



Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education.

Submission from
Catholic School Parents Australia
August 2017

About Catholic School Parents Australia

Catholic School Parents Australia is recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education as the national body representing and advocating for the parents and guardians of over 765,000 children and young people who attend 1737 Catholic schools across Australia. CSPA works in collaboration and consultation with the National Catholic Education Commission.

Catholic School Parents Australia

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) is the peak national body representing the parents and carers of over 765,000 children in 1737 Australian Catholic schools. This represents over 20% of all Australian students. Notably there are over ten remote areas in Australia where the only school is a Catholic school.

CSPA's membership is made up of the Catholic school parent associations of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT. In turn, each member parent body plays an advocacy role for all parents and carers through their Parents & Friends Associations, community group or school advisory boards at the local school level. CSPA Member State and ACT representatives also work in liaison with Catholic education authorities at diocesan level and with their State Catholic Education Commissions.

Introduction

The *Discussion Paper - Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* clearly outlines the generally lower education achievement of students from regional/rural/remote settings. Following is some discussion around a number of proposed actions that could be introduced or reinvigorated if the goals as outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* are to be better met for students in these regional/rural/remote settings.

By way of introduction, this submission by Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) endorses submissions of other key Catholic agencies including the National Catholic Education Commission, various State, ACT & NT Catholic education commissions and Catholic primary and secondary principal associations.

Further to endorsing these submissions, CSPA makes the following comments under the titles of:

- A. Parent engagement;
- B. Student characteristics;
- C. Attraction and retention of quality staff; and
- D. Information Communication and Technology.

A. PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Parents are an essential partner in the education communities of Catholic schools and are considered the first and continuing educators of their children. CSPA and its members support opportunities for parents to be involved in the life of the school through such undertakings as volunteering, participation in governance and advisory bodies and taking up opportunities to be authentically engaged in the learning, well-being and academic development of their

children. Supported by over 30 years of research, parent engagement has been proven to have a positive impact on the social and emotional as well as academic learning outcomes of students; for example refer to Redding *et.al* (2004); Pushor (2007, 2013, 2015); Harris, *et.al.* (2009); Emerson, *et.al.* (2012); Mapps (2014); Barr & Saltmarsh (2014); Fox (2015).

Genuine parent engagement requires “...an intentional and collaborative strategy by school communities to support and leverage the knowledge, capacities and social capital of families to improve learning and well-being outcomes for all children and young people.” (Agreed Australian definition of parent engagement in the schooling context, 2014). Parent engagement is one of the federal government’s cornerstones of the *Students First* agenda, and is key to improving the learning outcomes of children in regional/rural/remote school settings. A key strategy will be in determining how additional resourcing can be identified and costed to support parent engagement initiatives in these contexts.

At the centre of genuine parent engagement strategies is the relationship between parents and the school, especially the school leaders who can lead positive expectation around this and in so doing, create a culture of engagement throughout their learning communities.

School leaders and staff require adequate training and understanding of how to engage with their communities and how parent engagement can impact student learning. In many to most rural and remote areas around Australia, the local people are very community focused and parents engaging with the school is part of the culture. Although, arguably, this relationship is often found to be *involvement* rather than *engagement*. In other areas, children often travel to school by bus and parents rarely enter the school. This can present a challenge for many remote school communities in engaging with families.

Technology such as apps and the internet have enabled schools to provide information for parents and to begin to build relationships and engage with parents by sharing the learning of students. Many schools, however may not have the resources or capacity for technology to enable interaction with remote families, resulting in students not being as supported as they could be both at school and in the home. The provision of resourcing to assist this would potentially have positive impact around engaging parents more with their children’s learning.

The submission by the Queensland Catholic Education Commission to the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* outlines student attendance rates and, when compared to their city peers, attendance rates are lower for students in regional/rural/ remote school settings. Research into parent engagement indicates that when children are supported by their parents through their education, attendance rates can be improved, especially for students from lower SES backgrounds – which is a characteristic of some remote schools (e.g. refer to Paterson, 2011; Emerson *et.al.*, 2012).

More broadly, work around parent engagement aims to:

- Build parent capacity to engage in the education of their child – in understanding what the expectations of the school and students are and how they can be supported at home;
- Improve student interest and engagement in learning, as well as improve student behaviours;
- Improve student retention rates and build support teams around students to ensure they remain at school;
- Provide a focus on professional learning for leaders and teachers in schools so that capacity building to engage with parents is maximised; and
- Provide professional learning for parent leaders in schools towards developing a partnership approach to parent engagement in learning communities.

Parent access to education information

There are various ways that parents can access education information:

1. Online access to websites and emails;
2. Mobile phone apps; and
3. Face to face interaction with school leaders and teaching staff.

There are challenges with each of these in rural, remote and isolated communities. For example, some communities may not have access to the internet and therefore may not have the skills or capacity required to access information online; and many parents may work quite a distance from the school and therefore may be unable to be physically present in a school to interact face to face. Increased access to technology in remote areas would open up opportunities for more schools to interact and communicate and engage with parents online, particularly in these remote areas.

Schools and government education agencies need to provide information for a diverse range of parents, however the information provided must be relevant for each school context. For example, the Australian curriculum website may not be relevant for Victorian schools and is not totally accurate information for all Catholic school parents. Often parents are left to interpret information as it is not explained in a way that is easily understood.

The Australian curriculum website may consider further links to each State or Territory to guide parents in accessing accurate and relevant resources. Ultimately, each school must provide information for parents on their child's progress. This may be delivered in various formats and in ways that are relatable for parents, engaging them in learning in the process.

Maintaining the family

Regional, rural and remote families are often presented with a dilemma of sending their children from a very young age away to boarding school. While it may be challenging to reverse this trend as it is often part of a family's tradition, this can contribute to the demise of various regional/rural/remote communities, especially where existing local school options are considered inadequate.

Improving job opportunities in these areas as well as the quality of education options and quality teaching staff may provide the incentive for families to send their children to local schools, ultimately building the social and intellectual capital of the area.

Parent engagement also has a role to play in maintaining the fabric of family life – by engaging in children’s learning, parents are continuing to build positive relationships with their children and with the local school community.

A Future Focus

Further dialogue is required to identify specific resourcing to enrich parent engagement practices in all schools. For example, specific strategies could be identified through reference to outcomes from current research* underway into school-parent engagement being conducted in partnership by the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA). This research involves principals and parents from the Government, Independent and Catholic school sectors. A final report will be available from May 2018 and will include tool-kits with strategies for principals, teachers and parents towards the promotion and implementing of parent engagement.

[*This project is funded by the Australian Department of Education and Training through the Grants and Awards Programme 2015-16 to 2018-19].

B. STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

As an introduction, it is noted that in approximately ten remote Australian contexts, the Catholic school is the only school option available to parents. Often in these settings, student needs are proportionally higher when compared with students in less remote settings.

Students with disability

A clear concern for parents is the provision of adequate resources for students with disability. There are increasing numbers of students with disability seeking enrolment in Catholic schools and being able to ‘best’ cater for their needs very much depends on the location of the school.

A key aspect is access to social and health services including family support, counselling and specialist health providers. CSPA is aware of various Catholic authorities that locate specialist staff, e.g. psychologist trained counsellors, in regional centres, and they travel to various remote centres to provide these services. The increased likelihood of domestic violence in some isolated settings only serves to further exacerbate these needs. Adequate resourcing of existing initiatives is critical, as is the need to expand these services to other rural and remote locations.

The robust verification of student need is vital to the on-going adequate provision of resources for this purpose. There has been much cross-sectoral concern expressed around the inadequacy

of the NCCD in accurately and reliably determining student needs. Continuing to disregard these concerns is likely to lead to maximum negative impact on the most vulnerable students, a significant number of whom are found in regional, rural and remote contexts.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

CSPA understands that adequately providing for the needs of students in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities is an enormous challenge for many schools. A key focus could be towards increasing the assistance around training more local indigenous and Torres Strait officers to work in these communities. While not in any way judging current, dedicated staff who work in these settings, an increase in the number of specialists from the local community could hopefully better cater culturally for the social and emotional needs of students in those communities.

Another focus which has been developed in some Catholic settings is the provision of allied health services through MOUs with existing external education and health providers – this not only provides student access to allied health professionals but also provides training for students within a VET pathway.

The provision of adequate resourcing to initiate or continue this work is vital.

C. ATTRACTION AND RETENTION OF QUALITY STAFF

CSPA understands that Catholic education authorities provide much additional resourcing to attract and retain quality staff for their schools in remote and isolated settings. Quality staff, especially resourceful, versatile staff with a ‘can-do’ attitude, are required to provide appropriate education opportunities for these students. This is seen as significant particularly in those settings where Catholic education is the sole provider. Additional resourcing for these staffing initiatives requires adequate funding for this to be continued.

Teachers may need incentives to teach in rural, remote and isolated areas. While in no way wishing to detract from the excellent teachers who are often found in these more isolated settings, it is noted that many of these schools tend to struggle when it comes to attracting quality teachers to their communities. Also, teaching staffs in these schools are often dominantly early career teachers who have little teaching experience to draw upon. Added to this, optional, on-going professional learning opportunities are usually not as readily available as is the case in city contexts.

It is suggested that living away from home or living cost incentives such as those offered to medical practitioners, dentists and emergency services workers may be offered to attract more experienced teachers to these communities.

Initial teacher education programs could include student teacher classes taking place in these schools to immerse student teachers in rural and remote settings. Once they experience the unique learning environment and community, it may become more appealing for teachers to consider those schools. The provision of resourcing for selected teachers to undertake short-term teaching experiences in these settings could help address these challenges through more taking up these placements.

Recruitment, incentives, accommodation and mobility

It is understood that many Catholic education authorities undertake a variety of advertising to promote working in schools in regional/rural/remote communities. These include promotional videos and materials espousing the positive benefits of working in such settings. Parents of school students in these settings appreciate the additional resourcing which is provided to access quality teachers and senior leadership to these schools.

Some of these incentives include:

- Incentive payments for one to five years in the most remote and isolated settings;
- Accumulation of LSL at a higher rate;
- Subsidised accommodation;
- Provision of permanent employment status;
- Provisions and perhaps employer incentives for pre-service teachers to undertake university teaching practice in regional, rural and/or remote settings;
- Opportunities for aspiring principals within an organisation to be given opportunity to undertake some shadowing of principals in regional, rural and/or remote settings;
- Education providers should be encouraged to have staff working in rural and remote settings to complete entry and exit surveys to collect data re what works/does not work for attracting and retaining them in these settings; and
- Guaranteed employment in a less isolated setting after a period of employment.

Accessing specialist resources

CSPA understands there are key challenges to accessing teachers in specialist curriculum areas. While comments above are relevant to this, access to teaching via a remote link to classroom teaching in a 'sister school' has been used. There are various challenges around resourcing this including: the provision of adequate and dedicated hardware and facilities in both school settings, constraints around pairing up teaching times between the 'sister schools' and heavy reliance on adequate internet access. However, the access to adequate funding to resource such innovation is a key.

An important principle of the Australian Curriculum is that, as a minimum, children receive the same and consistent education opportunities no matter where they are in Australia. Care should be taken to localise the core of the Australian Curriculum being provided as it may compromise the significant gains made in creating an Australian Standard. This can be balanced by ensuring at Secondary Colleges VET Training is also provided to enable students to gain qualifications relevant to the labour needs and work opportunities in the local area.

Having VET partnerships with local businesses is a key in many isolated communities, for example, CSPA representatives are aware of many instances of the success of these in isolated mining communities.

In some regional, rural and/or remote settings there are alternate Catholic education contexts such as Flexible Learning Centres and these are for disengaged youth who may have exhausted several opportunities in mainstream school settings. The continued resourcing of these Catholic facilities is strongly supported by CSPA by way of offering opportunities to some of the most educationally marginalised from any sector of education. Features such as alternate curriculum studies which have been designed with assistance from students and the provision of transport for many students to and from the centres is expensive to resource however ‘life-giving’ for most who have this opportunity. CSPA strongly supports the on-going provision of these alternate educational settings and the resourcing required for their operations.

Professional development

The formation and professional development of staff in regional, rural and remote school settings is a key requirement towards providing effective education opportunities to all students. Importantly, as part of attracting staff to these areas, it is important that professional development opportunities offered elsewhere are not compromised by the location of a school. CSPA understands that the delivery of professional development to staff in these settings is facilitated through:

- Digital technology;
- Professional networking between schools;
- Remote access to mentors and coaches to those in equivalent roles in other Catholic school settings;
- Adequate resourcing of teacher replacement costs for teachers out of the school for professional development;
- In-school training and access to remote, external providers; and
- Sponsored university studies.

Also, CSPA understands that face-to-face opportunities are given for professional development to staff from these more isolated settings and underlines the additional time of hours/days of travel to ‘central office’ for such undertakings. Additional resourcing is required to provide these opportunities and level the playing field of having appropriately qualified teachers in regional, rural and remote settings.

D. INFORMATION COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The provision of quality internet access in regional, rural and remote settings can be a playing field leveller around the provision of equitable learning opportunities for these students compared with their metropolitan peers. Unfortunately, it is our observation that IT is often a game changer for all the wrong reasons in these contexts. Resources are required to continue to pursue equitable access to digital technologies in many remote and rural settings.

CSPA believes that Catholic education plays a significant role in providing educational options in many regional, rural, remote and isolated locations, especially in those locations where Catholic education is the sole provider. CSPA thanks the federal government for providing the opportunity for this feedback.

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