2

Barriers to education

2.1   Australian governments have expressed a vision for 'a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face.'[1] Yet, as the previous chapter has shown, there remains significant and persistent gaps in the educational attainment of students from regional, rural and remote communities compared to other Australian students.

2.2   There are a range of barriers to education for regional, rural and remote students that can lead to poorer outcomes and lower aspirations than their peers in metropolitan areas, and can mean that families choose to move to cities and larger towns in order to educate their children.[2]

2.3   While much can be done within education systems to make services better and more equitable (chapters three, four and five), some of the greatest barriers to education are beyond the capacity of schools to address.[3] Furthermore, many of these external challenges, such as depressed local economies, a lack of local employment opportunities, and limited access to ancillary services (such as occupational and speech therapies) and mental health services, increase as remoteness increases.[4]

2.4   A range of other factors that negatively impact on students' education experience and aspiration also increase with remoteness, including issues relating to language (chapter four) and limited opportunities for formalised early childhood learning (chapter three).[5]

---

1   Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe), Education Declaration*, December 2019, p. 2.

2   Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 2.

3   Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA), *Submission 2*, p. 7.

4   AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 7.

5   AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 10.

2.5 This chapter examines a range of barriers to education in regional, rural and remote contexts that are external to education systems and may require reform across multiple portfolios, including:

- issues relating to geographic isolation

- socioeconomic factors

- health challenges, and

- access to Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

2.6 The chapter concludes with a summary and discussion, including relevant Closing the Gap targets and recommendations from the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review).

Geographic isolation

2.7 Australia's unique combination of diversity, distance and demographics presents many challenges for the provision of education and other services.[6] Aside from areas of relatively dense population located either on the eastern seaboard or clustered around the major capital cities in the north, west and south of the continent, much of Australia is sparsely populated, often with large distances between major population centres.

2.8 Remoteness increases the costs of service delivery and prevents some services from being delivered at all.[7] Due to their size, many communities and schools are unable to benefit from the economies of scale that enable services to be delivered in locations where there is a larger population.[8]

2.9 Families living in regional, rural and remote areas have limited choice in where and how they educate their children[9] and limited access to other services and supports that families in towns and cities rely on.[10]

---

6   Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, January 2018, p. 15.

7   Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA), *Submission 22*, p. 14; Productivity Commission, *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, 2017, p. 268.

8   ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 16.

9   Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc. (ICPA Qld), *Submission 4*, p. 1; Empowered Communities, NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 13; ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 16; Isolated Children's Parents' Association Northern Territory (ICPA NT), *Submission 45*, p. 2; Newcastle Anglican Schools Corporation, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

10   Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 15; National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC), *Submission 40*, p. 5; ICPA NT, *Submission 45*, p. 3.

2.10 The size and remoteness of many communities means that they may not be able to support full time services, and some communities can be cut off from services for weeks or months each year.[11]

2.11 In some communities, low private vehicle ownership and limited options for public transport are barriers to accessing education and other services.[12]

2.12 Students living in geographically isolated locations may have fewer opportunities to play sport and music, to participate in the arts and other cultural activities, or to socialise with others of their own age, compared to their peers in metropolitan areas.[13]

2.13 Students who are located vast distances from major regional centres have limited access to secondary school education and opportunities for tertiary or vocational education pathways while remaining within their communities.[14]

2.14 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) expressed concern that a person's geographic location impacts negatively on their ability to have their rights realised, particularly when it comes to education.[15]

2.15 Similarly, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland (ICPA Qld) commented that 'distance is a fundamental impediment to learning', and explained:

> For geographically isolated families it limits choice across all levels of compulsory education. For students to engage with other students and develop their individual personalities through exposure to cultural and social activities there is a dramatic increase in expense. Distance necessitates the need for students to attend boarding school to complete their compulsory educational journey which has multiple effects on the family dynamic including increased emotional and mental stress upon all family members. In times of extreme environmental circumstances such as drought, fire and flooding, these stresses are compounded as families and communities also struggle financially. Geographical

---

11 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 14; Productivity Commission, *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, 2017, p. 268; Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA), *Submission 23*, p. 2.

12 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, pp. 13-6; Gunnedah Shire Council, *Submission 46*, p. 3; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 6; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

13 ICPA NT, *Submission 45*, p. 3; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals Association (NATSIPA), *Submission 33*, p. 6; RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 2; ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 1.

14 Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 6.

15 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 3.

isolation has also proven a disincentive for tertiary education due
to significant costs associated with attending university and
having little to no familial support.[16]

Socioeconomic factors

2.16   Australians living in remote and very remote locations have, on average,
        shorter lives and poorer health, experience higher levels of poverty and
        have lower rates of educational attainment at both secondary and tertiary
        levels than their counterparts in metropolitan locations.[17]

2.17   This gap is particularly pronounced in many remote Aboriginal and
        Torres Strait Islander communities where issues of income, food and
        energy insecurity, inadequate and overcrowded housing, and high rates of
        preventable diseases linked to poverty have been reported.[18]

2.18   Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory
        are also subject to higher rates of substantiated child protection
        notifications (four times the national average) and higher rates of out of
        home care (with only about a third in kinship care).[19]

2.19   Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are overrepresented in the
        criminal justice system, and there is a strong link between school
        disengagement and interactions with the juvenile justice system.[20]

2.20   Save the Children commented that 'education does not take place in a
        vacuum' and noted that 'poverty is strongly associated with
        developmental vulnerability in children when they reach school and with
        reduced developmental outcomes in general.'[21] Save the Children said that
        educational outcomes could be improved by 'addressing underlying
        sources of disadvantage and their effects, such as lack of access to secure
        housing, and poorer nutrition and general health.'[22]

2.21   Similarly, Children's Ground stated:

        Educational engagement and outcomes are primarily influenced
        by family and community environments. For many children, these

---

16   ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

17   Early Childhood Australia (ECA), *Submission 27*, p. 2.

18   Tangentyere Council, Submission 60, pp. 11-2; Nomads Charitable and Educational
      Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 5.

19   Central Land Council (CLC), *Submission 9*, p. 6.

20   Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 5; National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health
      Organisation (NACCHO), *Submission 44*, p. 3.

21   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

22   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

> environments include extreme disadvantage, economic poverty,
> political and social exclusion – all of which are preventable. The
> major service sectors of education, health and wellbeing, and
> economic and social support cater to the mainstream but are
> failing those at the margins of economic, cultural and social
> privilege. Currently, data indicates that for these families, very few
> are benefiting through improved life outcomes from current
> investment in education, health and child and family services.[23]

2.22   The National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
        (NACCHO) explained that disadvantage and overcrowding are key
        barriers to education for many young Aboriginal and Torres Strait
        Islander people:

> Disadvantage impedes families' ability to afford and access health
> services, resulting in students experiencing poorer health
> outcomes than their peers, including hearing loss which impedes
> learning. Overcrowding contributes to Aboriginal and Torres
> Strait Islander students' psychological stress and related
> behavioural problems, and impedes their ability to do homework,
> remain healthy and get adequate sleep and support to succeed at
> school.[24]

2.23   Tangentyere Council reported that about 45 per cent of all Aboriginal and
        Torres Strait Islander households in the Northern Territory live below the
        poverty line, and that poverty in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait
        Islander communities is increasing.[25] Tangentyere Council commented
        that many residents of the Alice Springs town camps face
        'multidimensional disadvantage'.[26]

2.24   Remote Indigenous Parents Australia (RIPA) noted that 'the current lack
        of genuine and sustainable employment in many, if not most, remote
        Indigenous communities results in high levels of unemployment',
        meaning that families 'rely on Centrelink and welfare.'[27]

2.25   Tangentyere Council commented that one 'way forward would be to
        ensure basic food and income security. In the short term this could be
        achieved by some reform of Centrelink requirements and increasing the
        amount of benefits.'[28]

---

23   Children's Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 16.
24   NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 3.
25   Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 10.
26   Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 9.
27   RIPA, *Submission 23*, p. 4.
28   Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 27.

2.26   The AHRC noted that young mothers experience significant challenges in continuing their education and reported that there are much higher rates of teenage parenthood outside of major cities, in low socioeconomic areas and in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.[29] The AHRC noted that the challenges faced by young mothers are more acute in remote areas due to lack of services and supports, such as early childhood education and care.[30] The AHRC provided examples of wrap-around models of schooling for young parents, which aim to re-engage young parents with education while providing support in developing parenting and other life skills.[31]

Health

2.27   A range of health challenges disproportionally affect Australians living outside of metropolitan areas.[32] Australians living in remote locations also have more limited access to health services, which can exacerbate health challenges and lead to poorer educational outcomes.[33] For example, the AHRC noted that 'as many as 32 per cent of children living in rural or remote NSW are unable to access the health services they need.'[34]

2.28   AHISA commented that 'student wellbeing is such an important part of learning' and explained:

>   Unless a student is physically, emotionally and intellectually well, they're not going to learn. One of the greatest gaps that our heads identified in remote and regional areas is the access to GPs [general practitioners], occupational therapists, counsellors and psychologists. Without that access, you're not going to be able to sustain the learning of those students.[35]

2.29   AHISA noted that 'limited or no access to medical services, ancillary services or mental health services in regional and remote locations can also

---

29   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 17.

30   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 18.

31   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 18.

32   Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Rural & remote health*, 2019, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-remote-health>, viewed 23 July 2019.

33   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15; Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), *Submission 30*, p. 2.

34   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

35   Ms Beth Blackwood, Chief Executive Officer, AHISA, Committee Hansard, 26 February 2020, Canberra, p. 5.

present a challenge to recruitment and retention of staff, with flow-on effects in education provision for students.'[36]

2.30 Health challenges are particularly acute for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities. For example, Tangentyere Council reported that:

> Central Australian Aboriginal people residing in the Alice Springs Town Camps have poor nutritional intake, low levels of physical activity, are more likely to smoke and suffer from hypertension. In addition, there is a significant proportion of this population that is overweight or obese. Aboriginal people are 13 times more likely to suffer from diabetes, 5 times more likely to suffer from heart disease and 7 times more likely to suffer from chronic kidney disease. Mortality rates for Aboriginal people are high and life expectancy is comparatively low. The reality for Central Australian Aboriginal people is that the risk factors and the prevalence of chronic illness contrast with the non-Indigenous population.[37]

2.31 Speech Pathology Australia reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children experience the world's highest rates of middle ear disease and conductive hearing loss, noting that 'children with hearing losses often report feeling isolated, and do not catch up with their peers without intervention.'[38]

2.32 Similarly, NACCHO noted that 'hearing loss is a significant barrier to school success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' that can result in children disengaging from school and becoming involved with the criminal justice system.[39] NACCHO noted that 'ear infections and hearing loss can be prevented through improved environmental health and reduced overcrowding.'[40]

2.33 The Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF) reported that approximately 50 per cent of all students attending a remote community school in the Pilbara in Western Australia in 2019 were confirmed as having ongoing poor ear health and hearing impairments and are recognised as having a hearing disability.[41]

---

36 AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 25.
37 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 22.
38 Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 7.
39 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 3.
40 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 3.
41 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 5.

2.34   NCEF also reported that poor nutrition, suspected Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, scabies, boils, conjunctivitis, and head lice, were 'not uncommon within the student population', while diabetes, heart, and kidney problems were also prevalent in the adult population.[42]

2.35   The Western Australian government reported that it has provided soundfield systems to regional and remote schools in the Pilbara, Kimberley, Goldfields and Midwest to amplify teachers' voices to improve classroom listening environments. Schools in Western Australia 'with an Aboriginal student population greater than 60 per cent could request systems due to the prevalence of middle ear infections and conductive hearing loss among Aboriginal students.'[43]

2.36   In Western Australia, Earbus mobile ear health clinics offer comprehensive ear screening, surveillance and treatment for Aboriginal children and young people in schools, day care centres, kindergartens and playgroups.[44]

Early intervention

2.37   It is important that families have access to services that identify any specific needs and supports that children require, at the earliest possible stage, to help children be the best they can be.[45]

2.38   Speech Pathology Australia commented:

> Early identification of speech, language and communication needs and access to appropriate interventions during the pre-school years can have a profound effect on a child's health, development, educational and wellbeing outcomes in the longer term.[46]

2.39   Royal Far West (RFW) noted that 'early intervention means more young people have the best possible start in life. It also makes good economic and social policy sense.'[47]

2.40   Children growing up in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, and have less access to screening and early intervention than those in metropolitan areas.[48] Furthermore, a higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in

42   NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 5.
43   Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 20.
44   Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 20.
45   Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6; RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 4.
46   Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6.
47   Royal Far West (RFW), *Submission 32*, p. 4.
48   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.

regional and remote areas are developmentally vulnerable compared to their non-Indigenous peers in those areas.[49]

2.41   Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA) reported that 45.5 per cent of children in very remote areas were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of child development when they commenced school in 2018, as compared to 20.8 per cent of children living in major cities. CCSA further reported that 6 in 10 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in 2018.[50]

2.42   RFW expressed concern about 'a lack of access to adequate services to sustainably meet the developmental, behavioural and mental health needs of all children, including basic assessment and screening.'[51] RFW commented:

> This lack of access is characterised by services being unavailable locally and requiring significant travel to access them; inconsistent access, characterised by intermittent availability (staffing and funding changes and gaps); and challenges to access such as extensive waiting lists, inappropriate services for child needs (quality/required expertise), and the unsustainably high cost to access alternative private services when public service access is unavailable or taking too long.[52]

2.43   RFW recommended that 'a developmental screening and early intervention program for 3-5 year olds be made available to areas of greatest need, and be free of charge.'[53]

2.44   NCEF expressed concern that, given the health challenges facing communities in the Pilbara, there is limited access to services that identify and support students with learning difficulties:

> Whilst often suspected (especially in the case of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders or FASD), official diagnoses of such learning difficulties are not being made due to the lack of services and available resources. This can often have life-long implications. Children from the community have seldom had the opportunity to benefit from the services of speech therapists or occupational therapists.'[54]

---

49   Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), *Submission 12*, p. 4
50   Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA), *Submission 24*, p. 2.
51   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7.
52   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 7.
53   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 6.
54   NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 18.

2.45   The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) noted 'evidence suggests that early intervention programs are best delivered in a coordinated, planned, family centred manner that reflects a life course approach to health and wellbeing outcomes.'[55]

2.46   A number of examples of early intervention programs were highlighted during the inquiry. RFW reported that it has partnered with the Fitzroy Crossing community in the Kimberley, Western Australia, to increase services and support for children with complex needs:

> As part of this community led model, RFW has been piloting the use of telehealth to provide speech, OT [occupational therapy] and psychology assessment and therapy directly into a remote pre-school and a remote school, as well as providing professional development and support to teachers and Aboriginal educators. The program works with children aged 3 -12 years, the vast majority of them Aboriginal. Through this model, children with speech/language and behaviour/regulation issues are receiving regular, direct therapy for the first time and teachers report greatly increased confidence in working with children with complex trauma based developmental challenges.[56]

2.47   RFW advocates that 'the model used in Fitzroy Crossing be scaled into a "Remote Communities Model" and become a critical component of remote education, working in partnership with local communities.'[57]

2.48   Save the Children commented that, in order to improve children's educational outcomes, 'there needs to be more focus on supporting parents and families to engage in children's learning and provide a safe and nurturing home environment, and on addressing underlying sources of disadvantage.'[58] Save the Children said:

> This requires a place-based and integrated approach to addressing need and disadvantage. In pursuing these aims, we recommend that government prioritise 'bundles' of initiatives and interventions which are scalable, already demonstrating success, and readily able to integrate with each other and operate within a system of supports, particularly during children's first 1000 days and up to age six.[59]

55   National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), *Submission 63*, p. 4.
56   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 2.
57   RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 3.
58   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 2.
59   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 2.

2.49   Save the Children gave the example of its Play2Learn model that 'provides integrated early childhood education and family support to around 12,000 highly vulnerable children and parents each year, including in remote areas across the country.'[60]

2.50   Similarly, Children's Ground works with children from pre-birth to eight years of age, together with their families, to address disadvantage. Children's Ground stated this approach 'recognises that the physical, social, emotional and economic health and wellbeing of all family members impacts children's education, health and wellbeing.'[61]

Students with disability

2.51   Children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote areas have limited access to services such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, and early intervention.[62] These services play an important role in supporting children with disabilities to participate in education on an equal basis with others.[63]

2.52   The AHRC commented that 'the lack of services in regional areas not only restricts choice, but sometimes results in people with disability being forced to leave their communities in order to access specialist disability services and support.'[64]

2.53   Speech Pathology Australia noted that communication disabilities 'may mean that a student's capacity to understand and use language can be severely compromised and the effects on their access and participation (including literacy and learning) can be significant.'[65] These students 'require additional support to access and participate in the curriculum and achieve expected educational outcomes.'[66]

2.54   The AHRC reported that a lack of accessible transport in regional and remote areas 'has a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability, particularly physical disability'.[67] This lack of access 'affects their ability to access education, employment and, critically, health services.'[68]

---

60   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 2.
61   Children's Ground, *Submission 56*, p. 9.
62   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15; CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 2.
63   CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 2; AHRC, Submission 1, p. 15.
64   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 15.
65   Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6.
66   Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 6.
67   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 16.
68   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 16.

Inclusive education

2.55   Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) noted that
        the participation of students with disability in remote areas in education
        can be limited by school and teachers' access to training opportunities
        around disability and inclusive education.[69]

2.56   CYDA described the daily experiences of students with disability as 'far
        from ideal, with significant lack of support for students and many
        traumatic experiences.'[70] CYDA reported that around 50 per cent of
        students with disability experience bullying at school, including from
        teachers, and that the majority of students did not receive appropriate
        support or information around planning for their futures and their
        careers.[71]

2.57   At the roundtable on 2 September 2020, CYDA expressed concern that
        students with disability in regional, rural and remote communities
        continue to be segregated from the general school population and this has
        a negative impact on their educational experience and attainment:

> From the evidence base of over 40 years, when students with
> disabilities are included in regular education settings along with
> their many non-disabled peers, we know that not only their
> educational outcomes but their lifelong outcomes are better.
> However, in Australia, including in rural and remote areas, we
> still continue to segregate disabled students from their non-
> disabled peers, under the belief that this will be better for them,
> despite the fact that this is in contravention of international law,
> Australia's responsibilities under the UN [United Nations]
> convention and also the best evidence.[72]

2.58   CYDA reported there 'is a significant lack of support' provided to young
        people with disability in in the later years of school around 'what they
        would like to do after school, planning for their careers and thinking
        about other training options'.[73]

2.59   CYDA advocated for a national inclusive education act be developed,
        noting that 'at the moment, responsibility for adherence to inclusive
        education sits under discrimination law, through the Disability

---

69   CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 2.

70   CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

71   CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 3.

72   Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, CYDA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020,
      Canberra, p. 11.

73   Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, CYDA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020,
      Canberra, p. 13.

Discrimination Act, but that is insufficient to actually realise inclusive education.'[74]

National Disability Insurance Scheme – thin markets

2.60   The capacity of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to provide adequate support services can be constrained by thin markets in regional and remote areas (where there are very few providers and limited demand).[75]

2.61   The Department of Social Services (DSS) and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) have commissioned the NDIS Thin Markets Project to develop strategies to address supply gaps in thin markets in the NDIS. The project is expected to develop a framework for addressing thin market challenges, including for rural and remote areas, and a roadmap for developing and delivering practical trial projects.[76]

2.62   CYDA commented that the 'development and implementation of a strategy to address thin markets for disability supports and allied health services in remote areas is likely to support schools and boost participation of students with disability.'[77] However, CYDA also noted that 'these measures will require additional investment from governments across jurisdictions, as well as cross-collaboration with other systems like health and the NDIS.'[78]

2.63   Yirrkala School suggested that one solution to the lack of disability services in remote communities would be to allow schools to provide NDIS services directly. It said this would also allow schools to 'develop fantastic on-site interdisciplinary initiatives' such as school-based Interdisciplinary Health Teams.[79] Yirrkala School noted that the 'groundwork for such an initiative already exists in our school through our fantastic relationship with our local Aboriginal Controlled Health Organisation, Miwatj which helps operate the only regular, doctor-led school clinic currently in the remote NT.'[80]

---

74 Ms Mary Sayers, Chief Executive Officer, CYDA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 13.

75 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 16; CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 4; Early Childhood Australia (ECA), *Submission 27*, p. 12.

76 Department of Social Services, *NDIS Thin Markets Project*, 2019, <https://engage.dss.gov.au/ndis-thin-markets-project/>, viewed 23 July 2020.

77 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 4.

78 CYDA, *Submission 30*, p. 4.

79 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 19.

80 Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 19.

2.64   Yirrkala School also advocated for schools to be able to fund a special needs teacher position outside the Global School Budget for schools with enrolments over 100 students and, for Northern Territory legislation to be changed to allow remote schools to provide quality education to students with special needs, including establishing special needs annexes.[81]

Skills shortages in health, community and disability services

2.65   The Australian Services Union (ASU) noted that the highest growth in the services sector in regional Australia is in the health, community, and disability sector.[82] This growth is being driven by the implementation of the NDIS, the needs of an ageing population and increasing demand for childcare and home-based care services.[83]

2.66   The ASU reported that many regions have skills shortages in these sectors, which may mean 'intensifying competition across regions to secure the people that each region needs in order to grow.'[84] The ASU commented:

> Longer term, healthcare and social assistance (community and disability support services) is expected to require another 85,000 workers in regions through to 2023. With long lead times on professionals in these industries it is vital that action starts now to create the skills development pathways. These new areas of job growth require a policy focus on ensuring people in regional areas are ready and equipped with the right skills, knowledge and aspiration to successfully engage in and drive these growth areas in their local communities.[85]

2.67   The ASU stated that 'the challenge for policy makers is to ensure that workers who already live in regional areas have a real opportunity to participate in the jobs growth and other opportunities that accrue to the projected economic benefits to those regional communities.'[86]

Mental health

2.68   Students who experience poor mental health are less likely to attend school and have poorer educational outcomes. Improvements to prevention, early intervention, treatment and management of mental

---

81   Yirrkala School, *Submission 48*, p. 20.
82   Australian Services Union (ASU), *Submission 19*, p. 6.
83   ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 7.
84   ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 8.
85   ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 8.
86   ASU, *Submission 19*, p. 8.

health conditions can lead to significant improvements in school attendance and engagement in learning.[87]

2.69 However, in many regional, rural and remote locations, particularly in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, there is limited access to mental health service.[88] A lack of access to and continuity in these services can lead to young people feeling increasingly isolated and vulnerable.[89]

2.70 For example, NCEF reported that, in the Pilbara:

> There is a crying need for greater access to and support from youth workers and counsellors, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists. This need is not only limited to within the remote community context as there is also a dire need for such services within the regional centres as well. Existing services are stretched to capacity and waiting lists are extensive.[90]

2.71 Empowered Communities Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Region reported that, despite extremely high rates of youth suicide in the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, there are currently no specialised mental health or suicide response supports available outside of the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands in South Australia.[91]

2.72 Similarly, the NPY Women's Council reported:

> There remains significant gaps in mental health support for remote youth. There is no dedicated youth mental health service across the NPY region except for the Child Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the APY South Australian lands, which is tremendously under resourced. Young people and families need better support. They currently have minimal to no options available to them. Families are dealing with this in isolation.[92]

2.73 The AHRC noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experience trauma at a much higher rate than non-Indigenous students,

---

87 Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9. See J. Reid, 'Mental health impacting student outcomes, study shows', *The Educator*, 18 December 2017, <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/mental-health-impacting-student-outcomes-study-shows/245005>, viewed 24 July 2020.

88 AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 14; AHISA, *Submission 2*, p. 8; Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 12; RFW, *Submission 32*, p. 4; NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

89 ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 1.

90 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 18.

91 Empowered Communities NPY Region, *Submission 17*, p. 17.

92 NPY Women's Council, *Submission 47*, p. 9.

which causes distress and makes it difficult for children to engage in education.[93] The AHRC commented:

> A myriad of complex factors contribute to this trauma including systemic intergenerational discrimination and increased exposure to traumatic incidents within families and communities such as bereavement, suicide, health concerns, incarceration, forced removal of children, poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and violence.[94]

2.74   The AHRC further commented that the prevalence of trauma in school communities 'creates challenges for staff who may not be equipped with skills to work in a trauma-informed manner to adequately respond to the needs of students, potentially causing further traumatisation.'[95]

2.75   Speech Pathology Australia commented that a 'lack of access to support services is particularly problematic when children have experienced maltreatment and trauma.'[96] Speech Pathology Australia explained that 'maltreated children experience difficulties recognising, expressing and understanding their own emotions. These children exhibit more aggressive and reactive behaviours and are more predisposed to display angry emotional expression.'[97]

2.76   The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) called for schools, systems and sectors to 'be equipped to improve the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and teachers in remote and complex environments.'[98]

Impact of disasters and pandemic on mental health

2.77   The recent droughts, bushfires and other natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated existing challenges and further highlighted the need for improved support for the mental health of Australians in regional, rural and remote locations.[99]

2.78   Save the Children noted that a focus on mental health is particularly important for children who have experienced natural disasters, such as bushfires. Save the Children commented 'without early intervention,

93   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.
94   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.
95   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.
96   Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 8.
97   Speech Pathology Australia, *Submission 11*, p. 8.
98   Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), *Submission 34*, p. 8.
99   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 4; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 20; ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 6; ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 21.

children experiencing trauma may experience negative developmental effects which impact educational and functional outcomes later in life.'[100]

2.79   Professor Lisa Gibbs noted that disaster events such as 2019-20 bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an increased risk of mental health problems and violence against women. Professor Gibbs said that 'children's sense of safety and stability is undermined by a disaster experience and their educational outcomes are likely to be poorer as they progress through primary and secondary school.'[101]

2.80   Professor Gibbs advocated for initiatives to be developed to guide and support school communities after a mass trauma event, which promote a sense of safety, calm, hope, self and community efficacy, and connectedness.[102]

Overcoming racism and discrimination

2.81   The harmful impact of racism and discrimination on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families was highlighted.[103] Just Reinvest NSW reported:

> We consistently hear from young people, Aboriginal education staff and families in the communities we work with that racism is prevalent in the school system. This has a negative impact on school attendance and performance in classrooms. Racism in schools impacts not only young people but also their families and communities.[104]

2.82   World Vision reported that 'racism remains a common experience for First Nations children' and explained:

> This racism can be from peers, teachers or administrators and the way the system is structured which marginalises First Nations children. This racism can be direct and overt, or it can be through the racial bias of teachers and administrators who develop subconscious negative biases towards First Nations children.[105]

2.83   NACCHO said that racism could be reduced and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students improved by:

---

100   Save the Children, *Submission 52*, p. 4.
101   Professor Lisa Gibbs, *Submission 62*, p. 2.
102   Professor Lisa Gibbs, *Submission 62*, p. 3.
103   AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 27; Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 5; NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4; World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.
104   Just Reinvest NSW, *Submission 42*, p. 5.
105   World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.

- increasing the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and faces in teaching materials
- reducing culturally inappropriate and offensive representations of Aboriginal people
- increasing the use of teaching materials in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to better assist students who speak English as a second language
- engaging all students in excursions and incursions (e.g. guest speakers) that effectively showcase Aboriginal histories, lifestyles, languages, music, rituals, stories, weapons, clothing and food, and
- teaching Aboriginal perspectives and unbiased accounts of Australian history (truth telling).[106]

Environmental factors

2.84   Environmental conditions, such as extreme heat, drought, storms, cyclones, flooding, insect attack, disease and fire can have serious and lasting impacts on regional, rural and remote communities and economies.[107]

2.85   These factors cause negative financial pressures for families and businesses and intensify other educational challenges, including mental health and wellbeing.[108]

2.86   Environmental factors can affect the safety of students and staff, limit the availability of staff, and make it difficult for families to pay for services or for extra-curricular activities.[109]

2.87   The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Australia) noted that 'drought and rural hardships impact all types of schooling in rural and remote communities, both for students in the towns as well as out on properties as the communities struggle to provide an education for their children.'[110] During times of rural hardship, students often 'forego normal supplementary educational activities like school camps, excursions or other events due to added expenses.'[111]

2.88   As a consequence of the drought, ICPA Australia reported it has been hearing of:

106 NACCHO, *Submission 44*, p. 4.
107 South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 6.
108 ISCA, *Submission 22*, p. 21.
109 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 6; South West TAFE, *Submission 54*, p. 6; AHRC, *Submission 1*, p. 29.
110 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 6.
111 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 6.

> …heartbreaking cases where families cannot pay boarding and tuition fees and the students are no longer able to continue at their school. In some instances, families are delaying their children going away to school or bringing them home early and in some cases choosing which of their children they can educate. Some are not going away to school at all while others are being brought home which can mean that education then stops for the most part, especially for boys as they may be needed to work on the property.[112]

2.89   In the Pilbara, tropical cyclones and flooding during the wet season can severely limit accessibility. NCEF reported 'it is not uncommon for community members to be stranded in or away from the community for weeks at a time due to flooding and road closures.'[113]

2.90   In Central Australia, there are concerns about the impact of hotter, longer and drier summers on school education, and the effects this has on children's capacity to engage in formal education. The Central Land Council (CLC) noted that the combination of overcrowded housing, inadequate air conditioning and persistent heat can lead to 'inadequate sleep, physical discomfort, family stress and food spoiling more quickly (particularly as many houses do not have effective refrigeration)', and can 'reduce children's ability and willingness to attend and engage with school'.[114]

2.91   The CLC further noted that extreme heat can also make it difficult for children to get to school:

> Many children in remote Aboriginal communities walk to school. This prospect is made extremely challenging on very hot days. A lack of formed paths and shade means children are exposed to hot sun and are walking on surfaces with temperatures of between 61°C and 68°C. At this temperature, a child could sustain instant and severe burns to their feet.[115]

Energy security

2.92   Tangentyere Council is concerned that the installation of new pre-paid smart meters in Central Australia 'has coincided with a significant

---

112 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 7.
113 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 15.
114 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 9.
115 CLC, *Submission 9*, p. 10.

increase in electricity prices. This has led to increased debt and increased power outages.'[116] Tangentyere Council reported:

> In one Town Camp (with 23 tenanted houses) the average house will use a projected 8,437 kWh per annum ($2,342 per annum). This average house will have 51 periods without power (involuntary self-disconnection) for a period of 238 hours. This means the average house loses power for about 5 hours every week in the last year. [117]

2.93   Tangentyere Council said that 'self-disconnections occur when energy consumers are unable to purchase power for their prepayment meter' and attributed this to the former Newstart payment rate. According to Tangentyere Council 'the current rates of Newstart undermine household energy security and this impacts upon the storage of food and the maintenance of safe internal ambient temperatures.'[118]

Information and Communications Technology

2.94   While Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has the potential to enhance learning for students, bridge gaps in access and increase opportunities for teacher training, there remains a 'digital divide' between Australians who have access to the internet, computers and other devices, and those who do not. This gap in access is particularly acute for Australians on low incomes and those living in geographically isolated locations.[119]

2.95   For example, the NCEF commented that the lack of remote community ICT access is exacerbating existing issues of disadvantage and inequality 'in a world that is increasingly becoming dependent and inter-connected through technology'.[120]

2.96   ICPA Australia said that 'connectivity is key', and noted the provision of the curriculum in remote areas is largely dependent on ICT access, especially for those studying via distance education.[121]

---

116 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 12.

117 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 12.

118 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 13.

119 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 7l; Melbourne Graduate School of Education, *Submission 59*, p. 5; Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 11; NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 49; Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 21.

120 NCEF, *Submission 66*, p. 49.

121 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 5.

2.97   The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) reported that 'across Australia, households in rural and remote areas continue to be less likely to have reliable, fast broadband internet and are more likely to share computing devices among household members than those in metropolitan areas.'[122]

2.98   When technological problems arise in the delivery of education using ICT, the availability of trained support technicians is critical. The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales reported that a common problem in remote schools is a lack of suitably trained personnel:

> Where these technicians exist, they are of immense value, however they are not widespread and are typically part-time. Consequently, technological problems in schools can take days to be addressed, and teachers and students lose valuable teaching and learning time when struggling with technical issues.[123]

Access and equity

2.99   The Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) commented that the affordability of devices and internet access remains a challenge for many Australians:

> In general, Australians with low levels of income, education, and employment are significantly less digitally included. The digital inclusion gap between Australians with a disability and other Australians is also substantial and grew in 2018.[124]

2.100   Tangentyere Council noted that the cost of internet access in remote and regional areas is more expensive due to the type of services available and reported that the National Broadband Network (NBN) is cost prohibitive for people on income support. Tangentyere Council commented that the 'lack of digital inclusivity creates financial exclusion and reduces participation.'[125]

2.101   Similarly, ICPA Qld expressed concern about a lack of affordable and reliable internet in geographically isolated locations, noting that 'although there have been definite improvements in affordability and accessibility there remains no comparison to the prices offered to their urban counterparts.'[126]

---

122 DESE, *Supplementary Submission 49.1*, p. 11.
123 Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Submission 20*, p. 3.
124   Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE), *Submission 59*, p. 5.
125 Tangentyere Council, *Submission 60*, p. 21.
126 ICPA Qld, *Submission 4*, p. 2.

2.102   Research undertaken by the Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (BoCAR) found that broadband costs in Australia have reduced but remain prohibitive for many low income earners:

> While prices have fallen and average mobile data allowances for mobile phone plans have increased, these changes have not necessarily led to services being more affordable for low income individuals. Similarly, while prices for NBN fixed-line services have fallen, these changes have not necessarily led to these services being used by lower income households. [127]

2.103   Anecdotal evidence suggests that many low-income earners use prepaid accounts because they cannot afford to sign up to a bundled plan. BoCAR's research suggests that many of these people are paying what has been referred to as a 'poverty premium'[128] on their mobile data because cheaper low data plans have a higher cost per unit of data than high data plans.[129]

2.104   DESE reported that NBN Co is 'providing up to $50 million to assist phone and internet providers to support low-income family households with school aged children who do not currently have an active broadband connection at home.'[130] DESE said that 'the funding will assist participating phone and internet providers to create more affordable offers to connect eligible families' during the COVID-19 pandemic.[131]

Satellite internet

2.105   The Sky Muster satellite service delivers NBN broadband access to homes and businesses in regional and remote Australia, via two satellites operated by NBN Co.

2.106   The MGSE noted that while satellite internet is often put forward as an alternative to fixed-line services, it 'is not always reliable and is very expensive for people living in remote areas.'[132]

2.107   ICPA Australia stated that data restrictions for Sky Muster satellite customers are 'particularly problematic', noting that while NBN Co. offers education plans with an additional data allowance, this is only available to

---

127 Bureau of Communication and Arts Research, *Affordability of communications services for low income households*, 30 April 2020, p. 19.

128 A Branley, *ABC 7:30*, 'NBN structure means those who can afford the least pay the most', 30 June 2020.

129 Bureau of Communication and Arts Research, *Affordability of communications services for low income households*, 30 April 2020, p. 19.

130 DESE, *Supplementary submission 49.1*, p. 11.

131 DESE, *Supplementary submission 49.1*, p. 11.

132   MGSE, *Submission 59*, p. 5.

students enrolled in Schools of Distance Education for primary and secondary education.[133] Tertiary and vocational education students do not qualify for the additional data offered by the Sky Muster Education Service.[134]

2.108   Similarly, M & S Consultants described NBN Co.'s Sky Muster as 'a brilliant service' but are concerned it is 'prohibitively expensive for the relatively small number of geographically dispersed students and schools to individually take advantage of.'[135] M&S Consultants noted that each state and territory have to negotiate individual agreements for the provision of distance education with NBN Co., which drives up the cost.[136]

2.109   M&S Consultants advocated for the Commonwealth to take a greater role in distance education (DE) provision, noting that 'if the Federal Government were responsible for the DE students' provision of the internet for education, they would have the 'buying power' to broker a far more inexpensive solution from NBN.'[137] Alternatively, they suggested the Commonwealth provide a single centralised DE service that can be accessed by multiple small remote schools, which would save money and 'expand the base student cohort for which educational opportunities could be increased.'[138]

2.110   Ms Julie Bailey reported that while the Northern Territory Education Department has 'the most sophisticated IDL [Interactive Distance Learning] system in the country using REACT', it 'does not provide programs to remote Indigenous communities.'[139] Ms Bailey said that satellite technology could help overcome barriers to education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and recommended that 'the Federal government allocate funds and regulate satellite delivery of appropriate education programs to Indigenous remote communities.'[140]

---

133   ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 9.
134   ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 9.
135   M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.
136   M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.
137   M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.
138   M&S Consultants, *Submission 16*, p. 6.
139   Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 53*, p. 3.
140   Ms Julie Bailey, *Submission 53*, p. 3.

Summary and discussion

2.111   There is a range of barriers to education that are external to education
systems and may require wider reform to benefit regional, rural and
remote students and their families and communities. These include:

- Geographic isolation: Australians living in regional, rural and remote
areas have limited access to and choice in the services and supports
which families in towns and cities rely on. Areas of concern included:
the provision of health, ancillary and mental health support services,
and disability support services through the NDIS

- Socioeconomic factors: Australians living in remote and very remote
locations have, on average, shorter lives and poorer health, experience
higher levels of poverty and have lower rates of educational attainment
at both secondary and tertiary levels than their counterparts in
metropolitan locations

    This gap is particularly pronounced in many Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander communities where issues of income, food and energy
insecurity, inadequate and overcrowded housing, and high rates of
preventable diseases linked to poverty have been reported.

- Other issues negatively affecting educational outcomes in Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander communities include experiences of racism,
discrimination and trauma, and high rates of out-of-home care,
developmental vulnerability in young children, youth suicide and poor
mental health, family violence and engagement with the criminal justice
system

- Environmental factors such as bushfires, droughts and cyclones
exacerbate issues associated with geographic isolation (e.g. service
delivery), cause negative financial pressures for families and businesses
and intensify other educational challenges, including mental health and
wellbeing, and

- Access to ICT: there is a 'digital divide' between Australians who have
access to the internet, computers and other devices, and those who do
not. This gap in access is particularly acute for Australians on low
incomes and those living in geographically isolated locations.

Relevant Closing the Gap targets

2.112   As previously noted, the new Closing the Gap agreement will shape
Commonwealth policy in addressing disadvantage in Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander communities in partnership with the states and

territories, and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations.

2.113   In relation to issues of socioeconomic disadvantage, Closing the Gap includes new targets to:

- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25-64 who are employed to 62 per cent by 2031

- increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent by 2031

- reduce the incarceration rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults by 15 per cent by 2031

- reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in youth detention by 30 per cent by 2031

- reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent by 2031, and

- achieve a significant and sustained reduction in violence and abuse against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children towards zero.[141]

2.114   In relation to health, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the targets to close the gap in life expectancy experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People within a generation,[142] and to 'increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a healthy birthweight to 91 per cent' by 2031.[143]

2.115   In relation to early intervention, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the target to 'increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track in all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to 55 per cent' by 2031.[144]

---

141 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020, pp. 24-32.

142 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 17.

143 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 18.

144 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 20.

2.116   In relation to mental health, the Closing the Gap agreement seeks to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a target to achieve a significant and sustained reduction in suicides.[145]

Relevant Halsey review recommendations

2.117   The Halsey review made two recommendations relevant to issues covered in the chapter: access to early intervention services and ICT. A range of actions were encouraged to progress these recommendations. Relevant recommendations and sections of the government response are provided below. The government did not detail how or whether it would implement all the actions to progress the recommendations of the Halsey review.[146]

2.118   Recommendation 4 related to improving access to early intervention services to ensure children start school ready to learn:

> **Recommendation 4:** Ensure RRR children start school with a strong foundation for learning

2.119   **Actions to progress this recommendation**:

- ensure that early intervention trained personnel and programs are in place to help families and to connect them to relevant support agencies, and
- substantially reduce the waiting time (say to a maximum of three months) for specialist assessments of students with learning difficulties and disabilities and the subsequent development of specific learning plans for them.[147]

2.120   In its response, the government indicated it is supportive of this recommendation but did not state if it would be undertaking specific new work in this area. The government response noted that:

> The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) had asked the Education Council, comprising Education Ministers from the Australian Government and all states and territories, to provide advice in 2018 on early learning reform principles informed by the Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational

145   Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 33.

146   Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018.

147   Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review, January 2018, p. 56.

Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood
Interventions.[148]

2.121   Recommendation 9 related to improving access to and the affordability of
        ICT for regional, rural and remote students and their communities:

> **Recommendation 9**: Improve the availability, accessibility and
> affordability of ICT for RRR schools, teachers, students, parents
> and communities.
>
> **Actions to progress this recommendation**:
>
> - establish a RRR ICT taskforce with the necessary expertise,
>   authority and resourcing to substantially improve access to and
>   use of ICT in education
> - ensure that students and families who are reliant on distance
>   education have continuous and affordable access to all of the
>   teaching and learning delivered by Distance Education
>   providers
> - work with ICT providers to ensure that sufficient bandwidth on
>   the NBN Sky Muster satellite service is always prioritised for
>   bona fide educational purposes, and
> - expand the NBN Sky Muster public interest premises definition
>   to include homes in remote locations where school and tertiary
>   students return out of term.[149]

2.122   In its response, the government stated:

> While this is much broader than regional, rural and remote
> settings, this Government recognises the impact of the digital
> divide among the most disadvantaged students, including those
> living in rural and remote areas. For example, the National
> Broadband Network (NBN) Co's Sky Muster satellite services
> became available on 29 April 2016. This Government prioritised
> work with NBN Co, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association
> and the education sector to develop a special product so distance
> education students could have the additional data they need to get
> the most out of their studies. As of 25 January 2018, 683 students
> across regional, rural and remote Australia were benefitting from
> the Sky Muster distance education product.
>
> One of the priorities for this Government in 2018 will be to further
> improve the delivery of education services over Sky Muster,
> including home-schooled students that are isolated for

---

148 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent
     Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 11.

149 Emeritus Professor John Halsey, Department of Education and Training, Halsey review,
     January 2018, p. 72.

geographic/medical reasons. In addition, schools, emergency services and health facilities in the Sky Muster footprint are also able to access special NBN 'Public Interest Premises' packages to help them do their vital work for regional, rural and remote communities. A data allowance of up to 300GB per month may be allowed. As of 25 January 2018 there were 103 primary and secondary schools in the Sky Muster footprint using the PIP satellite service.

On 29 January 2018 NBN Co announced a trial of multicast technology over the Sky Muster service for 15 distance education schools across the Northern Territory. The technology will enable satellite retailers to deliver content simultaneously to multiple users with uninterrupted, quality streaming and improved video conferencing. These services are intended for use by schools delivering distance education services to remote students such as School of the Air. Subject to the results of the trial, NBN Co plans to roll-out the technology to regional and remote locations across Australia from late 2018.[150]

Conclusion

2.123 Students in regional, rural and remote communities experience a range of barriers to education that are external to education systems and may require reform across multiple portfolios to address, including:

- issues relating to geographic isolation, such as access to services
- socioeconomic factors
- health challenges
- environmental factors, and
- access to ICT.

2.124 It is beyond the scope of this inquiry to consider and recommend a comprehensive suite of recommendations that address disparities in economic, social and health outcomes, and service provision between regional, rural and remote areas and metropolitan areas. However, it is the committee's view that the government should continue to develop policies that address these complex issues.

---

150 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Government Response to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, 30 May 2018, p. 10.

Recommendation 1

2.125 **To reduce barriers to education, the committee recommends the Government develop policies and programs that:**

- **generate investment, economic development and employment, and deliver essential infrastructure, including reliable and affordable access to electricity, in regional, rural and remote areas**
- **improve access and affordability in regional, rural and remote communities to:**
  - ⇒ **medical, ancillary and mental health services**
  - ⇒ **services and support for people with disability, including addressing thin markets in the National Disability Insurance Scheme**
  - ⇒ **public transport**
  - ⇒ **services and support for communities in times of crises or during periods of rural hardship, including access to Centrelink, and**
  - ⇒ **broadband and mobile phone reception, in particular extending the Sky Muster Education data offering to tertiary and vocational students in remote, regional and rural areas.**

2.126 Professor Halsey examined a similar range of barriers to regional, rural and remote education in his review and evidence to this inquiry supports his findings. While noting the government has agreed with the recommendations of the Halsey review, the committee welcomes the provision of a clear plan for how the government will implement many of the specific recommended actions.

2.127 For example, Professor Halsey recommended that the government ensure regional, rural and remote children start school with a strong foundation for learning by improving access to early intervention. The committee notes that in its response to the Halsey review, the government was supportive of this recommendation but it did not outline specific new work in this area.

2.128 In chapter four, the committee recommends that the government provide an updated, comprehensive implementation plan for the recommendations and actions contained in the Halsey review.

2.129 While the committee does not seek to duplicate the recommendations of the Halsey review, it is particularly concerned that children growing up in regional, rural and remote areas are more likely to be developmentally

vulnerable, and have less access to screening and early intervention than those in metropolitan areas. If children are to have their best start in life, and thrive in education, it is critical that developmental vulnerabilities are identified and addressed early. The committee would like to see detail regarding increased early intervention services in regional, rural and remote communities in the government's implementation plan for the Halsey review.

2.130   Professor Halsey also recommended the government improve the availability, accessibility and affordability of ICT for regional, rural and remote schools, teachers, students, parents and communities. The committee notes that the government's response to this recommendation does not include ongoing actions beyond 2018, although significant work is being done in this space. The committee expects the government to outline how it will improve ICT availability and affordability in regional, rural and remote education contexts in its implementation plan for the Halsey review.

2.131   The committee is concerned that education for many students with disability in regional, rural and remote communities is not inclusive.

2.132   The committee recognises that students with disability have better education outcomes when they attend school in the general school community, rather than being provided education separately. Children and young people with disability require reasonable adjustments and support to allow them to access the curriculum and participate at school. Teachers need to be trained and supported to provide inclusive education for students with disability.

2.133   The committee is concerned that current discrimination laws may not adequately protect the right to inclusive education for students with disability. Options for inclusive education legislation should be more fully investigated.

2.134   The committee notes that the current National Disability Strategy, which sets out a national approach to supporting people with disability to maximise their potential and participate as equal citizens in Australian society, is due to expire in 2020.[151]

2.135   Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments across Australia are currently working, in consultation with people with disability, to

---

151 Department of Social Services, *Developing the new National Disability Strategy*, December 2019, <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-a-new-national-disability-strategy/developing-the-new-national-disability-strategy>, accessed 9 September 2020.

develop the new National Disability Strategy to take effect from the start of 2021.[152]

2.136   The previous National Disability Strategy included policy directions to:

- Strengthen the capability of all education providers to deliver inclusive high quality educational programs for people with all abilities from early childhood through adulthood

- Focus on reducing the disparity in educational outcomes for people with a disability and others

- Ensure that government reforms and initiatives for early childhood, education, training and skill development are responsive to the needs of people with disability, and

- Improve pathways for students with disability from school to further education, employment and lifelong learning.[153]

Recommendation 2

2.137   **The committee recommends that the government reaffirm its commitment to inclusive education in the new National Disability Strategy in 2021, and include a focus on ensuring inclusive education for children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote locations.**

In the development of the new Strategy, the government should consider whether a national inclusive education act is required to protect the right to inclusive education for students with disability.

2.138   There may be merit in allowing schools in regional, rural and remote communities to provide NDIS services directly to students with disability. The committee encourages the Minister for Education to work with the Minister for the NDIS to investigate the benefits and feasibility of allowing schools to become NDIS providers.

2.139   The committee recognises the profound disadvantage that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience, particularly in remote areas of Australia.

2.140   The committee is aware that significant work is required to develop policies to meet the new Closing the Gap targets and reduce the disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

---

152 Department of Social Services, *Developing the new National Disability Strategy*, December 2019, <https://www.dss.gov.au/disability-and-carers-a-new-national-disability-strategy/developing-the-new-national-disability-strategy>, accessed 9 September 2020.

153 Department of Social Services, *National Disability Strategy 2010-2020*, pp. 54-6.

peoples. This will require the Commonwealth to work in partnership with the states and territories, and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations. It will also require a sustained commitment to, and investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander community controlled organisations, particularly those that provide health care and family support services.

2.141　Evidence to this inquiry has shown the benefits of wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services. In the following chapter, the committee recommends the government provide greater flexibility and surety in funding for integrated family services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

2.142　Other examples of innovative service provision that show potential for wider application include RFW's Fitzroy Crossing model that brings health specialists to remote schools via telehealth. The committee encourages the government to consider scaling up this model to support other remote communities and schools.

2.143　The committee is concerned that racism continues to be experienced by many Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This requires a renewed commitment to respect and understanding across the Australian community and in schools. Evidence in chapter four suggests that the wider incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, culture and languages in schools and improved teacher training in cultural awareness and the skills required to work competently and sensitively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will assist in reducing racism and discrimination in schools.

2.144　The burden and scale of mental health challenges in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been recognised in a new Closing the Gap target that seeks to improve the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and achieve a significant and sustained reduction in suicides. The committee supports this new target and sees an urgent need for policies and programs that better support the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recommendation 3

2.145   **The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth set out a roadmap for improving the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including improved access to mental health treatment and support.**

2.146   The committee is concerned by evidence that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families go without access to electricity, particularly in regions that regularly experience extreme heat.

2.147   The committee notes that, as part of the new Closing the Gap agreement, the government has committed to developing a community infrastructure target by July 2021 that will measure progress towards parity in infrastructure, essential services (such as electricity supply), and environmental health and conditions.[154]

2.148   The committee encourages the government to consider the impact of pre-paid smart meters and the rate of income support payments on energy security in the development of policies to meet the new community infrastructure target.

---

154 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720> viewed 30 July 2020, p. 36.