

Recipient Details

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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

The NSW curriculum is considered to be robust and extensive with complimentary assessment processes. The current curriculum offers the possibility for students in both RRR and metropolitan areas to follow a career path they choose, whether it involves a trade, staying to work on the farm or a degree at university. However, in practice RRR students don't always get the same opportunity to study their chosen courses because of the impact of geographical isolation, smaller school populations and limited teacher experience and resourcing. If you offer a wide-ranging curriculum the system must be prepared to fund and resource it to ensure all students have equal opportunity to follow their passions, desires and dreams.

An overemphasis on national assessment and data gathering could well be having a negative impact on RRR schools and students. Results indicating poor performance do little to motivate children or encourage parents about the education system. It is important to provide a positive balance between curriculum and assessment and although assessment is important, it needs to be focused on informing teaching and learning not on ranking students or schools. We need to keep in mind that assessment should be looking at assessing the whole of a student's understanding including social, emotional and physical development.

The P&C Federation would recommend the following strategies be adopted

- Provide additional curriculum and syllabus support and training for RRR teachers to ensure they understand and are supported in adopting change.
- Support and encourage a partner-school program between RRR and metropolitan schools that would allow teachers and students to share experiences and knowledge and enhance curriculum opportunities.
- Train teachers across both metropolitan and RRR environments.
- Further strengthen and expand Aurora College to allow significantly greater opportunities to all RRR children.
- Support and fund regional school partnerships, allowing schools with a geographical region to share resources, expertise and experiences.
- Delay the introduction of NAPLAN Online and online HSC exams until all schools have suitable and reliable technology in place and tested.

Rating: 6

Teachers and teaching

The disincentives to move to RRR areas – such as the costs of moving, the limited housing, and the remoteness itself – can counteract attempts to recruit/retain teachers in these areas. Consequently, RRR students may have access to a less broad curriculum than their metropolitan counterparts.

The shortage of quality teaching staff raises obvious concern about the quality of teaching, as there are higher levels of out-of-field teaching in RRR areas (26% of years 7-10 teachers in RRR schools as opposed to 14% in metropolitan schools). A survey conducted by P&C Federation of its members in RRR areas found that 74% of respondents believed RRR schools are disadvantaged by the lack of specialist subject trained teachers. The quality of teachers in RRR schools may also be affected by the fact that many RRR teachers have not experienced teaching in other schools, nor do they have the same opportunities for mentoring and professional learning as their metropolitan colleagues (43% of respondents supported this view). Reinforcing this view were the 80% of respondents that identified the quality of teaching staff as the factor that has the single biggest impact on education in RRR areas, with 37% of respondents noting the shortage of teachers and/or the inadequate training of existing teachers as areas that needed to improve.

The P&C Federation would suggest the following strategies be adopted

- Offer incentives (financial and otherwise) for teachers to gain additional qualifications or professional development in subject areas outside their current expertise in which they find themselves regularly teaching.
- Expand the opportunities to teaching students to gain work experience in RRR areas and possible have teacher training institutions develop regional partnerships for practical experience in RRR schools.
- Encourage a greater diversity of teachers/teaching methods in RRR areas through an exchange program by which teachers spend extended periods of time (e.g. one week, term or six months) in other schools. This would allow the teachers to gain exposure to different teaching methods and expectations, and to foster fresh ideas.

Rating: 7

Leaders and leadership

Having effective leaders in a school is paramount no matter where the school is located. Leaders without the necessary skills and experience will and do have a detrimental effect on schools and student outcomes. Leaders in any field should not only demonstrate the skills, experience but have the qualifications for the roles and responsibilities required to be undertaken.

One of the most detailed public policies regarding school leadership in New South Wales is the 2013 Rural and Remote Education: a Blueprint for Action, developed by the state's Department of Education, which outlined a range of proposed actions such as \$30 million towards newly-appointed teachers and school leaders in rural and remote schools to be offered a 10-week trial. However, just 30% of rural and remote school principals reported these incentives as having a positive impact.

A key factor for effective school leadership in RRR schools is autonomy over their management and directions, and there is a risk that attempts to improve the management of RRR schools may result in a loss of autonomy. For instance, a school classification structure introduced in New South Wales under its Local Schools, Local Decisions reforms created the role of Associate Principal, who operates in a small school where some administrative duties are outsourced to a larger nearby school. There

was unease about this voiced to P&C Federation from small schools concerned that this would place decisions in the hands of another school and thereby undermine the autonomy of small schools.

Approximately 45% of NSW small schools are in rural and remote areas, and the loss of autonomy in these small RRR schools may be especially detrimental, as key decisions may be made by principals in considerably more distant schools. The value and autonomy of these small schools may be eroded and this can result in parents moving children to different schools and the dysfunction and collapse of small school communities; P&C Federation thus emphasizes that respect and maintenance of school autonomy in key administrative decisions should be central to any approach to improve educational outcomes in RRR schools.

Rating: 7

School and Community

Support should be provided to families in educating them about student outcomes and the benefits of engaging parents/carers in their child's educational journey. Effective relationships are paramount to providing strategies to families to help them support and care for their children and ultimately support their child's development and learning. Having a positive relationship with parents cannot operate alone and needs to have intent and purpose aligned with it to build parent capacities if children are to have different outcomes. Engagement is necessary but not sufficient in itself to create change, though it is the engagement relationship as a medium through which effective learning, programs and change can occur. For many families approaching schools can be daunting and transitioning to schools even more so.

The P&C Federation would suggest the following strategies to support school and community:

- Have additional support systems in place in our RRR schools with roles such as Community Liaison Officers and Youth Workers, this could help to address this need and further support and build capacity of families within their schools. Funding should be offered to support Community Liaison Officers and Youth workers in RRR schools to not only support families and communities but support the school and teachers by taking on roles and responsibilities that can help to build positive relationships and engagement with families so that they can focus on student learning and achieving higher quality outcomes.
- Support student wellbeing by engaging local community service providers. By providing a funded program to support schools in establishing a Wellness Hub, allowing schools and community service providers to be able to allow students to connect with in a safe, confidential and supported environment is important. Not only does this support the student but many of the families who may live quite significant distances from these service providers and local communities.
- Help to support RRR families by subsidizing opportunities (academic, arts or sporting) that would expand their experience and skills and alleviating the stress (financial and otherwise) experienced when trying to support these opportunities

Rating: 7

Information and Communication Technology

A survey conducted by P&C Federation of its members in RRR areas found that when asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the importance of online communications technology, 70% rated it over 5. To ensure that all RRR schools are resourced and funded to a high-quality level of ICT teaching and learning, the development and implementation of an ICT Funding Framework for rural and remote

schools by the Federal government would ensure appropriate funding is secured for RRR schools across the country. Another problem is the lack of appropriately skilled ICT support technicians in RRR public schools. With current expectations of online assessments, virtual excursions, connecting collaboratively and accessing resources, teachers and students in RRR schools need to have the technical support to help them implement these expectations and opportunities. Where ICT technicians currently exist, they are of immense value to teachers and students, and to the overall running of RRR schools. However, ICT technicians are not widespread and are typically part-time.

The Digital Literacy in Schools funding program should be extended and have a specific focus on RRR schools. With the funding program only for two years, many schools have yet to be able to access this and missed out. This should be an ongoing funding program for at least another 5 years.

Some schools still do not have wireless access within their school hall environments as they are not deemed as a learning area by the Department of Education. It is necessary that schools have learning spaces to undertake these assessments, and school halls often offer the best location.

Australia's National Broadband Network (NBN) is designed principally for individual households and small businesses, and its service to larger users such as schools is more problematic. NBN's Sky Muster Satellite service was launched to provide Internet services to those in remoter areas of Australia. However, the Fair Use Policy of NBN's Sky Muster satellite should be revised to allow for over 75GB of data per month during peak times. More space could also be offered to smaller providers who may provide services not met by the NBN.

Rating: 7

Entrepreneurship and schools

The Government should address its emphasis on academic achievement as a prerequisite for higher education. The development of vocational skills is crucial for RRR communities and more RRR students have a greater interest in vocational subjects, yet up to 45% of students under 24 are not engaged in training, higher education or employment, compared to 24% of metropolitan students. Reinforcing this is a survey conducted by P&C Federation of its members in RRR areas which found that when asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the importance of vocational training to students in their school community, 90% rated it 5 or over. The Government should promote the importance of trade jobs across the country to mitigate the current imbalanced emphasis on university education. The Government must also look at the current demand of jobs in RRR areas, and help promote and support students' decision making in appropriate pathways when living in RRR communities. Students often undertake degrees where there are no jobs available, resulting in them taking lower paid jobs and therefore leaving very little job opportunities for young people who are not as qualified.

Moreover, the importance of vocational training means TAFE had occupied a central position in RRR education in NSW. However, the NSW State Government has largely replaced TAFE as it had existed with competing training organisations that have a wide range of capabilities, fee structures and quality of service. The higher costs of servicing RRR areas means RRR areas have become more neglected in available training services. Trade training should occupy a central position in RRR communities, and P&C Federation believes more could be done to foster more consistent, high quality trade based training centers in RRR communities.

Rating: 6

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

Enrolment policies should be universal amongst all schools to provide the same regulations. Private schools may be able to select students based upon academic performance or parents' SES status, whilst public schools are required to operate with an open enrolment process. For many RRR schools this creates further divide. According to an OECD report "this may lead to a situation where both high-ability and socio-economically advantaged students opt out of the public-school system. In such contexts, diminished peer effects and greater resource needs of disadvantaged students are likely to make it ever more difficult for public schools to retain both students and funding. Research also indicates that even where private schools cannot select students or raise fees, families from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to make use of school choice and less frequently consider academic quality criteria when deciding which schools to attend".

Also, throughout Australia there seems to be limited vision in relation to RRR schools and what they can offer. In comparison to our metropolitan schools who have a diverse range of schools specialising in specific areas such as the arts, sports and agriculture. It seems our RRR schools are not extended the same opportunity to specialise in specific areas to support students and families in RRR communities. In New South Wales, of the nineteen government schools specialising in agriculture, sports or arts, only two are located in an RRR area. For many students who would like to specialise in a particular area, the only option for many is to leave home and move to a metropolitan area. For RRR students and families boarding schools are an only option and for many are highly priced, placing additional stress upon families. If specific schools in RRR communities are identified to specialise in areas of sports and the arts, opportunities would not only be provided for students to remain within or close to their communities but extend the opportunity to create more specialised teaching positions for teachers in these areas.

Rating for enrolments: 6

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 7

Rating for boarding: 4

Diversity

All university teaching degrees include teacher training with a specific focus on RRR schools, and that teacher 'pracs' include a RRR school. The most promising framework for this is the Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) program, an initiative that has developed a curricular model for RRR teacher education with modules centred around five themes, including Community Readiness. It would be beneficial for such elements to become part of the required qualifications for teachers. Moreover, any community readiness measure should entail demonstrable knowledge and understanding of the local Aboriginal language and culture of that community. It should also emphasise the need for teachers to seek out and engage with representatives of the local Aboriginal community by engaging with the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), should one exist in the community. Also, a curriculum that includes indigenous perspectives (for example, incorporating indigenous language comprehension) is known to boost engagement at schools.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14 recommended several actions to close the gap in indigenous and non-indigenous performance. A 2014 evaluation concluded that "While a strong acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is critical to creating a welcoming school environment that encourages students to attend and engage,

the influence of the Action Plan in explicitly promoting cultural recognition was limited". It also made little distinction between metropolitan regional and remote schools, but instead developed a largely uniform approach to schools in all areas. We urge the Government to more firmly incorporate indigenous culture into school communities, and ensure that non-indigenous teachers are as fully trained as possible to meet the unique challenges faced by indigenous students.

Supporting existing public schools with support units or special schools also needs to be a priority. The diverse needs of students and family's needs to be supported. Purpose built facilities and other resources need to be provided to schools to support the individual needs of students, as this is costly for RRR schools. Government needs to support school communities with a specific funding program for existing special needs schools or schools with existing support units.

Rating: 5

Transitioning beyond school

It would be beneficial to expose RRR students to more career information throughout their school years in order to increase career-oriented attitudes in these areas. Visits to rural schools by careers advisers may be invaluable in exposing students to a greater number of courses and career options. A 'Rural Careers Advisory Week' in which rural careers advisers could attend several higher education institutions' information sessions would thus be worthwhile. Careers Expos are another positive initiative that can support students in their understanding of post school career pathways. A Careers Expo across RRR schools and funding to support RRR schools and students to travel and attend would be welcomed.

The Government should address its emphasis on academic achievement as a prerequisite for higher education. The development of vocational skills is crucial for RRR communities and RRR students have a greater interest in vocational subjects, yet up to 45% of students under 24 are not engaged in training/higher education/employment, compared to 24% of metropolitan students. A survey conducted by P&C Federation of its members in RRR areas found that when asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the importance of vocational training to students in their school community, 90% rated it 5 or over. P&C Federation believes more could be done to foster consistent, high quality trade based training centres in RRR communities.

Governments need to invest in industry in RRR areas to encourage young people in these areas as to the opportunities that are available. Currently, many young people have to travel large distances to undertake work placement in certain industry fields, which is a cost to families in regards to transport and accommodation. This amounts to an inequity between metropolitan and RRR students, and a subsidy to cover these travel and accommodation costs for RRR students would be of enormous benefit.

Funding programs should be developed to provide purpose built life skills homes in RRR special schools and public secondary High Schools with support units attached to better support the transitional needs of students with disabilities into independent living and employment upon leaving high school.

Rating: 7

Additional Comments

The development of a program that supports families and schools to provide subsidies for transport to sporting and cultural events is also important. Currently the opportunities for RRR students to access extra-curricular state/national events is limited by distance, travel and time, which needs to

become more easily accessible. The disadvantage for many families to support their child in attending such events can be due to financial costs that include time off work, travel costs and accommodation. Funding to support excursions for RRR schools and students should also be implemented to bridge the gap of inequity.

P&C Federation has heard numerous cases of parents struggling due to lack of bus runs, and subsidies for private transport may not be sufficient compensation for parents in remote areas who live several hours from the nearest school and also run farms that they are unable to leave. P&C Federation urges that when considering applications for school bus runs in RRR areas that student numbers, access to education and the impact on small schools and communities be considered in addition to the financial implications for the NSW Government.

P&C Federation had previously submitted recommendations regarding the provision of education for special needs students, which addressed the inequity of disability and special needs supports in RRR areas. It was noted that some rules surrounding the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) potentially undermine the provision of supports to disabled/special needs students in RRR schools. The NDIS rules for participants states that a support plan should be approved if it represents value for money, which may disadvantage students in remoter areas where service costs are inherently higher, while the NDIS rules for providers states that supports must be supplied by a registered provider, which may disadvantage students in smaller communities where services in small communities are often provided by people who do not register as support providers since it may not be their main source of income. P&C Federation believes NDIS rules should be amended to allow for support delivery to be determined in part by where an applicant lives, and to allow flexibility for people in RRR communities who rely on supports from local providers who may not be registered providers.

Access to resources that support students with disabilities to transition to work and living independently can be few and far between in RRR communities and even less in RRR schools. Some students are unable to live independently and for others the transition can be extremely traumatic and stressful. By supporting RRR schools that are special schools or secondary schools that have support units attached to them with specific funding to increase life skills would not only support the individual needs of these students but also support families transition their children to independent living and or employment. The creation of purpose built life skills homes within schools will provide the necessary resources teachers and school staff require to ensure students are as best equipped as possible to transition to independent living and employment opportunities.