



Catholic Education Services, Cairns

Submission: Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

August 2017

This submission is made on behalf of Cairns Catholic Education Services

Background

Cairns Catholic Education Services covers 29 schools in Far North Queensland with more than 11,000 students and about 2,000 staff (including relief staff). There are 20 primary schools, six secondary schools, two Prep-Year 12 schools, and one special assistance school for disengaged students. The schools are located from Tully in the south to Thursday Island, and west to the Tablelands, there are two remote schools on the Cape – Weipa (primary) and Cooktown (special assistance – secondary).

Attracting suitable staff

Our schools often have difficulty attracting quality teachers, and this becomes a larger challenge as the level of remoteness increases. This is a particular issue for midyear vacancies where school communities do not have a pool of available staff to draw on. We are also aware that the rolling retirement of the 'baby boomer' teaching cohort may result in further pressure on recruitment for remote schools.

In response, we are looking at ways of enhancing the experience of rural teaching and encouraging more graduate teachers to consider this option.

Example: *One recent strategy has been to offer Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, students the opportunity to do their final year practicum at Cairns schools. The offer comes with supplied accommodation (a large house owned by Catholic Education), a living allowance, and a guaranteed offer of a position on graduation, subject to a successful prac outcome. This resulted in several successful job placements this year.*



A further strategy has been to enhance the range of Principal and teacher accommodation in our remote schools. In the past there have been issues where accommodation has either not been provided or has not been of an acceptable standard.

Example: *St Joseph's Parish School, Weipa (P-6) opened in 2016. The cost of providing nine units of staff accommodation (houses and duplexes) was \$3,790,000 compared to the total school construction cost of \$7 million.*

Example: *Five accommodation units were recently purchased and renovated for staff at Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School on Thursday Island at a total cost of \$2.3m.*

Example: *We have recently built or acquired homes for Principals at Dimbulah, South Johnstone and Mossman with costs of between \$350,000 and \$410,000. While these are significant costs they are also longer term 'risk' investments given the lack of capital growth and quiet local real estate markets. We would expect these investments to fall in value over time rather than appreciate.*

Example: *We are in the process of arranging permanent accommodation for our staff at Holy Spirit College in Cooktown. This will take the form of 4 x residential units and 1 x Principal's house, at a total estimated cost of around \$1,500,000 to \$2,000,000.*

Investments of the like identified above can only be sustained by a system of schools operating a shared property investment and management fund. Small stand-alone school communities could not support the debt obligations to service such investment.

While staff accommodation is not outside the scope of state-provided capital grant processes, the state-wide demands on this funding have in the past generally precluded such funding.

Enrolment stability and transience in rural communities

Infrastructure planning data indicates our schools in the Cairns urban area might be expected to grow at 1-2% pa while the rural schools are expected to decrease enrolments by up to 1% (and possibly more in some areas).

In effect, this means Catholic Education in Cairns is managing a "two speed economy" in which the strength of the system of schools is cross-subsidising declining enrolments in the diocese's rural schools.

There are two related aspects. The first is the slow decline in enrolments over time. This can be seen as part of a general decline in rural populations but is also linked to the impact of major events, such as the ongoing local impacts of severe cyclones Larry and Yasi in Cassowary Coast communities.



The second is the out-migration of student enrolments in the course of the year. Exit interviews indicate the major reason for the loss of these enrolments is employment related – families are not able to access employment or career advancement in their local community. While in city schools there is often a counter-balancing in-migration of enrolments, the loss of enrolments in rural schools is usually a one way process.

Example: *St Teresa's School, Ravenshoe has seen enrolments drop from 130 in 2011 to 103 in 2017. Over the same period Good Counsel Primary School in Innisfail, a community impacted by two severe cyclones, has had virtually static enrolments – 309 in 2011, 305 in 2017.*

Example: *St Joseph's School, Atherton has enrolments of about 250 students. In the first half of 2017 it lost 16 students. Exit interviews indicated 12 of the students left the school for family relocation reasons.*

Application of ICT

Despite a variety of school sizes and locations we are providing an equitable service for technology to all schools in our Diocese. All Schools in the Diocese of Cairns are using a wide range of ICT connected by a Telstra managed Wide Area Network. This network provides a minimum of a 10Mbps (Mega Bits per second) speed or faster, which is comparable to speeds available to the NBN. The annual cost of this network is in excess of \$1 million.

The investment has allowed us to provide a level of equity around technology, such that we can utilise the same technology in our more remote schools, as we can in the Cairns area

We have seen a significant focus and increase in technology over the past five years, which has resulted in the current situation and prioritisation of funding for connectivity. We have increased our capacity 10 fold in this time, by moving from traditional ADSL and SHDSL technologies to Telstra Fibre Wideband IP. This has also allowed us to deliver centrally focused solutions such as the Shared Information Systems Project as well as numerous integration projects for managing the nearly 10,000 devices in use across all of our schools.

We expect to see technology use continue to grow and are confident we can scale the current technology out to keep pace with demand. The types of technology we are expecting to see become more widely used are more functional tablet computing (iPads, Surface), improvements in touch screen technology (laptops, interactive screens used in varying applications) and augmented reality which will see the an increase in the use of virtual headsets (such as [Occulus](#) or [HoloLens](#)). All of these technologies will rely heavily on being connected to a network and the internet to function.

We are in ideal position in being able to increase capacity of connectivity at a technical level, however this will be constrained by costs and what is sustainable. We have seen some recent discounting with the Telstra services, however they remain significantly higher due to our geographic location and higher costs associated in providing services to regional areas. For example, we pay three to five times more for regional services than our counterparts in southeast Queensland.

Remote Indigenous education

Indigenous students in remote communities in recent years have been offered access to a wide range of secondary boarding options. This is an outcome of many secondary schools having available



boarding places (as a result of changing rural demographics), increased access to AbStudy, and often access to additional school and philanthropic support reflecting Closing the Gap strategies. While many students and their families have availed themselves of these opportunities, for others the transition to a distant secondary school presents a difficult transition. Students not able to make this transition often return to communities and become disengaged from education. Our consultation has indicated most, if not all, rural and remote communities in Far North Queensland have cohorts of disengaged youth.

Example: *Holy Spirit College (Cairns and Cooktown) is a designated special assistance school for disengaged young people. It has a small boarding campus for up to 32 students at Cooktown servicing the Cooktown, Wujal Wujal and HopeVale communities. Students have been drawn from the local state school and from disengagement from more distant boarding schools. The Cooktown campus offers weekly boarding (currently under review) to allow students to return to family and community at weekends. In the event of the need for family intervention most families live within an hour's drive of the school. The small size of the school also offers a more pastoral and supportive environment compared with, for example, a large metropolitan boarding school. The school was established in 2015 and can demonstrate a number of successful outcomes for its students. However, it faces a number of ongoing challenges – financial (the high cost of service delivery in a remote location with high needs students, as well as the fluctuation of enrolments relative to the student Censuses) and duty of care issues relating to a high needs student cohort.*

Example: *Mount St Bernard College, Herberton is a predominantly Indigenous boarding school on the Atherton Tablelands, drawing students from Cape York, Torres Strait and from across northern Australia. It has an 'Elders in Residence' program where the families of students are welcome to live in provided accommodation (a restored colonial era school residence) for periods of up to two weeks. This provides support for both immediate family members but also other students drawn from the same community. The college also uses face to face ICT to link students and staff to families in remote communities.*

Capital costs

The locality index for capital programs (the additional cost of building school infrastructure outside Brisbane) varies from 8% additional for Cairns to an additional 85% in Weipa and on Thursday Island. A number of our schools are in the 15-35% range. While this is taken into account as a 'given' in needs-based state-provided capital funding, it is a significant additional cost for school and system funded capital works. The index is also a good indicator of the additional costs of infrastructure maintenance for rural and remote schools.

Cost and distance

While we are making increasing use of digital technologies to deliver meetings and professional development opportunities, there is still an ongoing need to bring staff from rural and remote schools to Cairns for training, workshops and meetings, especially when these events require collegiate discussions. The distances and availability of flights involve additional costs and time away from schools.

Example: *Travel for Principals at Weipa and Thursday Island to attend meetings in Cairns usually involves a 'travel day' either side of the event – this usually means the Principal is out of the school for three days in a school week compared to a single day (or part day) for a Cairns-based Principal.*



Example: It is cheaper to fly from Cairns to London return than it is to bring a parent from an outer Torres Strait Island to Cairns for a school related purpose.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bill Dixon', written in a cursive style.

Bill Dixon

Executive Director

