

## Recipient Details

Name of organisation or individual: [O] Wimmera Southern Mallee Regional Partnership

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State or territory: Vic

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## Responses

Curriculum and assessment

Wimmera Virtual School Project

Eleven secondary colleges across the Wimmera District of Victoria developed a network of schools cooperating to provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum through the utilisation of shared resources. A cluster of schools called 'North Central Cluster' also embarked on a similar project utilising video conferencing as the medium for synchronous delivery of VCE subjects, combined with asynchronous provision of online resources and materials.

A range of video conferencing is used to deliver VCE subjects into small secondary schools and languages education into primary schools. All participating schools are equipped to receive and send video using their video conferencing technology. Using a blended learning approach, a normal class lesson is attended via a live video conferencing feed, which enables the teacher and students to interact with video and audio in real time as if they were in the classroom.

In 2015 there are 62 Victorian schools representing 2101 students spread across all regions involved in virtual language delivery using video conferencing technologies on a weekly basis.

Rating: 7

Teachers and teaching

The ability to attract and retain quality teaching staff in rural and remote areas is an ongoing challenge across Victoria. The system does not appear to meaningfully acknowledge the difficulty in attracting and retaining staff in rural areas. The existing scholarship programs are beneficial but only seem to scratch the surface of graduates and do little to attract educational leaders to rural areas.

One year teaching contracts are a challenge. It is difficult to attract teaching staff with a one year contract when generally no one wants to accept the personal upheaval and challenge of moving to the country for a year, without future job security. If there was the ability to offer graduates a five year contract, it may be a different story. Even longer term contracts, or the offer of a permanent position, may further incentivise the transition to regional areas. Due to the small size of many schools, principals also face the challenge that appointing staff for longer terms may create financial issues down the track. A lack of staffing scalability and continuity contributes to many of the issues of managing a regional school.

There is an opportunity to more closely align universities and schools to provide linkages between graduates and employment opportunities. A requirement for graduate teachers to undertake longer teaching rounds in schools, with a compulsory requirement to include remote postings would benefit graduate outcomes and enable new teachers to get a real feel for rural schools – an environment that is very different from large metropolitan schools but one that has many benefits.

The concept of offering incentives to teachers to come to regional areas has been promoted many times, but the suggestion of offering financial, accommodation or leave incentives continues to be raised and is worthy of consideration.

In small schools, the turnover of staff means that continuity and momentum for quality improvement is lost. Staff turnover results in lost productivity, increased administration time and work handover challenges, i.e. outputs are lost in the constant transition of staff.

Rating: 7

### Leaders and leadership

Leaders and leadership – reducing time spent away from school

Teaching classes is something that many metropolitan principals never have to think about, however in rural schools it is a part of the job.

The number of days principals are out of schools to attend meetings within the network, area and region is a significant issue. Principals in country schools are often part of a very small team and need to be working at the coal-face, leading their schools and be visible to students, staff and parents. Meetings that Area Executive Directors, SEILs and principals must attend, take them away from the grass roots. When travel time is added to the equation, principals end of travelling far too much, leaving less time to engage with the school community.

School leaders need to be freed up from administrative tasks to ensure they have adequate time to focus on students and educational outcomes. To reduce the amount of administration draining the time and resources of our school leaders, one suggestion is to involve school principals in Strategic Plans, Annual Reports and Performance Plans, while dealing with other issues such as policy, OH&S, human resources, maintenance etc. at a regional and state level.

### Leaders - workload and wellbeing

There is a well-known, underlying issue of the workload of principals, particularly in smaller schools. One of our regions has lost nearly 1/3 of their principals due to stress, ill-health, etc. Ensuring the wellbeing of principals is a must, but it seems that only lip-service is paid to this major issue. The hidden time costs and expanded job description of a rural school teaching principal is far different to a non-teaching principal of a larger school. There is no allowance made for small-school principals in work load or requests that are directed at them. Health and well-being is now an OH&S issue for principals through mental health, burnout or the time pressures associated with travel.

It is time to re-focus from the accountability and compliance of principals and schools, to providing support and assistance for those at the educational coal-face.

Rating: 7

### School and Community

Community links – student motivation and support

Students can be inspired by work experience placements, providing motivation to work harder to achieve their career aspirations. However travel, accommodation and costs can be prohibitive to country students undertaking quality work experience in industries they are passionate about. Therefore students do not are not being exposed to the range of careers that are possible for them.

We need to make it easier for young people to engage with employers in order to retain them in the region and address youth unemployment. By creating better connections, we can empower the community to play a mentoring role and support transition between education and economic development.

Rating: 7

#### Information and Communication Technology ICT for delivery

State of the art access to excellent video conferencing delivery is critical and has changed the way that education is delivered in some schools across the Wimmera. The Wimmera Virtual School Project provides a strategy to support children to extend their range of subjects through video conferencing and blended learning. There are still improvements that can be made, such as consideration of a centralised provider who could guarantee delivery of subjects at set times with proven teachers year after year so that schools could plan around this service (e.g. staffing decisions etc). Also students undertaking distance education are required to learn independently requiring motivation, problem solving and independence that students in city schools would not have to demonstrate. There is also the challenge that some schools still do not have access to Polycom video-conferencing facilities e.g. Donald PS.

Evidence shows a digital divide exists between regional and metropolitan Victorians. It is a priority to improve mobile and digital connectivity in the Wimmera Southern Mallee for the benefit of our communities. Without access to fast internet, remote education services are not effective, limiting many of the potential programs that could be leveraged via online access.

Fast, reliable, digital connectivity in the family home, something metropolitan families take for granted, is also critical for schools students to realise their full potential. It is impossible for country students to compete if access to online tools and resources is limited by a lack of connectivity. It creates time, knowledge and attitudinal disadvantages in relation to at-home study that can have long-term impacts on results and access to further education.

Townships along the Western Highway have access to the Australian Academic & Research Network (AARNet), an extreme speed, fibre optic network. This existing infrastructure should be utilised to improve educational delivery. With connectivity and technology, people can perform office work from anywhere in the world, including rural communities. This would stimulate local economies and private sector investment, creating more jobs. Once population decline is reversed, the outlook for rural towns would be much brighter.

Rating: 7

#### Entrepreneurship and schools Entrepreneurship and schools – developing collaborative industries

The WSM Regional Partnership is working toward developing a Networked Grains Centre of Excellence and the major AgTech facility - AgTIDE in the region. The WSM has significant competitive advantages in grains production and research. These projects aim to deliver globally significant facilities and resources to attract researchers, students and R&D investment to the region. Hands-on education and training will be available for growers, students and professionals in the latest farming technology through partnerships with Longerenong College (Ag College), Skillsinvest (RTO) and Federation Uni (research organisation). Through inclusion of school students in the education and

training mix of large scale regional projects such as AgTIDE, students will be exposed to the latest farming technology, offered the highest quality learning experience, and motivated to realise their career aspirations through local industries and training.

Outcomes are not always about more money, but different approaches. Rather than allocating large budgets to a single organisation, perhaps a large organisation could play a policy / guidance role to several local, smaller organisation that can be funded to deliver services on the ground as they have local content and context.

Rating: 5

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

Improving access - transport

It is disappointing that something as simple as school buses continues to cause disadvantage to our rural students. State schools are disadvantaged by policy, private schools can put buses on wherever and whenever they like, however it is nearly impossible to get a common sense change made to a state school bus route. The cost of these services are not prohibitive and they are critical to providing access for country students. Having limited public transport in our region, also means parents have to be relied upon to commute kids to excursions.

It has been suggested that transport for VET should also be provided for country students. Many VET students are under 18 and find accessing their training nearly impossible in the country.

Transport for children with special needs also needs to be addressed. Agencies currently have a siloed approach to provision and it creates inefficiencies.

Improving access – delivery systems

Administrative boundaries do not always work in favour of local delivery. For example, due to the geographical size of the Wimmera South West Area – 4 hours north to south, 2.5 hours east to west, there is little connection between communities in the south and north sections of the area. Splitting the Wimmera South West Area into two, one for the south and one for the north (Horsham) area, creating an eighteenth area within Victoria, would reduce travel times for management and facilitate smoother management and immediate action in these regions.

Rating for enrolments: 7

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 7

Rating for boarding: 4

Diversity

Diversity - support services to enable learning

Student cohorts in rural areas are becoming far more disparate, but the support services are not ready to address these needs. Access to services e.g., social welfare, counselling, psychologists are required, yet many of these services are not readily available in smaller centres, requiring travel up to 1.5 hours each way.

City kids can also access revision lectures and weekly lectures, for country students this can take a whole weekend to attend a revision lecture and is cost prohibitive - finding accommodation, funding travel costs interrupting work, sporting, commitments etc.

Diversity – high quality learning experiences

Students need to be stretched and have access to the thoughts and views of many students. This is limited in small classes. Encouraging gifted students to stay at regional schools is important. When the 'cream of the crop' are targeted to go to boarding school, it leaves the students remaining with a very clear message that the 'smart kids' go away to school. Smaller class sizes, whilst having some advantages, also limit the scope of subjects that students can select, influencing engagement levels and subsequent results.

Attending galleries, arts performances, theatres, sports, zoos, etc. in Melbourne are important to inspire and engage students. However, transport costs are prohibitive - \$2,000 minimum for a bus to Melbourne, and accommodation costs in Melbourne and urban camps are prohibitive especially for low SES families. Seeing things via video conferencing is the next best option, but it is hard to engage students without giving them the real experience

Rating: 7

Transitioning beyond school

Transitioning – beyond school

Many families and young people have low aspirations regarding education and low awareness of diverse career pathways. Delivering meaningful career education in the primary school years may assist to motivate our children and inspire them to achieve.

There is limited opportunity for regional students to access information and experience of university pathways. Compulsory exposure to a broad range of university experiences in Yr 10 - fully funded and resourced, so access is equitable for rural students (centralised organisational structure essential i.e Somers camp model) should be considered. Students don't understand university life, work experience and university experience should be part of the curriculum eg. "University Immersion Week". Transition support resources should be organised and accessible in collaboration with universities and fully funded. Advertising the success of our students from rural communities to demonstrate what can be achieved may be useful.

The cost of post-secondary education and the need to accommodate children in city universities is an ongoing challenge for our students. Initial set-up costs, accommodation and travel all adds up. A one-off payment to students/families to get started is worthy of consideration. The GAP year is becoming a reality for post-secondary education due to the impost of tuition fees along with accommodation. Once students get a taste of earning a wage are they lost to further education? City students who don't need to pay for accommodation may be less likely to take this GAP year, thereby altering the educational outcomes.

Vocational and higher education provision in the region is limited and difficult to access for some. Funding models for thin markets are essential - vocational training, childhood development/core education, indigenous education etc.

Rating: 7

## Additional Comments

### Address poor early years outcomes

WSM has the worst results in Victoria, across ALL five early childhood developmental benchmarks. We know that too many children are turning up to school, not ready to learn. Nearly one quarter (22.5%) of Wimmera children are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains (AEDC 2015). In most cases, the reason is that their parents lack the knowledge, skills and/or motivation to support their children's development before they get to kinder and school. Children who start school behind their peers, often do not catch up. They struggle through primary school and ultimately disengage from secondary school in the middle years with low literacy and poor skills. Many are destined to a lifetime of welfare dependence. Regional and rural students (15 years) are on average one-two years of schooling behind metropolitan students in reading and scientific literacy (PISA 2012).

Disengagement should be addressed early, commencing education from birth by co-locating kindergartens, child-care centres etc., with schools so that continuity of education and support is provided to all students and staff. Additional assistance is required in primary schools to assist students that are at risk of disengaging, including health and welfare support services through school and specialist services such as speech, OT etc. A flexible funding delivery model is essential to deliver these services and support, taking into account dispersed populations and greater travelling time. Coordination between services is essential to limit service delivery waste and duplication.

The WSM Regional Partnership are addressing these challenges through trialling innovative place-based co-designed and collaborative solutions to the current fragmented and inaccessible system. These trials, commencing in 2018, will last three years and are expected to provide vital insight to innovative service delivery for early years that coordinates health, early years and schools. The focus is on better use of existing facilities and resources, rather than big spending programs.