

Recipient Details

Name of organisation or individual: [O] Cairns School of Distance Education Parents & Citizens Association

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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

A greater emphasis on 'project-based' learning with a rural/remote context, may result in improved engagement and achievement in school by geographically isolated (GI) students. Instead of separate subjects for maths, english, science, geography, history, the arts, languages, etc, term-long project-based units that focus on particular themes which tick all the boxes in the Australian curriculum, may be more engaging for students, and would also assist in delivery in the multi-year level context which is often the case for GI families. The curriculum needs to be more aligned with real life, so students can identify with learning, so it has a practical application in their daily lives, and so they can see how it will benefit them in the future. For students, it is often hard to see what the tangible outcome of learning will be. One curriculum example is algebra, where often students cannot see its relevance. If greater emphasis was placed on the problem-solving side of algebra, students might understand the practical application that algebra can prepare them for problem-solving in all contexts.

The Review notes the importance of having a range of subjects available to students. Our school is developing a 'Make-a-Space studio and mobile workshop' which will be used to enrich the current curriculum options. This is particularly important to facilitate our flexible delivery of education to a number of categories of enrolments, particularly to GI.

In Queensland, from 2020, SATE (Secondary Assessment and Tertiary Entrance) testing to be undertaken at a central location such as a school. This is extremely problematic, especially for GI students who may be required to relocate for the exam period, which would likely be for up to three weeks at a time. This is a burden for students and families, and GI students would be at a considerable disadvantage, as not only would they be removed from the support of their families and home, but would have to bear the cost of accommodation and travel. Therefore, special considerations need to be put in place so that GI students are not disadvantaged, both academically and financially, by external examinations and assessments.

Rating: 6

Teachers and teaching

According to the Review, considerable effort is being made by Australian governments to improve teacher quality. At our school, an expert teaching team has been identified by school leadership as integral to student success, but this can be undermined by seriously deficient infrastructure and facilities to accommodate teachers and students. So teaching quality, leaders and leadership, cannot in isolation improve the achievement of students. Schools need to be properly resourced so that teachers can perform their duties without limitations imposed by poor and aging buildings, infrastructure and facilities.

Further, the 'at-home' teaching of GI students falls on families, and often a parent or employed governess takes on the role of the 'Home Tutor'. For parents of GI students, finding and employing someone to teach their kids, and then being able to pay them, is an incredible challenge and causes stress and hardship for many families. A solution that may work is where the 'teacher in training' does a term of 'teaching practice placement' in the studio at the school, getting to know the paper work and on-line teaching side of distance education, then completes three terms on 'placement' in a student's schoolroom. This might not be a solution for all families but there are many who would be open to support a trial.

It is also recommended that the Australian government introduce schemes that would ease the financial burden placed on GI families teaching their own children. For example, a stipend or allowance should be introduced which would help compensate families for the loss of income of one parent teaching a child or children. Alternatively, a stipend or allowance could be used to pay someone else, such as a governess. Tax incentives may be another option which could reduce the financial burden on families.

Rating: 6

Leaders and leadership

School leaders and leadership are to the achievement of students as they set the standard for the school. For distance education schools, leaders face challenges that city schools do not such as the issues of ICT and how to determine and measure factors such as student attendance. The issue of school infrastructure is also a challenge as there is a presumption that schools of distance education do not need the buildings and facilities that city schools do. School leaders, particularly principals need to be strong advocates for their school in terms of securing financial resources to meet the demands of a wide range of enrolments. There is also the issue of advocating for special recognition for GI and medical students who are challenged by distance to attend school events and compulsory testing regimes that are put in place by governments that do not understand the challenges of distance education.

Rating: 6

School and Community

School and family are to the achievement of students, particularly those enrolled in distance education schools, as for many students living in isolated areas there is limited social contact outside of school and family. It is noted in the review that community and family play a vital role in what seems to be difficult social and demographic contexts and schools of distance education certainly fit this description. Ideas and interventions often come from the community and families, and school leadership must nurture and encourage this relationship by continuing to value and place high importance on the outreach programs held in geographically isolated clusters, e.g. study days, home visits and mini schools. Within these events strong relationships are built between teachers, students and families which is paramount and crucial to student outcomes and engagement. Governments must also incentivize schools through financial and other resources and flexible policies and programs that will allow schools to make the most of the skills, know-how and passion of the school community, rather than limit these opportunities.

Our school has recently introduced a Student Leadership program, with elected school leaders in each school cluster. The program aims to increase and enhance the engagement of students in determining the direction of the school and in school projects. For example, our school leaders are currently working on designing a new playground. One of the outcomes of the program will also be a

greater sense of self-worth among students in that they are able to work together to achieve things and make a real difference in their school for the benefit of students, teaching and learning. This sort of incentive should be encouraged and supported by governments via funding and resources.

Rating: 7

Information and Communication Technology

ICT is important, as it is a tool for the delivery of education to students. For students in rural and remote areas, particularly GI students, it is one of the primary modes of delivery. The important issue for families is reliable access to affordable fast internet in order that education can be delivered so that students have an equitable access to education, as do their counterparts in the city. Many GI students and families are still experiencing problems with reliable internet access for schooling. Whilst SkyMuster has helped fill the gap for many families (thanks to the advocacy of the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA)), there are families who still struggle with unreliable or no internet at all, such as itinerant families who have to move around for work. NBN and SkyMuster need to develop a portable, reliable, affordable and fast internet to accommodate these families. In addition there are families that are not eligible for SkyMuster as they have some 3G access. Subsidies need to be put in place so that internet is more affordable for every situation.

There is also the issue of a reliable fixed phone service. People living in remote areas who are out of range of mobile, rely on fixed phones, not only for health, safety and business, but also for education. These telecommunication services must be reliable and affordable for families.

Rating: 6

Entrepreneurship and schools

As noted in the Review entrepreneurial education shifts the focus from 'primarily preparation for employment to creation of employment. Our school is taking a first step in this regard through the Design & Technology Entrepreneurs program which aims to support entrepreneurs in regional Queensland.

Rating: 5

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

As a School of Distance Education (SDE), our enrolments cover a wide range of categories, including GI students, overseas and interstate, traveling, medical, home-school by choice and school-based. Many of our enrolments are due to taking up students from mainstream schools that have failed to meet the needs of students. Improving access is probably one of the most significant issues for our school, as many of our students are GI or medical, and of those a large number transition to boarding school when they reach year seven.

Our school has had a significant increase in enrolments, doubling in the last two years. With that has come a rapid increase in teaching and non-teaching staff. But unfortunately the funding and resources available to accommodate students and teachers, and deliver quality and equitable access to education for our students wherever they live, has not met up with the significant growth in our school. We are at a crisis point now where teachers do not have the space or facilities to prepare and deliver lessons to students. This seriously undermines the ability of our school to deliver quality teaching and learning and prepare our students for their transition to further study, training and employment. Whilst there are minimum standards set by the State for mainstream schools, no such guidelines exist for Schools of Distance Education, which in itself highlights a lack of standards and expectations for our students, teachers and staff. We recommend that minimum standards be

established for SDEs as a matter of high priority and that the Australian government increase its education allocation of funds to State, putting in conditions that a significant proportion be allocated to meet the increasing needs of SDEs.

Rating for enrolments: 7

Rating for clusters: 7

Rating for distance education: 7

Rating for boarding: 5

Diversity

Diversity is for the achievement of students and their transition to further study, training and employment, particularly for SDEs whose enrolment includes a broad range of categories. Our school rises to meet the challenges of meeting the needs of students from a diversity of backgrounds and situations. While there may be diversity in the obstacles faced by students, there is commonality in their expectation that their education is of a high quality standard and that they will be afforded the same opportunities as their fellow students in mainstream and city-based schools. Our school has put a number of measures in place including the delivery of a number of field events throughout the years as well as school-based workshops for students to attend. GI families are offered assistance under a number of programs, such as Connellan Airways Trust and the Rural and Remote Education Access Program (RREAP) to assist in the financial costs of travel and accommodation to attend these events.

Rating: 5

Transitioning beyond school

There needs to be a greater focus on transitioning beyond school in teaching and learning. Often too much emphasis is placed on testing and assessments, rather than on what opportunities there are for students to take up when they finish school.

Rating: 6

Additional Comments

We make the following recommendations to this Inquiry:

- A greater emphasis be placed on 'place-based' or 'project-based' learning and a curriculum with a focus on the rural and remote context.
- Special considerations be put in place so that GI and other students are not disadvantaged, both academically and financially, by their particular circumstances, especially with respect to external examinations.
- The Australian government introduce schemes that would ease the financial burden of families teaching their own children, for example, stipends or allowances or tax incentives.
- A scheme be trialled or introduced where a trainee teacher completes a term of 'teaching practice placement' in the studio at the school, getting to know the paper work and on-line teaching side of teaching via distance education, then completes three terms on 'placement' in a student's schoolroom.

- To improve student and community engagement, school-based initiatives, such as Student Leaders and Student Entrepreneurs be encouraged and supported by governments via funding and resources.
- To enhance student outcomes and engagement leadership must nurture and encourage the relationship between teachers, students and families by continuing to value and place high importance on the outreach programs held in geographically isolated clusters, e.g. study days, home visits and mini schools.
- Access to affordable, reliable and fast internet be available to all students, wherever they may live and that government adequately resource this through funding and the latest technology.
- Minimum standards be established for SDEs as a matter of high priority and that the Australian government increase its allocation of funds to States, putting in conditions that a significant proportion be allocated to meet the increasing needs of SDEs.