnova: Renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia. Volume 1: Project Report. Bathurst: Charles Sturt University.

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5 McKinley E (2017) From inequality to quality: Challenging the debate on Indigenous education in, Bentley T & Savage GC (2017) *Educating Australia: Challenges for the decade ahead*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press; pp191-205.

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7 Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (2017) *Educate Australia fair? Education inequality in Australia*. Focus on the States Series, No 5. Curtin Business School, Curtin University.

8 See for example Tomaszewski W, Perales F & Xiang N (2017) *School experiences, career guidance, and the university participation of young people from three equity groups in Australia*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Curtin University.

9 McKinley, op cit.

10 The views of independent school leaders who contributed to Part 2 of AHISA’s submission to the Inquiry into Educational Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students regarding relationship building and cultural sensitivity are further explored in an article related to the submission, posted at <http://independence.realviewdigital.com/?iid=142473#folio=80>.

11 OECD, op cit.

12 The National STEM School Education Strategy is available at <http://www.educationcouncil.edu.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/National%20STEM%20School%20Education%20Strategy.pdf>.

13 Such innovations are described in AHISA’s journal *Independence*. See for example Wilson L (2014) The education continuum in *Independence* Vol 39 No 1; available at <http://independence.realviewdigital.com/?iid=93081#folio=18>

14 Australia Education Foundation (2013) *What works 5. Schools becoming Asia literate: What works?* Available at <http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/docs/default-source/what-works-pdf/what-works-5-report.pdf>.