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Reference Type: Principal

State or territory: NSW

Serial Identification Number: 477741

Responses

Curriculum and assessment

6.1.1 Despite emphasis in the Australian Curriculum on the development of the 7 general capabilities, many teachers continue to focus on the delivery of content which is often perceived to be of little relevance to rural communities. Assessment continues to be summative and feedback limited. A more flexible approach to curriculum development and delivery, meeting each student where they are at, building on local context and having a clear understanding of what constitutes excellence are all important in improving student outcomes. The ability of some schools to do this can be limited by high turn-over of staff, limited experience of leaders and low aspirations of the local community.

6.1.2 Schools in rural and remote areas are often comparatively small and struggle to provide sufficient breadth of curriculum to meet the needs of some students. Capable students may not have a sufficient understanding of what constitutes excellence.

6.1.3 The use of technology to connect students in remote locations can be beneficial, as it expands the size of the 'talent pool' and can allow like-minded students to challenge each other to improve their results.

6.1.4 NSW has engaged in innovative delivery of curriculum in their models of virtual schooling, including the xsel program (Western NSW Region 2009-2014) and its successor, Aurora College, which commenced operations in 2015.

NSW also uses its Access Programs to form classes between schools, facilitated by a teacher from their home school. This allows subjects to run, which would otherwise have been unviable.

More effort needs to be put into developing greater consistency of judgement between teachers in relation to assessment so that students and parents have greater confidence and awareness of what excellence looks like. Assessment feedback needs to be specific and provide clear suggestions for improvement, so that students have specific understanding about how to improve.

Rating: 6

Teachers and teaching

6.2.1 Few incentives attract top teachers to the bush. Statewide staffing systems rewarding teachers for country service are ineffective in times of high demand when schools choose to merit select rather than use service transfers. Some teachers go to the bush in order to accelerate their careers, however, many of these only stay for short engagements before returning to more desirable locations.

6.2.2 Incentive packages need to be more attractive, and target not only beginning teachers. Housing incentives, including mortgage supplementation or low interest loans, should be

considered. Salary bonuses for retention could work. Tailored, flexible packages could be developed to a set value to meet the particular needs of the teacher and his/her family.

6.2.3 Professional learning must be strategic and individualised to ensure that inexperienced teachers are able to meet the needs of all students. Many teachers in rural schools find themselves teaching Year 12 without having sufficiently developed their craft and content knowledge. Professional associations and local networks play a critical role, but may be difficult for teachers to access. Rural schools are often disadvantaged financially due to the costs of sending staff away to attend courses. They find themselves in a perpetual training cycle due to high turnover of staff.

6.2.4 Teacher Education courses often fail to prepare teachers for life and work in rural communities. Practicum experience in rural schools may help to overcome this. This may be beneficial for students with little previous experience the bush. For many, understandings of life in country areas are coloured by stereotypes perpetuated by the media.

Previous schemes of bonded scholarships were successful in getting newly-graduated teachers into country areas, but these are now rarely used. Incentive schemes are ineffective, as they encourage teachers to move to rural areas with the promise of a guaranteed return to a more desirable location. This guarantees a high turnover of staff. We also make incorrect assumptions about the demographics of newly-graduated teachers. Rather than being 21, single and highly mobile, many graduates have taken a gap year, are in a steady relationship by the time they graduate, in their mid-20s.

Rating: 7

Leaders and leadership

6.3.1 School leaders are increasingly distracted from educational leadership by increasing compliance and management tasks. Systems need to be efficient and sufficient resources need to be provided to allow principals to focus on leading teaching and learning. In larger schools, in addition to extra executive staff, principals would benefit from business managers who could manage the administrative functions of the school, leaving the principal to focus on students, teachers and learning.

Many school leaders in rural schools lack the experience of their metropolitan counterparts. This lack of leadership depth is compounded when the executive team and classroom teachers also lack experience. In some cases, school leaders are appointed without having developed the requisite skills simply because there was no other choice.

6.3.2 Enhanced pay and clear career pathways would help attract experienced leaders. Many schools in country areas tend to be smaller than city schools and principals are classified at lower pay scales. To gain a salary increase, they must move to larger centres.

For other school leaders, who tend to be paid on a single scale, there needs to be other incentives for working in these locations. This could be in the form of salary enhancements based on location, or some form of accreditation or recognition that may help with career advancement, for example a requirement that teachers must spend part of their career in a disadvantaged community (including some metropolitan locations) could ensure a supply of experienced staff, whilst providing those staff with enhanced experiences in a more diverse range of settings.

6.3.3 Experienced mentors should be appointed to all beginning principals, as well as other school leaders. These mentors need to be provided with time to spend with their colleague over an

extended timeframe. The mentorship should begin prior to appointment and endure through at least the first year of principalship.

Prerequisite credentials, with a sufficient focus on leadership, rather than just management, are also useful, particularly in helping to overcome the inexperience of some leaders.

Rating: 7

School and Community

6.4.1 Schools in rural communities often have strong connections with their local communities. Where these connections are productive, they add enormous value to the school, providing a ready source of mentors, parent/community helpers and the like. These types of programs build social capital and can enhance the school's ability to raise the aspirations of the community, and, by extension, their students. It can be easier for students to find employment because of the family connections and relative ease of securing work experience.

Conversely, the success of these programs depends on the local conditions. If there is high unemployment and low expectations of students in relation to either study or employment, then generational poverty can be a hard cycle to break. Some students may not see any point in working hard at school when they see limited career opportunities. Capable students may make a conscious choice not to pursue further education because of the burden on their family due to the costs of moving away from home and studying at university, even if their families are supportive.

6.4.2 Finding ways of easing these costs and high-lighting the opportunities available to students are the best motivators. Refuting the stereotype of low-expectations and low-value placed on education is essential to raising student achievement.

6.4.3 A whole of government approach to reinstating services, industry and business to the bush is critical to creating the critical mass needed to ensure a vibrant, productive community where students have something to which they can aspire.

6.4.4 The philanthropic sector is playing an increasingly important role in providing the resources that schools need to support students to achieve outstanding outcomes and in providing opportunities for students to raise their expectations. Harding-Miller Scholarships are supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to continue their student through high school, with incentives to achieve improved results, whilst the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation provides grants for schools to build connections with their community through the Schools Plus Fair Education Program.

Rating: 5

Information and Communication Technology

6.5.1 ICT networks in rural and remote areas must be of a sufficient standard and capacity to support learning. High speed, reliable, affordable internet is absolutely critical and must be available to all students in their home as well as at school. Schools with effective technology programs are developing and communicating to parents minimum device requirements for those choosing to BYOD. They also ensure devices are available for students who may not be able to afford to purchase their own device. Video-conferencing capability is also critical in supporting not only students but also teachers in relation to virtual excursions, professional learning, shared curriculum and remote delivery. Education systems and initial teacher education course providers need to adequately train teachers to understand how technology can be used effectively to support learning.

6.5.2 Education systems and schools need to develop a more coordinated, strategic approach to how ICT can better support students. The establishment of virtual faculties to support inexperienced teachers and head teachers, showed some promise in Western NSW, but this initiative has relied on local effort rather than systemic support. Virtual curriculum provision to ensure that students have equitable access to a broad, high quality curriculum is essential. When run effectively, these initiatives can improve outcomes and allow students to complete a quality education whilst staying in their local community, as opposed to having to move to boarding facilities in a city or regional centre. The retention of students in the local school helps to maintain the viability of the school which has flow on effects to the local economy, particularly if the local school is also one of the larger employers in town.

6.5.3 Short term funding arrangements from government or education departments, poor infrastructure, lack of equitable access for disadvantaged families and lack of adequate training for teachers to adequately use technology effectively are all significant barriers to maximising the impact of technology. The relatively short life-span of many technologies is also an issue for schools and parents who may struggle with the cost of constantly having to upgrade devices or local infrastructure.

Rating: 5

Entrepreneurship and schools

6.6.1 Significant funding would be needed to allow schools to specialise in entrepreneurial education, as few schools have the resources and/or infrastructure to engage with this in a meaningful way. Facilitated connections between business and the school would also be necessary, in order to ensure that meaningful and productive relations can be developed that enhance learning and do not place students, staff or resources at risk.

6.6.2 Many schools with farms or similar facilities set up stalls at the local growers' market. Denison College of Secondary Education (Bathurst NSW) has established a trout farm as part of a Trade Training Centre and has the appropriate licences to sell product at local markets and to local restaurants. As more schools engage with technology, 3D printers, CNC routers and the like may enable students to design and manufacture on a small scale. Hospitality facilities could enable schools to run commercial cafes. These activities could create opportunities for rich, cross-curricular experiences, but many schools do not know how to engage in market activity. Additionally, especially in secondary schools, many schools are focused on delivering curriculum in a very compartmentalised and traditional manner, which makes these activities difficult. Families may also be resistant to curriculum delivery methods with which they are unfamiliar.

6.6.3 There are significant gaps between different educational providers and schools. In a market where external providers with no experience nor any previous relationship to schools, it can be challenging determining who to trust. The dismantling of TAFE has been disastrous in rural areas, where there is a limited market and other providers are reluctant to establish services due to the significant establishment costs. Poor quality, unreliable providers have undermined efforts to engage in these relationships for many schools. A lack of trust now exists, which many will find difficult to overcome.

Rating: 4

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

6.7.1 Clusters of schools, or hub-and-spoke models could provide greater capacity in rural areas, particularly where a number of very small schools are in close proximity to each other. Virtual

connections can allow for curriculum sharing and resource pooling could result in economies of scale. For example, a single groundsman servicing a number of small schools with one set of equipment could represent significant savings over each school having to have its own ride-on mower and other associated maintenance equipment. Schools that share curriculum are often able to overcome issues of teacher supply or limitations on teaching resources. Sharing students can result in classes that would not be otherwise viable being able to run.

6.7.2 Distance education is growing in demand, particularly when full curriculum provision is not available at the local school (particularly in secondary) or for students with a range of particular needs that preclude them from attending their local school. Advances in technology and pedagogy should enhance the provision of distance education in the future.

Boarding can be problematic. Although sending children away to larger centres may give them access to broader curriculum or more specialised facilities, it may also have the effect of perpetuating a downward spiral at the local school which can then impact on the broader community. Additionally, boarding is not an option for some children and families, who may not be able to bear the financial or emotional costs of boarding. From a retention perspective, young people who live and study in rural locations are much more likely to stay or return.

There are a variety of programs which show promise in terms of providing access to high quality education. These include Access Programs, and virtual provisions, but these initiatives require further development and support to maximise their potential. A shortcoming is sometimes that whilst the technology enables students to connect remotely with experienced teachers and like-minded students, pedagogy must be equally innovative and not place unnecessary restrictions on the home school.

Rating for enrolments: 7

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 5

Rating for boarding: 2

Diversity

6.8.1 Education has a significant role in bridging the gap between local indigenous culture and 'mainstream' curriculum. Educators must value local culture, heritage and language and ensure that students have exposure to life 'on the other side of the levy wall'. Education must raise and articulate expectations and aspirations that are socially and culturally relevant. This can be done, for example, through encouraging the study of language through indigenous language programs.

6.8.2 Educational success in remote communities is characterised by the building of effective relationships between the school and families. It is marked by high attendance and engagement of students, programs which engage with families and draw upon local expertise and explicit indicators that local culture is valued. Retention and completion rates are high, and students and families indicate satisfaction with the school and their teachers.

6.8.3 Teachers need to be better prepared to meet the individual needs of all students through specific training in differentiating curriculum and instruction, supporting students with specific learning needs, and mental health issues. Cultural awareness training should be provided specific to the local area and, preferably, delivered or supported by members of the local community. Teachers

need to be aware of effective ways that they can work with family to develop personalised learning plans for students.

6.8.4 Sufficient investment must be made in infrastructure to make schools attractive, safe places to learn. Classrooms need to be flexible learning spaces, with adequate heating and cooling for local conditions. Enhancing existing and building new, productive relationships with community, business and other education providers can support the development and maintenance of quality learning environments.

6.8.5 Exchange programs may help to stem the flow of students, but these can be difficult to administer and may be short-lived as staff turnover. Strategies to keep students in their local school and local communities are most desirable, especially if these can be allied with proactive employment strategies. Keeping or increasing jobs and services in rural communities is essential in giving people a reason to stay. Strategies to specifically target increasing the numbers of professionals into country towns should be considered.

Rating: 5

Transitioning beyond school

6.9.1 There should be federally-funded scholarships that specifically target students from the bush to enable them to access tertiary study. This would help reduce cross-border anomalies which may mean that young people must travel interstate to access their closest university. More needs to be done to raise awareness of the value of further study, particularly in those communities where few people have completed formal education post-secondary. There needs to be a change to thresholds for welfare payments for rural students, in order to acknowledge that in almost all cases, they must travel and live away from home in order to access tertiary education.

Government policy which positively encourages business, industry and government departments to decentralise would also have a positive impact on post-school opportunities, providing incentives to study and work in rural areas. This, in turn, would help to re-invigorate those communities that have been suffering from the steady withdrawal of services over the last decades.

6.9.2 There needs to be more accommodation, and it needs to be more affordable. Accommodation provision needs to include subsidised college-type accommodation. Aboriginal students who commence university course often return home very quickly because they have no connection and limited support at uni. Mentors and effective Aboriginal student hubs may help to increase completion rates.

6.9.3 Enhanced opportunities for students to engage in online courses may help to stem the flow of students to cities. Effective online courses are supported by effective mentoring programs so that students are able to develop a connection to their university and fellow students whilst maintaining their connection with their local community.

Universities such as Charles Sturt University which have multiple campuses dispersed over a wide geographic area may also be effective models for allowing students to continue to study without having to relocate to cities. This has the benefit of maintaining not only familial and community connections, but also reduces the economic impact on regional communities. Students who live and study in regional areas are more likely to remain in those communities.

Rating: 5

Additional Comments

Improving outcomes for students in regional, rural and remote locations is not only an education issue. Rather, it is a whole of community problem, requiring a whole of government response. Rural communities need to be viable, vibrant and sustainable in order to attract and retain the economic and employment benefits that come with a stable and diverse population.

Young people will have greater motivation to study and do well if they have hopes for employment or further study and training. In terms of tertiary study, they must be optimistic that not only will they have the intellectual capacity, but the emotional and economic means to be able to succeed when they move away from home. We cannot afford to have potentially successful students self-exclude themselves from tertiary study for fear of the economic hardship that this will impose upon their families.

The withdrawal of services and industry from rural communities over time, has eroded the social capital in these towns. The absence of a professional class reduces the aspirations of those who have no effective role models. Government policy which positively encourages business, services and government departments to decentralise should be considered if we are to stop the continual migration away from country Australia.

As the urban population increases and as housing in metropolitan areas becomes less affordable, it makes economic and social sense to actively encourage the population to decentralise, however, without the infrastructure and resources to make living outside of the cities attractive, it will be hard to encourage people to make the move. As well as jobs and services, people expect to have access to high quality education for themselves and their children.

In addition to this, there is a need to raise the status of the teaching profession so that capable young people are attracted into the profession and retained. Parents and communities must have trust and respect for teachers and be confident in the knowledge that their child is known and cared for in the classroom.

Schools must be adequately sourced, based on need. In a rural context, this means ensuring access to safe and comfortable learning environments with spaces that are flexible and can cater for a range of teaching styles and strategies. Students must have reliable access to technology, including high speed internet, in their school and in their home. There needs to be an understanding of, and a commitment to overcome, the intersections of disadvantage that impact upon many rural schools.

Consistent with the Melbourne Declaration, all young Australians should have the right to expect equitable access to education regardless of their postcode or their family's circumstance.