29 August 2017

Emeritus Professor John Halsey
Independent Review into
Regional, Rural and Remote Education
via email: IRRRRESecretariat@education.gov.au

Dear Professor Halsey

RE: Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

Christian Schools Australia (CSA) is a national body that support and represent schools for whom religious formation is an integral part of the education process. CSA schools educate around 65,000 students across more than 140 locations nationally. The average socio-economic status (SES) score of these schools is below the non-government school average, reflecting the affordable-and-accessible philosophy which underpins these schools.

Member schools of CSA operate as independent, locally governed, religious and educational communities. Some are closely aligned with one or more Christian churches in their communities, while others have their heritage in a group of parents coming together to start a school.

The schools are geographically, culturally and educationally diverse, although they serve predominantly middle to lower socio-economic communities. They range in size from around 12 students on one campus, to more than 2,200 spread across three campuses. While mainly in the outer suburban fringe suburbs of major metropolitan areas a number are located across regional and rural Australia as shown below:

Geographic Classification (MySchool)	Foundation – Year 6	Foundation – Year 10	Foundation – Year 12	Other
Remote & Very Remote	1	0	2	1 – Years 11 & 12 indigenous
Outer Regional	4	6	6	-
Inner Regional	3	6	22	1 - Special Assistance

While we accept that school funding is outside the scope of the Review the particular resource challenges of schools in regional, rural and remote Australia must be acknowledged as being a significant constraint upon the provision of effective education in these areas, particularly in smaller, non-systemic schools where cross-subsidisation or sharing of resources is not possible. We do appreciate the commitment of both major parties at the Commonwealth level to the funding approach embedded within the *Australian Education Act 2013* (Cth), however it must be understood that this approach will not be fully rolled out until 2023.

The impacts of these resources limitations are evidenced across many of the major thematic areas identified in the Discussion Paper and provide a very real limitation. Particular examples of some of the impacts of these constraints are outlined in the responses below but this issue must also be understood to underpin all of the operations of a school in these areas.

Curriculum and Assessment

The recent revisions of the Australian Curriculum mentioned in the Discussion Paper are certainly welcomed by schools in regional, rural and remote Australia. Feedback from various jurisdictions was, however, mixed in relation to the impacts to date at a school level. In some States changes to the Australian Curriculum do not seem to have translated to equivalent changes in more prescriptive State level documents, or at least not reflected in expectations at the time of school registration reviews.

While this may merely reflect timing and transition issues schools would certainly welcome a less crowded curriculum and one with greater flexibility. The Discussion Paper identifies, page 21, the difficulties relating to the delivery of structured and sequential content in a multi-year class. This is of particular concern to many of our member schools. Those identified above range in size from 12 to 1,032 but have an average size of 253 students. Multi-year classes are thus very common and the year level based Australian Curriculum does impose greater complexities than, say, the 'stage' based approach previously used in some jurisdictions.

There is undoubtedly a unique and distinct set of needs and context in relation to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as mentioned in the Discussion Paper. The emphasis on improving student attendance is an obvious example of where attempts are being made to improve educational outcomes by modifying cultural norms and expectations to conform to a particular pattern of learning. This is, in turn, driven by structures within curriculum and assessment practices. Greater flexibility in the curriculum may assist in addressing this.

In addition to the unique nature of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rural students more broadly also have a particular context, distinct set of experiences and often different values and aspirations than those living in the major cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne. Feedback from schools suggests that there are many aspects of the curriculum that rural students have no 'connection' with and find difficulty with relating to. Identification of alternative cultural and/or location relevant content provides just another layer of work and complexity to schools in regional, rural and remote areas.

Teaching subjects in a modular form instead of as a subject is an option being investigated by some schools. This will give greater flexibility around actual subject/topic choice as well as assessment. This would be particularly well suited to students who may not be strong academically or who know that they will enter a trade. Disengaged or challenged students could choose a self-directed topic to research which may entail a practical component. A folio would need to be kept to present to possible employers and for assessment purposes. Flexibility is needed in aligning such an approach to the required outcomes at varying stages.

Teachers and teaching

Attracting and retaining suitable teachers in an often small school, commonly operating multi-year classes with teachers engaged across a variety of subject areas, is a particular and ongoing challenge. Many schools are needing to provide additional financial incentives, sometimes in conjunction with travel or accommodation support, simply to ensure that the school can be properly staffed. This has very obvious financial implications against the background of the resources constraints mentioned above.

Teachers who care deeply and who support their students through the barriers of "rural family mindsets", who try and broaden the students' outlooks to see what lies beyond the "levy bank" of their town are vital for quality outcomes. This goes way beyond narrow academic outcomes and takes teachers who are willing to invest emotionally into the lives of their students. One of the difficulties facing smaller regional, rural and remote schools is that it is easy to lower the bar and lower expectations because of the cumulative effect of small additional hurdles and disadvantages. Greater engagement by policy makers with rural, regional and remote communities is as important as such engagement with other educationally disadvantaged groups.

In addition, while a period of service in a rural, regional or remote systemic school may be seen as part of a career path to higher level as a metropolitan school, whether as a school leader or more broadly, these same opportunities do not exist in the same way in independent schools. Often the investment of a rural, regional or remote Christian school in the development of a teacher will result in that teacher leaving to take a role in another school simply as a result of the limited opportunities available at that Christian school.

The provision of ongoing professional development for teachers is also particularly challenging. Feedback from a number of schools indicated that limited travel options in rural, regional and remote areas often mean that a single day of professional development can mean three days out of school for a staff member. Of course, this not only results in the associated travel and accommodation costs and replacement staff costs but, in some cases, opportunities not being able to be pursued because of the difficulty in getting replacement staff.

In addition, the vast majority of professional development is based on single stream classrooms, or schools that have multiple classes in a year group. Most Christian schools in regional, rural and remote Australia would also fall into the small school category, as noted above. One school provided feedback regarding attending professional development promoted as specifically geared for small schools which was dominated by city schools with 400 plus students. While this may me small by metropolitan standards it considerably reduced the usefulness to the regional school of that activity.

While there can be professional development opportunities provided in regional areas in some cases schools have reported being excluded from activities arranged by systemic school bodies, despite a willingness to make an appropriate financial contribution. Although this is in some ways understandable, seeking ways of collaborating across sectors in rural, remote and regional areas would seem to be a vital initiative. Christian schools will always need to undertake some professional learning around their key distinctives but would welcome the opportunity to be involved in local professional learning with educators from other sectors.

Leaders and leadership

Many of the challenges facing rural, regional and remote schools in attracting teachers are merely amplified in relation to school principals and other leaders. The discussion paper acknowledged the extensive range and diversity of responsibilities of school leaders in a country school setting.

Of course, these are also at least equally broad and diverse in an independent school if not more so. The discussion paper provided the example of school buses as an example of this diversity. The practical experience of many Christian schools in rural, regional and remote areas, often as the smaller school in the area, is that these 'infrastructure' decisions can often be made by larger schools with little, if any, opportunity for involvement. Changes in leadership in other schools can have a significant impact on the, smaller, Christian school, the outcome depending upon the particular views of the incoming leader about other school sectors. Leaders in Christian schools sometimes face responding to these dynamics on top of teaching part-time and the other diverse responsibilities of their role.

Initiatives to foster greater cooperation and collaboration between Principals and school leaders in rural, regional and remote schools would be warmly welcomed. In order to provide leadership to such initiatives State and Territory Education Ministers should be encouraged to ensure greater engagement across sectors themselves. Such leadership would provide strong signals to those within the education community of the collaborative nature of the task.

School and community

Once again, the discussion paper correctly identifies the importance of activities 'outside the school gate' in education generally, but particularly in rural, regional and remote areas. This includes aspects of education outside those measured by narrow measures such as NAPLAN and ATAR scores.

CSA schools are concerned with the religious (or spiritual) formation of students as an integral aspect of education. This is very much in line with the goals of the Melbourne Declaration.[1] All Australian Governments are signatories to the Declaration which asserts, in its Preamble:

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[1] Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (December 2008) Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_You ng_Australians.pdf>.

> *"Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nations ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion."*

We agree strongly that the education of the whole child is not complete unless it includes spiritual, moral, emotional and aesthetic development alongside the more commonly stated domains of intellectual, physical and social. We believe that social cohesion is served well by such a view of education and that this is particularly important in the more integrated communities found in rural, regional and remote areas.

The Melbourne Declaration is also important for its recognition of shared responsibility.

> *"Society is well served when the responsibility of parents, individual schools and the broader community is recognised. Schools share this responsibility with students, parents, carers, families, the community, business and other education and training providers. In recognition of this collective responsibility, this declaration, in contrast to earlier declarations on schooling, has a broader frame and sets out educational goals for young Australians".*

In the schools represented by our organisations, and indeed in Australian faith-based schools of many kinds, the ideals of the Melbourne Declaration are realised, embodied and celebrated. Our schools are commonly involved in serving local faith communities in particular, but also the wider local community.

Explicit support to families is also a vital part of the role of schools in contemporary society. Some of these activities are already in place, others remain aspirational as a result of limited resources. The following quote taken from feedback received from a Principal in a small school in an outer regional area captures well these desires –

> *"I would love to be able to use the school facilities to teach modular courses to young pregnant mums or those with babies about life skills that would improve theirs and their children's lives. Things like budgeting and planning meals. They do practical cookery lessons where they can then freeze their meals and take them home. How to structure one's day and keep a toddler engaged – they could make material books, educational games, learn how to read to a child and what sort of questions to ask while reading etc. For the boys who are disengaged, offer welding courses etc that will be available to the community not just the children enrolled in our school. Community members could become involved by sharing their skills and knowledge rather than it just being added pressure on the teachers to run with this. It could run parallel to the formal education and then offer opportunity for the students to work on projects together etc."*

This level of passion and commitment is found across many school leaders in rural, regional and remote areas. Often all that is needed is some initial seed funding to provide the release time to allow these projects to be transformed from aspirations to reality.

Perversely in some cases the recent emphasis on greater transparency and accountability for school funding has worked against some of the more creative and innovative solutions in these areas. In

many cases it is difficult in smaller rural, regional and remote areas to avoid dealing with 'related parties' to obtain goods or services for the school. Often the costs associated with the supply of those goods and services are much higher in these areas than in metropolitan areas and it is difficult to find comparable alternatives against which to benchmark 'market value'. When this is added to the need to clearly link expenditure to the provision of 'education' or 'educational outcomes' the additional compliance documentation required for, say, a community development program involving local families both within and outside the school community where services are provided by a local church associated with the Christian school, can be daunting. Once again, a 'city-centric' approach can impose unexpected barriers to innovation and improved student learning.

Information and Communication Technology

The commitment of successive Commonwealth Governments to improved internet access to rural, regional and remote areas is widely appreciated. Gaps in adequate provision, however, remain and access for school families is, as the Discussion Paper identifies, still a particular challenge. For smaller non-systemic schools another challenge can be the lack of flexibility in offerings from retail service providers which schools forced to pay, higher, business rates to get access to the necessary speed, data limits and reliability essential for the use of web based services in the classroom. Similar difficulties can often be found in relation to software licences, commonly structured around the needs of larger schools.

While further improvements to delivery technology will be welcomed there is a gap, as identified in the Discussion Paper, between the *possibilities* and the *practice*. As noted above there are logistical challenges in relation to the provision of professional development to staff in any event for schools from rural, regional or remote areas. There is also the challenges of finding professional development tailored to the very common multi-year classes within schools in these areas.

In the context of professional development relating to the use of technology in the classroom this almost inevitably means that available professional development is geared towards use of technology for a class of 25 – 30 students in the same year level, a vastly different context to a multi-year class of, say, 20 students across four year levels. To add further complication, you have the broad context of country living which is very different to the presumption of urban life that seems to dominant almost all available software. In reality too, you often need to consider a further overlay of the particular needs of Aboriginal or Torres Straits Islander culture and community which is more prevalent in rural, regional and remote areas.

Entrepreneurship and schools

Current curriculum and educational practice seem designed to eliminate entrepreneurship and innovation. While steps to reduce the 'overcrowded' curriculum have been taken the impact on the ground has been far from uniform across jurisdictions. The subject based 'silos' of secondary education reinforce a disconnected view of knowledge and work against an integrated, multi-disciplinary, entrepreneurial approach. When combined with 'mandatory hours' of instruction still found in some jurisdictions at the senior levels and school funding requirements which insist on daily

attendance, education remains, in many ways, locked into a production line approach. More flexibility is needed.

A critical element in the sustainability of any innovative or entrepreneurial approach is retaining the teacher or teachers committed to its development. Invariably these projects require investments of time and energy from teachers well beyond usual expectations. It is incredibly difficult to sustain these new initiatives when the teacher who is driving the idea or carrying the responsibility leaves and schools are forced to attempt to train someone up all over again. Feedback from schools indicates that usually the idea dies unless it is part of the culture and the school is able to attract another vibrant, motivated teacher. Often the principal is juggling so many roles that they just cannot train a new teacher to the level to sustain the project.

Improving access

A common thread in the responses from schools to the themes identified in the Discussion Paper is the need for greater flexibility. This is as important in relation to improving access, and attendance, as any other area. One school provided the example of the impact of agricultural patterns, particularly harvest periods, on schools. In many cases harvest periods involve the whole community and commonly involve sun up to sun down activity, if not longer depending on the nature of the crops and technology. All the members of a farming family are at least impacted if not involved in some way or another. Even those within the local community not directly involved on the land are, in many cases, significantly impacted by these periods. In the words of one Principal, 'Unless you live in a rural community and experience harvest, one cannot grasp how it impacts on the whole community'.

While schools seek to adjust to the ebbs and flow of rural life this is not always easy in an educational calendar with very fixed and rigid structures. There is little real flexibility in term times, even for non-government schools, due to the impacts on bus availability of the terms set by the larger systems. National assessment programs work on a fixed, Australia wide, timetable for obvious and understandable reasons, yet these may not always be optimal for rural, regional and remote communities. These ebbs and flows are also often further impacted by traditional cultural requirements in relation to Aboriginal or Torres Straits Islander students.

The Discussion Paper refers to instances of schools working together to pool resources and work collaboratively. This is certainly warmly embraced by Christian schools in rural, regional and remote areas where it is appropriate. In some cases, of course, the unique perspective and approach of Christian schools, part of the rationale for their existence, may mean that this is not suitable. In addition, there have been some occasions where smaller, independent Christian schools have been deliberately excluded from such local cooperation. In practical terms, there needs to be a commitment by State and Territory governments and education departments to actively promote and foster collaborative approaches in rural, regional and remote areas.

The challenges of accessing appropriately targeted professional development have been noted above. The potential for establishing cross-sectoral clusters of schools, with exemplar programs within those schools becoming the basis for professional development may be worth exploring. This could provide the opportunity for context specific professional development through 'observation' of actual

practices and approaches. Of course, some additional resourcing of those schools providing such opportunities may be necessary to ensure that the practice is supported by sound theory.

Diversity

Meeting individualised learning needs, against the background of potentially multiple layers of impediments already identified, remains an enormous challenge for rural, regional and remote schools. Once again, the increasing resources promised through the Commonwealth Government's funding approach are welcomed and appreciated. Christian schools look forward to the greater equity across schools that this approach will bring.

Christian schools in rural, regional and remote areas often have as one of their aims becoming a place of belonging and community – a place which brings hope for the future of the wider community. This includes bringing hope to those with individual learning needs, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage or other forms of additional disadvantage. Educational success needs to be considered more broadly than the current measurable outcomes for these students in particular. One Principal defines educational success in the context of her school as -

> *"Students who are confident in the skills they have learnt and which they can apply in a variety of situations. Students who are prepared to "give it a go" even though they may feel at a disadvantage. Students who are confident in their own identity."*

While basic literacy and numeracy is undoubtedly important, and relative results in international tests can be instructive, in rural, regional and remote areas in particular it is the learning outcomes for the individual which are most valued.

Transitioning beyond school

One of the challenges for schools in rural, regional and remote areas is undoubtedly that students and parents do not always see the benefit of formal education. It takes strong teacher-student-parent relationships to challenge students to strive for excellent educational outcomes. In many cases this may be 'counter-cultural'. Aspirations must often be expanded to encompass not merely staying or leaving but other possibilities such as further learning while remaining within a rural community or leaving temporarily to return.

It is certainly a misnomer to suggest that the end of schooling reflects the beginning of employment for students in rural, regional and remote schools. Many rural young people are already hard workers. This may be for some as part of a family business, either on the land or in town, or as providing support within the home for such businesses through unpaid domestic responsibilities. In many other cases students are often holding down 20 -35hr jobs on top of attending school.

In this context, with much of the work being undertaken by students through the course of schooling being manual, domestic or relatively menial in nature, there is almost a perverse incentive to continue in those areas. Further study or training often involves a loss of income in the short term. Once students start earning money and become self-sufficient, the desire or need to "better" themselves loses momentum. When such a pathway would also involve moving away from family, friends and community this makes the decision all the more difficulty.

There has certainly been an increase in the variety of post-secondary pathways over recent years. This is very welcome. Greater variety in the delivery options for undergraduate tertiary education would, however, certainly be of significant potential benefits to students in rural, regional and remote areas. The ability to combine existing part-time employment or involvement in domestic support with flexible tertiary study is certainly an option worth promoting in rural, regional and remote communities.

On behalf of our member schools in rural, regional and remote areas we want to express our appreciation for the opportunity to make a submission to this Independent Review. We look forward to the results of the Review and the recommendations it makes.

Yours faithfully

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