

Recipient Details

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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

The breadth of the Australian Curriculum provides a broad focus to allow schools meet the needs of their local communities. However, the significant issue is the lack of high quality resources available, which focus on the smaller regional and more remote communities. My experience as an educator and in conversation with communities over nearly 20 years of rural and regional education is that resources often define the content of what is taught. It is admirable that the national curriculum provides the flexibility to teach units specifically focussed on local needs but the resources are not available and so educators will tend move towards resources that allow them to access what is needed in a high quality format, which is also readily available. Perhaps a solution might be for the state and federal education leaders to work together to provide a platform and then funding so that regional educators can work together across all systems to develop appropriate local content.

The current assessment processes are effective. The HSC in NSW is not perfect but is a broad comprehensive curriculum, which meets the needs of most young people. The single greatest issue for regional schools particularly in the senior years is the smaller cohorts and then smaller course offering or low numbers in courses so students are unable to make comparisons when it comes to assessment results. Perhaps an opt in common assessment program for regional schools would allow students to compare themselves to larger cohorts as they move through the education system and therefore, for our top students in particular have the competition that they often desire and move to larger metropolitan boarding schools for.

It would also be very interesting to explore with the small indigenous communities ways to provide culturally competent education in a way that develops local identity. We may also need to answer the question of does education really need 6 hours in a classroom every day or can we create a comprehensive education that balances cultural and academic needs.

Rating: 6

Teachers and teaching

In my experience what currently attracts top teachers to regional schools is promotion. That is of course unless they are from a regional environment and returning or they have found a partner and wish to move with them. However, there are a number of possible suggestions that I believe would assist in attracting top teachers to regional areas:

1. Full scholarships for teachers who teach and live in regional areas to complete Post Graduate degrees, with a commitment to teach for a period beyond their study time,
2. The cancellation of University debt (HECS) when a teacher achieves accreditation and commits to teaching in a regional community for a set period (a model to decide that they are “top” teachers would be needed).

3. Subsidised housing when teaching in regional areas that is supported across all sectors which then allows staff to move between positions in large communities and maintain their housing,
4. Tax incentives to move to regional areas, perhaps salary splitting with partners in certain postcodes,
5. Financial support for schools to provide high level Professional Development or to send staff to PD. The school that I lead has to add at least \$700 to the cost of each course for transport and accommodation. This figuratively, halves our Professional Development budget.

It is my experience that keeping the top teachers is simple. It is finding ways of embedding them in the community.

Government subsidised PD and travel is important but it is my belief that along with excellent PD, networking is of equal importance with perhaps an extra day to allow regional networks to meet. Providing significant incentives to move major conferences to large regional cities.

I think a significant review of the teacher training structure is necessary. All discussion and reviews recently have spoken of the need to set higher educational standards for our teachers and that is of importance but we need to have a conversation about what the university process itself is producing and whether it is the best process to train teachers. 350 words is not enough to explore this well.

Rating: 7

Leaders and leadership

I speak of leadership from an independent school context. Whilst I have worked across all sectors, I have only held leadership positions within the independent sector.

I think this is the wrong question. The power of the principal is in the development of the educators in their care. The educators are ones who are spending the time in the classroom with the students and so the answer then becomes a different one. The single biggest difference that could be made is provide all principals with large Professional Development budgets that they can use to provide the necessary development and ongoing mentoring for all staff at all levels. The research is clear that teachers have the most significant impact, so if principals can be empowered to develop all teachers to be the best they can be then change can and will happen.

I must also state that the recent introduction of the accreditation process has allowed leaders to challenge teachers who do not achieve the necessary standards to meet them or move on to a new career. A concerted effort across all school and all sectors to achieve this would be of incredible benefit to all young people.

I think perhaps a right of return model for short term mentoring may be the best way to see highly experienced, quality educators spend their time in the bush. A little far fetched perhaps but perhaps system that says if you give us 5 weeks of your long service leave we will give you 5 weeks in the Whitsundays or on the snowfield or perhaps shortening the time frame to achieve LSL with the government making up the cost shortfall.

I believe mentoring is the key to developing leaders. I am a member of AHISA and the time and support I receive from this organisation is vital to my development as leader, I am able to have regular conversations with leaders in like schools.

Rating: 5

School and Community

All Schools and Communities and engage well with each other when they have common goals and high levels of respect. Over the last generation or two we have seen the development of distrust in institutions, often for appropriate reasons. Yet this has seen a deterioration in relationships between schools and their communities. There has been an increase in violence against teachers and school leaders and constant demeaning of our education system by our political leaders.

When any results are released for any form public assessment the initial reporting focusses on the negative often led by statements from our political leaders.

So what do we need to do, change the narrative. We constantly espouse that the key to fixing all the issues with the world is education and yet we constantly attack educators.

If you want to achieve better relations then work with the schools to make them the respected centres of their communities, places of trust, education and advice. The narrative must change.

Rating: 6

Information and Communication Technology

Cohort size is often the issue in Regional schools if ICT can be supported to provide the large bandwidth necessary to provide the video conferencing, "Adobe Connect" style programs, this would allow students to engage in broad conversations with other young people with courses. It would allow schools to harness the great power of ICT.

The single biggest issue affecting rural and regional schools is Bandwidth, the ability to download and upload large files at significant speed is imperative to achieve the solution to the distance divide.

It also important to develop a new paradigm when considering distance education. The current model has not changed very much from the models of old. Instead of sending documents through the post we now send them via email and instead of residential we now have chat rooms and that is about it. Surely it is time for a complete rethink.

Rating: 5

Entrepreneurship and schools

This is a very interesting area that I have not previously thought a lot about. Large regional towns have a unique opportunity to develop the entrepreneurial skills of their young people by engaging the local entrepreneurs in a mentoring role.

Here in Dubbo, as our base hospital expands to become a teaching hospital what possibilities might appear and how do we harness those possibilities for the young people of this region.

I also believe that rather than continually seeking to expand university campuses at significant cost perhaps university/school/tafe partnerships should be developed. Schools are closed for significant periods of time after hours and on weekends. In teacher education the opportunities would be extensive, however, the opportunities would not be limited to teacher education.

In teacher education perhaps it is time to move to an apprenticeship model. More time in classrooms with one day a week at university, engaging school leadership to provide the university training after school hours in regional areas or perhaps regular residential programs. This would allow young people to realise early in their training whether they are right for the profession.

This would also allow young people to engage in university education within the cultural context that they know. Some young people will want to move away for study and this is to be supported some will want to stay home.

Rating: 6

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

Cohort size is of significant importance to the development of high quality educational outcomes. Students, for the most part, enjoy the challenge of working alongside other high quality students. The development of programs which allow this to happen is important. Groups of schools working together to develop programs where students can work together will clearly be of benefit.

Distance education as it currently stands is woefully inadequate. The model in most instances relies on emailed PDF documents and phone calls. If this is to be a viable model a complete rethink needs to occur. With the power of ICT significant change is possible.

Boarding is a complex issue. There are many families who are simply too far away from a school to attend and so need boarding. Boarding offers a range of high quality educational and cultural options. The question is how do we make regional schools good enough to challenge the big city boarding schools.

Rating for enrolments: 3

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 5

Rating for boarding: 2

Diversity

Education itself exist to best prepare young people to be positive influencers on the world in their adult life. Over recent years we have shifted the goal to being achieving the highest possible mark on a given external assessment. We have provided diversity in this by allowing people to opt out of the external exams for a variety of reasons. On the other side of this is the societal transition to the main goal being meeting the needs of each individual. These two goals are incongruous. How are we as educators to create individuals who achieve outstanding results on standardised exams?

We as a society need to consider which is it that we want. Do we want individuals who influence our society and if so then let us measure and report publically on that or do we want them to only be standardised test takers and if so than let us change the societal narrative of individualism.

To meet the needs of individuals well we already have much of what we need in place. The National Curriculum is well structured to allow the variations necessary, where the problem stands and falls is three fold:

1. The conversation with the local community to see what they believe the best possible education outcomes are.
2. The quality educators to develop the resources necessary to teach community specific content.
3. The quality educators, not necessarily the same as No 2, to implement the community specific educational programs.

The directional flow of young people to cities is an issue to be sure but to stop this flow we need to give them something to stay for. To do this we need to redevelop an understanding of local culture and history. As a society we need to make a much bigger decision. Families come to Dubbo to shop because Woolworths, Coles and Aldi can charge prices cheaper than the local IGA is able to buy the product. To fix this we need to target significant regional cities, like Dubbo, Shepparton and other similar cities and develop the infrastructure that will support these smaller towns.

Rating: 5

Transitioning beyond school

Young people have always had dreams. For me it was a policeman, a rugby league player or an olympic swimmer. Teaching came a little later. Regional young people have dreams and visions. The societal narrative of “you can do anything you want” and we don’t know what jobs will exist when you are 30” is not helpful for our young people. Nor is the consistent message that you are what you earn. Having said all of this, I believe there is much we can do to see the post school educational gap close.

1. Consider the development in High Schools of a range of Year 13 (1st Year of Uni) modularised courses. Imagine if young people could stay at home and undertake university courses at the school that had grown up in. These courses could be broad with small specialities and if they were accepted as recognised prior learning by all universities then students would be able to explore university and achieve success without massive cost.
2. The question must also be asked about the transition of post school learning in the last 30 years. In 1985 when I completed Year 10 many of my cohort left for an apprenticeship or an internship. My teaching degree was 3 years with a 4th part time but we were amongst the first groups to need to complete the 4th. I value academia and it has its place in society but have we swung the pendulum too far where we expect everyone to have a 4 year university degree before they are ready to be an adult. The on the job learning that apprenticeships and internships provide is significant.

Perhaps we need to consider making post school education more relevant to students from regional areas and give them an opportunity to see success prior to expecting them to move beyond their homes and communities.

We, as a society, also need to consider a complete redefining of the distance education model. Relationship is key to good education, there is no relationship in our current model of distance education.

Rating: 6

Additional Comments

The stated purpose of the review says that the review will “provide recommendations on innovated and fresh approaches to support improved access and achievement” of regional students. This is an admirable aim. Yet I would argue strongly that we as a society don’t really know what achievement we want for our young people. The simplistic approach will look at NAPLAN, ATAR and university results as the key measures but they are just not enough. Great education develops the whole child for the whole of their life not just small parts for single days.

Education of regional students must strive to develop a love and understanding of local culture to counter the draw to the big cities whose culture is consistently advertised through our media.

Finally I would request a significant multifaceted review of the training of teachers. I am a fan of teacher graduates having to show through an examination that they have achieved certain standards. What I am not a fan of is the increasing drift away from undergraduate teachers spending a lot of time in classrooms teaching. They should do this early in their course and often. They should know by the end of their first semester whether they dislike teaching enough to drop out. I am advocating for an apprenticeship model where students are assigned to a school for a year and must spend a significant period of time in the school leading small groups, teaching whole classes, participating in professional discussions. The Federal government funds schools they could make it mandatory on a ratio of classes how many students each school should take.

I also believe, although I might have my facts wrong, that universities receive their funding based on numbers of students each year. I would suggest a significant change to this in education. With the move to teacher accreditation across Australia universities should be paid when a student achieves proficiency (or its equivalent) accreditation. Clearly there would need to be a period of interim funding for universities but a model which rewards teachers who get into schools, achieve and stay there should be explored.

I would love to have the opportunity to discuss many of the ideas in my submission further with the review panel.

Good luck, this is a massively important review for those of us who live in regional Australia.