

## Australian Schools Plus submission to the Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education August 2017

Schools Plus offers the following contribution to Emeritus Professor John Halsey to consider in his review of the challenges faced by regional, rural and remote students regarding their learning outcomes. Our experience connecting with schools in remote and rural areas throughout Australia puts us in a unique position to assist the Review, by contributing insights and data that reflect the needs of disadvantaged schools in these areas.

Schools Plus has a strong interest in ensuring funding – especially when allocated through a needs-based model – is directed to activities that best address the challenges holding back students from disadvantaged backgrounds in regional, rural and remote communities. Our purpose aligns with those of other organisations such as the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal with whom we have engaged in valuable collaboration for a number of years to share data and to ensure that we are not duplicating our efforts.

### **Schools Plus – background**

Australian Schools Plus (Schools Plus) channels high-impact philanthropic support to schools in disadvantaged communities, to improve students' learning outcomes. A national charity, we were founded in 2013 as a direct result of Recommendation 41 in the 2011 Review of Funding for Schooling. It called for "a fund to provide national leadership in philanthropy in schooling, and to support schools in need of assistance to develop philanthropic partnerships". We were established to bridge the gap between schools in need and supporters, to ultimately reduce the impact of disadvantage on students' education.

Driven by eight leading not-for-profit organisations, our establishment received bipartisan political support. In March 2015, federal legislation passed confirming our Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR1) status. Donors can now claim a tax deduction for donations, while schools can access funding from DGR restricted trusts and foundations through Schools Plus.

More than 4,600 schools (Government, Catholic and Independent) are eligible for support via Schools Plus. To be eligible for funding, schools must have a value below 1000 on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). Of these schools, 2971 schools would be classified as either regional, rural or remote.

### **Our work with schools**

Our core purpose is to increase philanthropic funding to schools to support projects that improve students' learning outcomes. We are rigorous in selecting projects that are most likely to transform outcomes, and draw on the advice of independent education experts in the assessment process.

Several key features are critical to maximise impact. Projects receiving funding from us have:

- used evidence and research in their design
- directly met a community need

- been led by the school, aligned closely with the school’s overall strategic plan and had strong involvement of school leadership to ensure it was embedded in day-to-day operations
- often incorporated teacher professional development, to ensure staff have the confidence and capacity to fully implement and evaluate the project
- demonstrated improved student engagement and outcomes using a range of measurement tools.

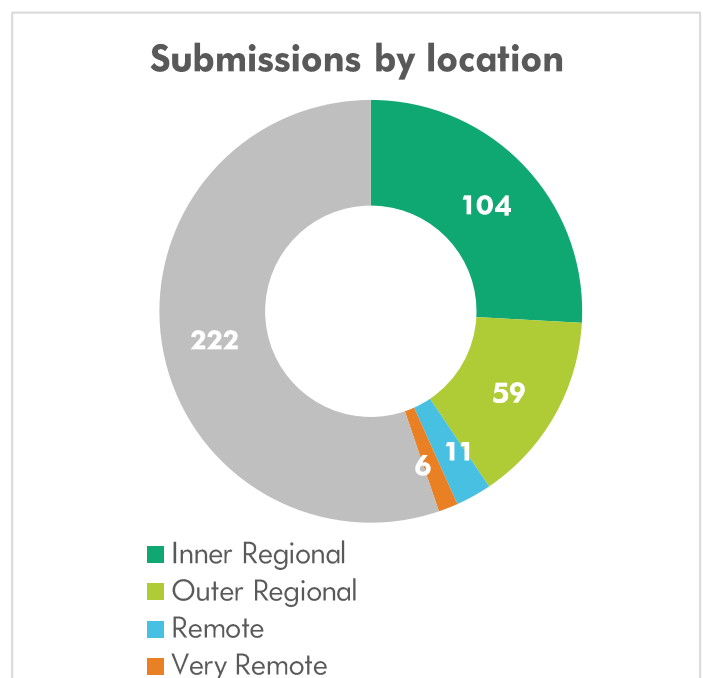
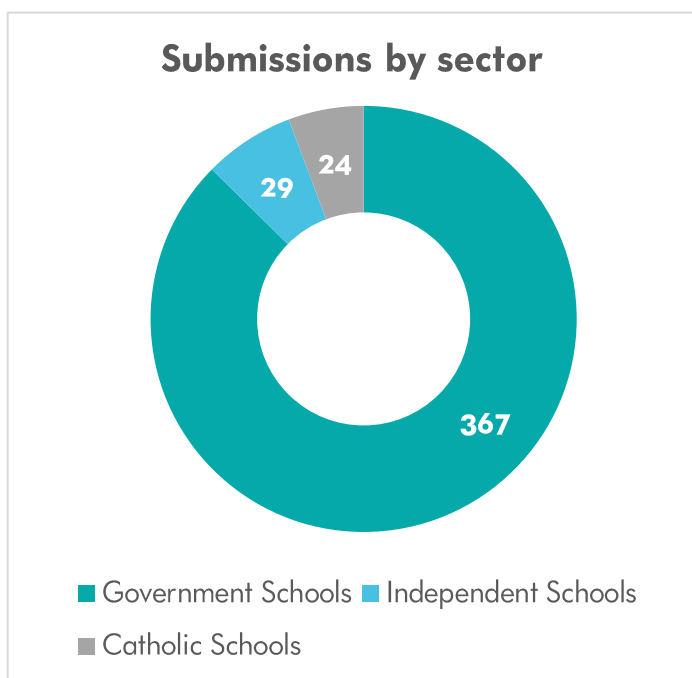
Another of our core purposes is to build schools’ capacity to develop new philanthropic partnerships. We have developed a crowdfunding platform and supplementary resources that enable schools to mobilise their community – parents, broader families and friends, local businesses and clubs - to raise funds for much-needed activities and resources. We are currently developing a program to assist schools to tap into their wide alumni networks for additional financial and other support.

## Our impact to date

The positive response to our establishment has confirmed the role that philanthropy can play in bridging the gap between the systemic funding provided to schools and their ability to deliver programs to enrich and enhance student learning outcomes. There is clearly a need for an organisation such as Schools Plus to facilitate better connections between disadvantaged schools throughout Australia with philanthropic partners, and to provide evidence of how these partnerships can benefit students and school communities.

In the last two years, we have connected with 693 schools. Of these, 344 schools were in regional, remote and rural areas. Initial contact with these schools involved applications for funding, registration on our crowd funding platform, attendance at fundraising workshops and phone support.

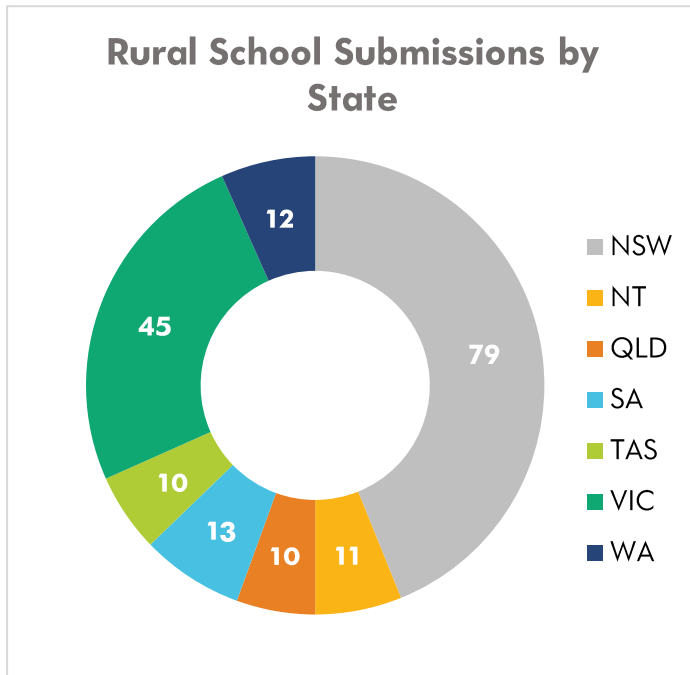
The total value of all project submissions from 2015 to 2017 amounted to \$15,259,341. The submissions by sector and location are represented below.



**Our work with schools in regional, remote and rural communities.**

Since 2015, Schools Plus has received nearly \$7 million of submissions for funding from regional, remote and rural schools.

The breakdown of submissions by state for schools in rural areas is represented below.



Since 2015 Schools Plus has raised approximately \$4.8 million for projects in schools. More than 60,000 students have benefitted from these projects. 28,000 of those students are from rural areas. In addition, Schools Plus has established significant, long-term partnerships with leading foundations, corporations and high net-worth individuals to support disadvantaged schools through Schools Plus with a further \$6 million in support already pledged to 2020.

In terms of support to rural initiatives, since 2015 Schools Plus has provided funding to

- 54 inner regional schools
- 27 outer regional schools
- 7 remote schools
- 4 very remote schools

The impact of the projects that Schools Plus has funded is currently being evaluated by investigating a range of measures, both qualitative and quantitative.

## Our contribution to the Review into Regional, Remote and Rural Education

### Introduction

We see a real need for additional funding to support schools in regional, remote and rural communities so that the gap between schools in these areas and those in other parts of Australia can be bridged.

As suggested in the initial Gonski Review, we have found philanthropy can support schools to innovate and trial programs they could not otherwise afford. These pilot projects lead to insights and experiences that can apply more broadly across the education system.

Our data reveals that there is a diverse range of needs that exist in non-metropolitan schools with schools requesting support for programs in a wide array of areas. This is reflective of the context within which schools operate. There are, however, some consistent themes which have emerged which relate to schools’ priority issues and their proposed solutions to overcome students’ disadvantage, particularly how they would use additional funding to implement those solutions. The pilot projects implemented by schools have led to insights and experiences that can be used to inform policy at both a local, state and national level.

### The Data

The projects we fund fall under five themes: Effective Teaching and Leadership, Student Engagement, Student Wellbeing, Family and Community Engagement and STEM Education. These themes were developed with the assistance of education experts, including from the Federal Education Department, to reflect the activities most likely to improve student outcomes.

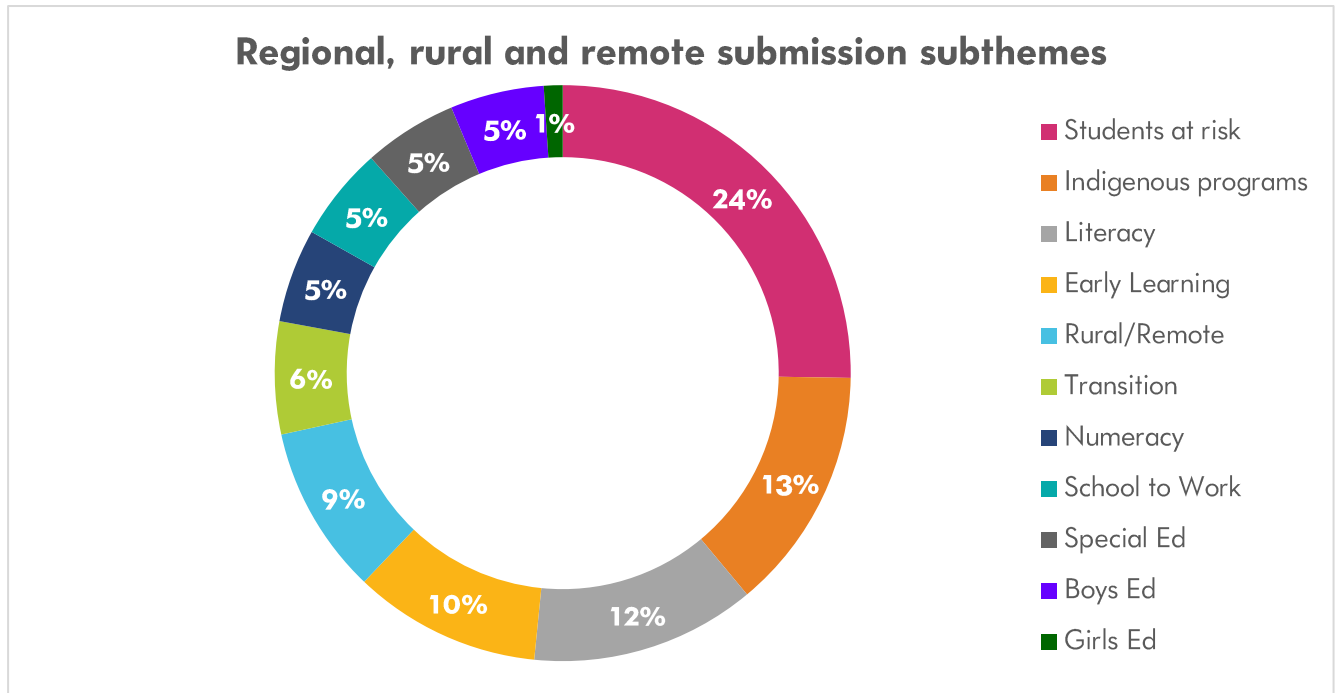
We are able to glean from this data a substantial body of evidence as to what support these schools require. The data below relates to rural schools.

Rural schools’ focus areas of need as indicated by our five key themes:

Student Engagement	33%
Family and Community Engagement	25%
Student Wellbeing	15%
Effective Teaching and Leadership	14%
STEM Education	13%

To compare, rural schools are seeking funding for more initiatives targeting student wellbeing than metropolitan schools. Whereas, metro schools are seeking more funding for STEM education. This is reflective in the sub themes that are most prominent for the rural schools below.

Under each main theme school projects are also allocated up to two sub themes which are captured below.

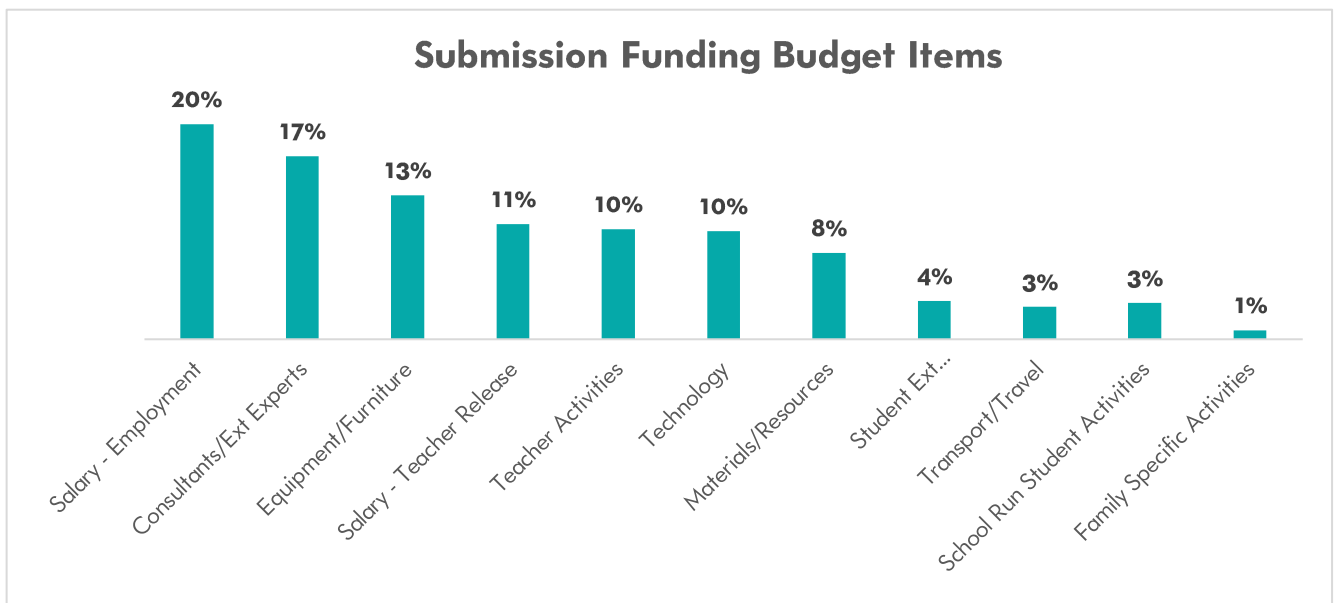


In rural areas, students at risk and indigenous student populations are top of the list of priorities for schools. Improving literacy rates and better preparing young children to start school are also critically important. Schools are also asking for specific funding to address the challenges of being in a rural setting, as shown by 9% of projects having that as a priority area they wish to address.

By comparison, the subthemes priorities for schools in metropolitan areas differ slightly with transition and special education programs more of a priority and indigenous programs less of a focus.

### Resources requested

Our data reveals that rural schools' requests for funding in their budgets to deliver projects fell into the following categories:



The budget requests from these schools leave us in little doubt that the schools consider accessing additional expertise as front and centre to making a difference to student outcomes, whether that is through employing additional staff to manage the unique challenges faced or bringing in external input from consultants, coaches and specialists.

This is reflected in the section below, which tackles some of the issues and opportunities for rural schools.

Our work with disadvantaged schools in remote and regional communities since 2015 enables us to make the following comments that relate to the following key focus areas of the review:

1. Teachers and teaching
2. Leaders and leadership
3. School and community
4. Entrepreneurship and schools

## **1. Teachers and teaching**

Many schools have indicated they felt isolated from opportunities to engage in professional learning. Online training, when available, is often more difficult to engage with and falls short of the impact of face to face professional learning. The tyranny of distance makes it difficult and expensive for staff to go to training or for trainers to come to them. Staff in rural and remote schools do not, therefore, have the opportunities that staff in metropolitan schools have access to.

Therefore, one of the biggest requests for funding is focused on bringing in new staff with different skillsets, as well as the provision of professional learning for teachers, particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy and STEM, to support them in the implementation of new programs and equipment. The majority of these experiences involve bringing in outside expertise to deliver specific teacher professional development programs, to provide specialist intervention or to mentor and coach staff. There is a clear demand to increase teacher capability within rural schools in these ways.

One of the growing areas of demand for professional development is building teachers' capacity to analyse student achievement data and choose effective teaching approaches in response. This is critical to improving student outcomes in a future focused learning environment.

Schools have shown they value opportunities to share learnings and experiences with others in similar communities who are conducting initiatives to address similar issues, but report they often don't have the time or connections to enable this. Schools Plus has been able to bring together schools in communities of learning to provide additional support for change, reduce duplication of effort and increase project impact. We are also trialling a knowledge sharing platform that will enable staff to share knowledge, resources, experience and expertise connecting them to schools in similar circumstances, even if far apart geographically.

## **2. Leaders and leadership**

Schools Plus recognises that dynamic and passionate leaders within schools are essential to the success of the programs that we fund. Principals in all schools need the opportunity to engage in quality learning opportunities and Schools Plus has been able to provide these opportunities in a variety of ways in response to an obvious need that is reflected in the grant applications that have been submitted. In

particular, this is evidenced by the request by schools for the provision of external expertise and in the large number of requests that have been received for school leaders to have access to expert coaching.

Our Fair Education Program is an exciting initiative of Schools Plus and the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. It was created in response to consultation within the education sector about what strategies would make the most impact upon schools and also where there were marked gaps in support being provided to schools. In particular, the needs of schools in rural settings was identified. Now in its second year, the program is an exemplary model of how to develop the capacity of school leaders in disadvantaged schools in NSW to better engage families and communities in student learning.

The program has been a catalyst for significant change within the participating schools in the NSW education system in general and in rural schools in particular. It is based on the belief that any meaningful transformation in education must be led by the teaching profession.

Schools engaging in the program have had the benefit of working with an expert coach who has provided school leaders with support to achieve the objectives of the program in the first instance and more importantly, on enhancing their leadership capacity by challenging them to think profoundly about the change they wish to make. Of the seventy applications that were received for the program, thirty-one were from schools in rural settings.

A possible way our organisation can contribute to developing leadership capacity is to provide opportunities for professional learning that complement the Lead Teacher accreditation process in each state.

In collaboration with the Commonwealth Bank, Schools Plus has also implemented a Teaching Awards Fellowship program. Launched in October last year, the awards were created to recognise and reward great teachers and principals, especially those working in challenging and socially diverse communities. By sharing their inspirational stories and celebrating their achievements, the Fellowship aims to inspire other teachers and promote excellent teaching practice across Australia. They have now embarked on a 12-month Fellowship which includes professional development, observation of high-performing education systems and opportunities to influence education practice in Australia.

Of the twelve Fellowships awarded in 2017, five of the recipients were from rural and remote schools. They are: Charlie Klein (WA), Leah Crockford (NT), Chad Bliss (NSW), Lesley Mills (NSW) and Dr Christine Roberts-Yates (SA).

### **3. School and community**

Evidence from our work with rural schools would suggest engaging with families and the community is a priority. With approximately 18% of projects seeking funds to use family and community engagement in student learning as an effective technique to improve student outcomes, it is clear that schools need to be well equipped with the resources to undertake this work. This community engagement work is often overlooked due to competing internal classroom priorities, as well as a lack of time and resources to dedicate to building external partnerships.

Projects which take an innovative approach to family engagement include cultural awareness initiatives, parent education opportunities, creating schools as community hubs and engaging parents in the year prior to their children starting school. Many schools in rural communities are looking to strengthen their business and broader community relations, particularly to bring 'real world' examples into the classroom

through project based learning and working to build mutually beneficial business partnerships which provide opportunities for exploring options for post-school transition.

The sheer number of schools in rural settings seeking support to build partnerships through Schools Plus (180 schools applying for funds and a further 19 conducting their own fundraising), suggests there is an appetite for partnering which schools are struggling to do by themselves.

Our Fair Education program builds school leadership capacity to better engage with family and community, with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes. Both coaching and funding is provided to schools over three years to enable this to happen – there is huge demand from schools in rural areas to be part of this program.

As part of our work with schools we have encouraged a cluster approach where appropriate which has created communities of learning that have enabled the sharing of experiences, created support networks and have a widespread impact on a community.

Through all of our work, Schools Plus is well positioned to support schools to build connections with philanthropy and to grow their own philanthropic support.

#### **4. Entrepreneurship and Schools**

Projects that we have provided funding for indicate that schools have sought opportunities to provide students with activities to increase engagement through real life learning experiences and innovative practices. Schools also applied for grants to establish student run businesses such as cafes, tourist souvenir shops and market gardens. They are also seeking to opportunities to take students into the community to expose them to authentic business experiences, positive role models and connections to potential future careers.

A significant number of schools also made applications to fund Project Based Learning and create innovative programs in a diverse range of areas, many of which are focused on solutions to local community needs. These programs established goals that reflected opportunities for students to immerse themselves in learning experiences that could translate into future career options.

There is a major focus on the delivery of STEM in all schools in Australia and our data reflects the support that schools in rural areas need to be able to deliver these programs with confidence and skills so that students can obtain the maximum benefit to equip them in their future careers. These include the purchase of equipment, such as robotics kits, 3D printers and other items of technology and the provision of creative learning environments such as Makerspaces and STEM Hubs.

#### **Summary**

Through our connections with nearly 700 schools, Schools Plus can provide data about the schools that are most likely to seek philanthropic support and the types of projects for which they seek funding.

With more than 200 projects underway or completed as a result of funding via Schools Plus, we have accrued many practical case studies of ‘what works’ in schools and how additional resources provided by philanthropic partnerships can benefit students. These span the gamut of education milestones such as early learning, transition to primary and high school, and transition to work programs. Partnerships have also enriched curriculum delivery particularly in literacy and numeracy and in specific programs



such as STEM and project based learning. Our organisation would be happy to share specific examples of projects and case studies if these are of interest to and would assist the review panel.

Finally, we see the opportunity to make a positive contribution to this Review and offer our support to the panel, Federal and State governments, and education departments and peak bodies during this process and into the future.

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I agree to have my submission published.

I am lodging a submission as an Organisation

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