

Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments

Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

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**Prepared by: Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations
of New South Wales**

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Introduction

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful to Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training for this opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into education in remote and complex environments. P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents¹ and families.

The core belief of P&C Federation is that the education of our children and youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource. Under Australian legislation and international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments are obligated to ensure schooling is available to all students. It is therefore the responsibility of governments to help our students reach their full potential by ensuring equitable funding for education.

P&C Federation Feedback

There are at least three are at least three broad areas that are highly pertinent to students in remote areas:

1. Technology in school learning
2. The availability and quality of teachers
3. Preparation for life after school

An outline of challenges in these areas and some initial recommendations for each is provided below.

1. Technology in school learning

Due to Australia's large geographic size and low population density, some students in remoter areas must access their education through distance schools, which depend on reliable telecommunications technology to work. In 2017, P&C Federation conducted a survey of members in rural, regional and remote (RRR) areas, which found that that when asked to rate on a scale of 1-10 the importance of online communications technology to the quality of education in their school, 70% rated it over 5.

P&C Federation has heard numerous cases where the effectiveness of this education is hampered by the unreliability of internet and communications technology in RRR areas. This is largely because providing such services becomes more expensive with remoteness, as was made clear by Telstra in its 2015 submission to a review into regional telecommunications,

¹ "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

which stated that the “key barrier to extending mobile coverage is the simple commercial reality that, as population density declines and potential coverage areas become more remote, the business case for investing in coverage becomes weaker. Naturally, there is a point at which the business case fails.”²

The Sky Muster satellite ameliorates this somewhat, as it provides Internet access to very remote areas. However, it was conceded that the service offered by satellite “will never be as reliable as what many people would get in the metropolitan areas. It uses a 30-gigahertz band that is susceptible to rain fade, so when there is heavy rain it is going to go out, and there really is not anything that we can do.”³

Technology also impacts the quality of education in physical classrooms, which now frequently utilise Internet technology in teaching and learning. In remoter areas, a common problem is a lack of ICT support technicians: 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.

Recommendations:

- Investigate how the Sky Muster Satellite can better serve very remote areas
- Ensure all schools are provided with permanent ICT support technicians

2. The availability and quality of teachers

A constant challenge for schools in remoter areas is gaining and retaining a sufficient number of specialist qualified teachers able to deliver the curriculum. The disincentives for teachers to move to remoter areas – such as the costs of moving, the remoteness itself – can often counteract attempts to address this challenge. Consequently, many schools require teachers to teach subjects outside their field of expertise to make up for the shortfall – in remote locations, about 41% of Years 7-10 teachers teach out-of-field at least some of the time, compared to 24% of metropolitan teachers.⁴ A 2017 survey conducted by P&C Federation of its members in RRR areas found that 74% of respondents believed RRR schools are disadvantaged in relation to specialist subject trained teachers. In this same survey, over 80% of respondents listed quality of teaching staff as the factor that has the single biggest impact on education in RRR areas.

² Telstra. 2015. *Submission to the Department of Communications 2015 Regional Telecommunications Independent Review Committee*, p.2

³ *Environment and Communications Committee Estimates*. 28 February 2017, p. 186

⁴ Figure 6 in Weldon, P.R. 2016. *Out-of-field teaching in Australian secondary schools. (Policy Insights ; n.6)*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)

Recommendations:

- Encourage teachers to undertake experience exchange programs in other RRR schools, under which teachers spend extended periods of time (e.g. one week, term or six months) in other schools. This could be done within a specific period of time. This would allow the teachers to gain exposure to different teaching methods and expectations, and to foster fresh ideas.
- All university teaching degrees include teacher training with a specific focus on RRR schools, and teacher 'pracs' include a RRR school. Offer incentives for current teachers in metropolitan areas to undertake a period of teachers in a RRR school.

We had put these recommendations to the Commonwealth Government in 2017, in our submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education. That review recommended the government ensure that RRR contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in the selection and pre-service education of teachers, initial appointment processes and their on-going professional support, along with some actions to implement it. The Commonwealth Government has endorsed this recommendation.

3. Preparation for life after school

There are several challenges for students in remoter areas regarding preparing for post-school life:

- Access to career advice: the large geographic size and sparse population of non-metropolitan Australia means that services such as career expos are not as readily available for students in remoter areas. Also in New South Wales, it is entirely up to school principals to determine how many career advisers their school will have, and in remoter areas the available pool is likely to be smaller.
- Lack of focus on vocational options: In New South Wales, students in regional areas are considerably more likely to be in a VET Cert I-III course or apprenticeship, or to be in a traineeship.⁵ TAFE had previously occupied a central position in RRR education in New South Wales, however the State Government has largely replaced TAFE as it had existed with competing training organisations that have a wide range of capabilities, fee structures and quality of service. The higher costs of servicing RRR areas means RRR areas have become more neglected in available training services.
- Opportunities in remoter areas: There is frequently a lack of exposure to various industries and job opportunities to inspire young people in remoter areas. At the same

⁵ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. 2019. *NSW secondary students' post-school destinations and expectations report, 2018*

time, many young people in the country do not want to live in metropolitan areas due to the difference in cultural upbringing and pace of life.

Recommendations:

- Expose RRR students to more career information throughout their school years in order to increase career-oriented attitudes in these areas. Careers advisers visiting schools may expose students to a greater number of career or study options. Initiatives such as 'Rural Careers Advisory Week' in which rural careers advisers could attend several higher education institutions' information sessions could also be beneficial.⁶
- Develop careers expos across RRR schools. Funding to support RRR students to attend would also be necessary.
- Promote the importance of trade jobs and foster more consistent, high quality trade based training centres as an alternative to academic achievements.
- Invest in industry in RRR areas to encourage young people in these areas as to the opportunities that are available.

Other points:

Government schools comprise about 65% of all school students, yet under the national education funding model, the large bulk of Federal education funding flows to non-government schools, despite non-government schools being generally better resourced. While this underfunding exists, government school students are not operating on an equal playing field. Equitable funding that allows RRR government school students to fulfill their full potential would be one of the most positive steps the Federal Government could take.

Although this inquiry's terms of reference focus on remote environments, the concept of 'complex environments' can be interpreted more broadly than that. Below are some other learning environments that can be characterised as complex:

- Schools for specific purposes
- Schools with students with disabilities
- Schools with a large portion of students from low-income families
- Schools with large diversity of cultural backgrounds

⁶ First proposed in McConnell. 2015. *'Tipping Points' to Higher Education for NSW Rural and Remote Students*. NSW Department of Education.

Government schools cater to a high proportion of students in many of the above areas, and a national education funding model that provides government school students with equitable funding would be enormously beneficial.

