



AUSTRALIAN PARENTS COUNCIL Inc.

Representing parents of students attending non-government schools in support of choice, equity, quality and voice for all Australian children

National Office:
PO Box 5011
Launceston TAS 7250

Tel: 03 6334 8886
Email: admin@austparents.edu.au

ABN: 29 984 203 605

SUBMISSION

Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

August 2017

The Australian Parents Council (APC) is the nationally recognised parent organisation representing the interests of parents with children in non-government schools and Australia's parent population more generally. These interests extend down to early childhood development and learning, and up to post-school transitions.

Our organisation does not profess to have deep expertise in matters relating to regional, rural and remote education. However, we believe it important to draw the committee's attention to aspects of our work that bear on the Review and have been informed by the voices and experiences of the parents, schools and communities we have worked with over many years.

We are pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission and offer the following commentary:

1. The acknowledgement of the importance of families and community in influencing and shaping the achievements of students is welcomed. There is much evidence around the critical difference parent engagement in learning has on student outcomes yet too often, it is not identified nor highlighted. Integrated into two of the convictions, the Review addresses that early in the paper.
2. APC wants the best outcome for every student in Australia and are committed to the accessibility and affordability of non-government schools for parents who choose them for the education of their children regardless of where they live. Funding for schools outside the metropolitan area is assisted by the location loading, however, there are many more costs families have to bear particularly in rural and remote settings with regard to travel and in some instances, boarding. Both state and federal governments must ensure that children of families who reside outside metropolitan areas receive equitable and adequate funding to provide them with the same opportunities as their city counterparts.
3. Whilst non-government schools are the minority provider of education in regional, rural and remote locations, none-the-less they still offer choice for parents and importantly, in some areas, are the only schooling option.



4. Curriculum and assessment – the subject choices for students, especially in upper secondary school are limited when there are not enough students in those year groups or teachers specialised to teach them, so whilst the curriculum might have met the learning needs of these students, they are denied the opportunity to take them. It also locks students into pathways too early when the breadth of subjects is limited. In primary school, breadth of curriculum can also be limiting when for example, there is no music or art teacher available, which has an impact on the early development of interests beyond academic subjects. Hence, schools need support for online learning programs as these can often be provided by Skype using tutors from the metropolitan area. However, these online programs are at a cost because the supervision and duty of care still remains with the school, therefore so too the cost of a teacher.

Ultimately, ICT and increased connectivity could be better utilised to aggregate students, no matter where they are located, into learning interest groups who could then have access to broader subject choices. Of course, having specialist teachers to teach these students is required.

5. Teachers and teaching – by openly valuing and acknowledging the profession and vocation of teachers, especially those who dedicate themselves to teaching in communities that are in the country, would encourage graduates to take seriously the opportunities outside metropolitan areas. Providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to experience teaching in regional, rural and remote schools would also be beneficial.

Integrated, relevant, accessible and multi-level professional development that provides opportunities for both teachers and parents to learn and work together should be considered. So often PD is one-off and not integrated or contextualised for specific student cohorts or communities. For example, having an organisation establish vegetable gardens and then not return to follow-up and support their initial contact leaves school communities having to fund and maintain the project with no guidance or support.

The majority of country teachers are early career teachers, so professional development is particularly essential for the first two years of their career. This support is also important because for many of these teachers it will also be their first time living away from home or first time living in a country environment.

The provision of financial incentives linked to longevity of tenure for high quality graduates (and leaders) to teach in communities and the offer of mortgage assistance not just rent assistance would encourage teachers to remain in the community. The teacher investing in a home in the local community makes a huge difference to them and their family being comfortable and happy and remaining in the community longer and mitigates the too commonly held belief by parents that most teachers are ‘passing clouds’ in their children’s educational lives.

The Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia is a welcome move to prepare graduates with the necessary skills to teach, however across Australia, there are no common units



in Parent Engagement in Learning which equip pre-service or graduate teachers with compulsory evidence-based training on working with parents to support their children's learning, so that this more challenging aspect of teaching is allayed. Parent engagement is also inextricably linked to the school learning from the parent's knowledge and appreciating what the teacher can learn from the parents.

Although not specific to teaching in country schools, it is an aspect of the Quality Schools Quality Outcomes policy which has been overlooked for its importance in raising the achievements of students and the APC would strongly urge the Review to consider this as a focus for improvement.

6. Leaders and leadership – Leadership teams are often small (may be only the principal) and are often inexperienced. Additionally, a principal in these areas often has more responsibilities than a metropolitan one so there is a need to have development of a leadership team not just the principal or increased administrative support.

To address this, consideration could be given to the implementation of a well remunerated “mentoring year” where experienced principals are strongly encouraged to move to a country school for one full year to mentor and support the existing principal, not replace them, with a guarantee that they will be able to return to their own school. This approach provides support for the existing community, an opportunity for the invited principal to broaden their experience and partner with a less experienced colleague.

Also, increased recognition of the importance of parent and community leaders who with training and support can then become an integral part of the decision-making within and beyond the school.

7. School and community - valuing the contribution of the community to the school culture and the educational outcomes of the students is critical and hence better connections between schools, local government and industry needs to be formed. Community groups such as surf lifesaving and sports groups can add value to education, mentoring of staff and students, and real examples of what can be achieved. Also, what parents understand of school and what their children experience is very different and so bringing parents in to engage with the school and the curriculum is important, however, we acknowledge this is easier said than done. None-the-less, it is important to bridge this gap as parents and families are the principle motivators of regional, rural and remote students, indeed all students, to succeed and realise their aspirations.

There is much value in child health nurses, speech pathologists, OT's etc being located within the school environment dealing with birth upwards which gives parents an early connection to the school. The Child and Parent Centres in Western Australia are a good example of this approach.

The physical school environment plays an important part in its value, connectedness and importance within the broader community but also in saying to students and families that it is an



important place of and for learning. Too often, country schools are less well maintained than their metropolitan counterparts and therefore are not as inviting and their perceived worth in the community is diminished, so increased capital expenditure is required.

The philanthropic sector could provide scholarships, internships and sporting opportunities for students to get work experience and other experiences they may otherwise not be able to have.

8. Information and Communication Technology – fixing the reliability and equity of access must be a priority to ensure ICT supports education in regional, rural and remote schools. Amongst other benefits, it would provide more opportunities for students to access subjects and courses that are of interest to them and, also provide opportunities for city-based specialist teachers to teach students in country schools. It would assist in providing professional development for staff and perhaps consideration could be given to the establishment of a ‘lead’ school in a community that provides the PD and support to other schools in the area. Additionally, there needs to be a level of staff expertise to maintain ICT infrastructure. This is a particular issue for primary schools and smaller schools.

Addressing this issue is perhaps the single biggest gain to be made for education beyond the cities.

9. Entrepreneurship and schools – Mentorship is needed for a school or group of schools to specialise in entrepreneurial education. Also, making sure that the learning options match the community expectations and aspirations and that they are staffed. For example, the trade training centres built in communities on the Dampier Peninsula in Western Australia, although new and physically well-resourced are not providing the training needed by the youth in their communities nor have the staff to run them. There is an opportunity for philanthropy here.

Well qualified and resourced career education teachers are needed. There is evidence that in many schools there is either no focus on this important area which is left to the students and their families or for example, it is the English teacher who is given half a day to guide and mentor students in subject choice and post-school options.

10. Improving access – there are opportunities for schools to be organised and function differently, for example encouraging more cross-sectoral collaboration which breaks down social barriers but also provides better options for students, flexibility of curriculum delivery including hours of school and block teaching so a specialist teacher/teachers can visit a region to deliver specific course content. Perhaps school’s and/or teachers in urban areas could buddy up/sponsor schools in regional areas.

There are very limited boarding opportunities in Perth for families wishing to choose non-government co-educational schools for their children and so affordable residential facilities that enable this would be welcomed. However, providing assistance for students to stay in their communities would also be beneficial so perhaps local companies or philanthropic organisations could support families to do this.



Exposure to post school opportunities would also improve access, for example university, TAFE and workplace visits.

11. Diversity – we absolutely agree that relationships and involvement with the parents and their community is essential for educational success. The sustainability of the community is often linked to the success of the school and vice versa.

“Education is a valuable and essential part of community life. Ideally teachers are valued and respected as people, educators and as community members and children are inspired to achieve beyond the school gate and see a positive future.” – Helen Anderson, parent, Albany WA

Integrated and ongoing professional development and the support and education of parents would assist schools and teachers to meet the individual learning needs of all the students in their school.

“Providing opportunities for those from an urban school to experience a country education will help promote principles of social justice. Collectively we are all responsible for working for the common good, reaching out for the poor and marginalised and sharing resources.” Principal, Pilbara WA

We need to invest in regional, rural and remote communities and ensure that wherever practicable, there is choice for families in the school which best meets the needs of their child(ren). We need to promote and encourage collaboration across schools and schooling sectors to ensure all students in a community have access to educational opportunity. We need to ensure parents and their communities are engaged in the education and therefore the future of their children. We need to staff these schools with high quality teachers and support staff and make sure they don't suffer from burn out.

12. Transitioning beyond school - providing students with broader experiences of work opportunities than they may otherwise be exposed to, especially in smaller towns and remote areas is important. Ensuring that career guidance is high-quality and provided by qualified staff who engage with business, the community and especially parents in providing pathway options for students beyond school is required. Access to Youth Allowance is a huge barrier to RRR young people and great cause of financial hardship and family heartache when a tertiary pathway undertaken.

An example of an innovative model of accommodation delivery that could benefit regional, rural and remote tertiary students studying away from home is the investment in the purpose built student accommodation in Albany, WA opening in 2018

The directional flow of regional, rural and remote students moving to cities for further education and/or training has a significant impact on communities. Having businesses who are supported in employing local youth and incentives for further education providers to establish centres and remain active in regional and rural centres would assist. An example is the University of Notre



Dame's Broome campus, which offered teaching degrees but then closed which meant potential teachers for the Kimberley had to relocate to Perth or conduct their studies online.

13. There is much to celebrate in the country. It has a rich diversity of people, context and history. This review is welcomed for any improvements in education that arise.

Shelley Hill
President
Australian Parents Council

29 August 2017