



## **Introduction**

The Australian Association of Special Education (Inc.) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the *Independent Review of Regional, Rural & Remote Education*.

The focus of our submission will address the following specific themes addressed in the discussion paper of July 2017:

6.2 Teachers and teaching

6.4 School & community

6.5 Information and communication technology

6.9 Transitioning beyond school

For an overall response to 6.1 Curriculum & Assessment, please refer to our paper “Quality Education for Students with Special Needs” (<http://aase.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/documents/Quality---Education---Position---Paper.pdf>)

These issues identified in the Review’s *Terms of Reference* and *Discussion Paper* align closely with the aims of our association and we feel we have the expertise and research based knowledge to provide advice on these points.

## **The Aims of AASE**

The Australian Association of Special Education Inc is the national peak body of professionals, other paraprofessionals and community members with expertise and/or interest in the education of children and young people with special education needs.

The key aims of AASE are to:

- a) Provide educational leadership to the professional and wider community
- b) Advocate for quality education for all
- c) Commission, participate in and disseminate quality research to inform educational practice
- d) Arrange, promote and facilitate high quality professional learning events and conferences
- e) Coach, mentor and model best practice in teaching and leadership
- f) Build partnerships with universities, service providers and the community, and
- g) Actively influence policy and decision-making.

## **6.2 Teachers and teaching**

The quality of teachers and their instructional skills have significant impacts on student learning (Hattie, 2009). There is emerging research that shows teachers with a special education qualification achieve better outcomes for students with disability (Feng & Sass, 2012). Qualified special educators are more likely to know about and use evidence-based practices for students with disability. Employing and retaining highly competent teachers for regional, rural, and remote schools is essential to enhancing the positive engagement and learning outcomes of **all** students, including those with disability.

The provision of effective, evidence-based educational programs for students with disability in inclusive and segregated settings requires specialist teachers (special educators) with qualifications in special and/or inclusive education to undertake classroom, support and executive positions. The specialist knowledge and skills required by these teachers is typically beyond what can be provided in initial teacher

education programs and internal professional learning programs. Ensuring that teachers are highly skilled will likely contribute to their beliefs of self-efficacy and willingness to be included in regional, rural and remote communities.

Additionally, opportunities that increase the level of community engagement for teachers *prior* to moving to the school, should be planned and implemented. These opportunities could enhance the sense of belonging for both staff and their families. Community engagement activities for teachers can be facilitated by the provision of multi-phased and responsive induction programs.

### *6.2.1 What key initiatives are helping to attract 'top teachers' to regional, rural and remote schools?*

Incentive schemes for teachers in regional, rural and remote areas have been implemented for some time. The contribution of incentive schemes appears to be important for both attracting and retaining valuable teachers, at least intuitively, although little evidence exists for the practice.

Targeted allowances and benefits, provided in the NSW Public system, illustrate significant investments to support teachers in regional, rural and remote locations. The publication *Your Guide To A Great Teaching Career in Rural NSW* presents a range of locality allowances including a fixed long-term contract, medical and dental benefits, travel and accommodation expenses, climate and isolation allowances.

It is important to establish an evidence base for this practice, and determine if these incentives are adequate. More importantly, we should seek to understand how incentives contribute to teacher employment and retainment in regional, rural and remote areas in association with strategies that enhance the self-efficacy and social connectedness of teachers.

### *6.2.2 How can we improve retention of 'top teachers' in regional, rural and remote schools?*

With the appropriate training and support, all teachers have the potential to be "top" teachers. This can be achieved by:

- Providing better preparation for all teachers so they know and can implement effective educational practices for students with special education needs
- A requirement that all teachers in support and special education positions hold a special education qualification (that includes skills in collaborating with and coaching adults)
- A requirement that all regular class teachers have access to support from an appropriately qualified special educator
- Effective on---going professional learning for in---service teachers (individualised, with a coaching and feedback component)
- Provide adequate support and mentoring for teachers who have students with special learning needs, and
- Provide training to school leadership teams to ensure that support is provided to special education personnel in their school.

#### *6.2.3 What professional development should be available for teachers, schools and communities?*

We strongly advocate that support teachers, transition specialists, and teachers in special education units and schools, **must** have a qualification in special education or inclusive education that incorporates the following components:

Curriculum---based assessment, functional behavioural assessment and monitoring of student learning

- Effective programming, including the development of appropriate individual plans and the reporting of progress against these plans
- Effective explicit teaching strategies in basic literacy and numeracy skills; cognitive skills, pro---social behaviour skills, self---help skills and communication skills
- Teaching, mentoring and modelling effective practices for other teachers and School Learning Support Officers
- Ability to work collaboratively with families and include families as partners in the development of IEPs, and
- Skills in identifying evidence based practice.

For teachers who do not have expertise in these areas, professional learning opportunities to provide these skills would be required. In addition, families may need support in making decisions about the adjustments to be provided for their child and in collaboration with teachers and specialist staff, as required under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992).

#### *6.2.4 What innovative approaches could be taken to support a high---quality teaching workforce for regional, rural and remote school communities?*

The following considerations may be applicable to recruitment, retention and professional development domains. These include:

The Scottish government's community hub model in rural areas is worth exploring. In this model, teachers are shared across schools, vocational education sites and other services, so that students have access to specialist teaching staff. The teachers are not aligned to a single school but work across the wider rural community. Since we know there is a shortage of appropriately qualified special education teachers in NSW, this may be one way to ensure all schools have access to qualified personnel.

More use could be made of video---conferencing, and the provision of professional learning and collaboration opportunities via electronic means. Many city---based events could be made available to regional, rural and remote communities in this way.

- Increasing the training opportunities for pre---service teachers in regional, rural and remote areas (e.g. practicum). These opportunities would align with AITSL Standards.

#### **6.4 School and Community**

As a basic starting point, all teachers need to be well trained and supported to use evidence---based instructional strategies, which contribute to meaningful learning outcomes for students (Scott, Hirn & Cooper, 2017). The interactions between schools, families and the broader community are closely interconnected with achieving these outcomes. The literature concerning general student engagement has identified the social and academic benefits of active family involvement with school (Lewis, 2009). These benefits include an increase in affective connections between families and teachers, such as a sense of belonging and purpose among students. As the example provided in this inquiry's discussion paper notes, "Hopefulness is at the heart of building and nurturing students' aspirations and expectations". For students with special educational needs, including emotional and behavioural difficulties, and disability, the implementation of collaborative planning processes has

been identified as an evidence---based practice (Barrett, Weist & Eber, 2013). In particular, the 'wrap---around' personalised planning process is considered highly effective (Strnadova & Cumming, 2016). The experience of marginalisation of families, due to disability, mental health difficulties and geographical isolation, makes the construction of support mechanisms imperative. In particular, child---related problem behaviour most likely contributes to significant family stress, and increases in anxiety and depression (Durand, Hieneman, Clarke, Wang & Rinadi, 2012). The collaborative planning process further increases the likelihood of instructional practices and specialist services being used effectively, as they are built around an agreed plan for

each student. In regional, rural and remote areas of Australia, there are both strengths and weaknesses within school---community relationships, in comparison to Metropolitan areas. For example, the level of 'trust' between stakeholders may be influenced by the size of the communities, or the degree of insider knowledge being shared. Regardless of those factors, trust can be enhanced by a commitment to create

systems, at the school level, to involve families in planning. This aspect is particularly important for students with special educational needs.

#### *6.4.1 What new and innovative approaches are you aware of that improve the connection between schools and the broader community?*

The Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework is a promising system-based approach for increasing the likelihood of improved student outcomes, including family and community engagement. The framework emphasises critical universal features that embrace all students, teachers and families. A continuum of tiers is used to ensure additional supports are in place for students who may require more targeted or personalised support:

The MTSS framework has six core defining features (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016):

1. Team based leadership and coordination
2. Evaluation of implementation fidelity
3. Continuum of evidence-based practices
4. Continuous data-based progress monitoring and decision-making
5. Comprehensive universal screening
6. On-going professional development including coaching with local content expertise

If a goal of the school is to increase participation of families, particularly those with children who are more easily marginalised due to disability, mental health and behavioural difficulties, a pro-social focus needs to be developed. The school's capacity, through system creation, needs to be developed at universal, targeted and personalised support levels. Lewis (2009) identifies awareness, involvement and support as essential features to build trust and family connectedness across these three levels. Awareness relates to the shared understanding between families, community and school; involvement relates to the measurable level of interaction between families and schools; support is the level of the school's active role to provide strategies to families for both social and academic learning.

For the delivery of tertiary or personalised supports, training services need to be accessible for behavioural family interventions (Dadds & Dawes, 2005). In particular, the use of evidence-based functional behavioural assessment to understand the relationships underpinning the behaviour, has to be available, to create an effective family centred intervention plan (Walker, Chung & Bonnet, 2017). Recent evidence suggests increasing parents self-efficacy, particularly family optimism, can change child problem behaviour directly and indirectly (Durand et al, 2012).

The experience of implementing MTSS across the education systems in Australia is at an early stage. Various Australian states have made some partial or significant investments in systems underpinned by MTSS; Positive Behaviour for Learning in Queensland and NSW; School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support in Victoria and Western Australia.

There is not a consistent and sustainable approach nationally or within states to enable the full delivery of family---school connectedness that the MTSS process promises. Furthermore, the use of effective personalised planning processes for students that satisfy the 'wrap---around' criteria is not fully understood nor implemented with fidelity in Australian jurisdictions. Similarly, the use of functional behavioural assessment that informs the content of personalised plans is limited due to insufficient training capacity at school system and university levels. The initial training of teachers is a key opportunity to develop the necessary skills for working collaboratively with families and developing personalised plans for students, within a school---wide framework.

Access to technical support, for initial training and sustained mentoring of school leadership, is influenced by geographical isolation and the availability of local expertise. Partnerships between schools, education sector administrations with universities and other professionals, may assist with developing schools' capacity to implement MTSS. A partnership could focus on training and mentoring, but also include evaluation and research goals.

## **6.5 Information and Communication Technology**

Although the digital divide has narrowed in Australia, it has deepened, as the disadvantages of being offline grow. Access to technology and the Internet is becoming more and more important, as businesses and government shift their resources, provision of information, and opportunities to interact to online platforms. This is more of an issue in regional, rural and remote communities, where access to the Internet may be a challenge. In 2014---2015, only 79% of households had Internet access (Ewing, 2016). In order to function effectively in tomorrow's world, students of today must possess technological skills and expertise.

*6.5.1 What has to be done to ensure ICT supports education in regional, rural and remote schools and communities like it does in the 'best of the best' city schools?*

All schools need to have both the hardware and the infrastructure to support classroom technology use. This would include:

- Internet access
- Access to power points to charge devices
- Acquisition and management of software/applications. There should be a designated individual at each school to access to devices, particularly mobile devices. Johnson, Adams, and Haywood (2011) list tablet devices such as the iPad as one of the six technologies that will emerge in mainstream education in their Horizon Report, which identifies and describes technologies that are likely to have a large impact on teaching, learning, and research globally. Teachers in Australia have identified the iPad as a useful resource for developing academic, communication, social and functional skills for students with special learning needs (Chambers, Jones, McGhie-Richmond, Riley, May-Poole, Orlando, Simsek, &

Wilcox, 2017).

- Professional development for teachers in the area of effectively incorporating ICT into their practice to support students in improving their educational outcomes and preparing them for post---school life

#### *6.5.2 How could ICT be used to improve educational outcomes for regional, rural, remote students?*

Cumming, Draper Rodriguez, and Strnadova (2013) identified the following key ICT contributions:

- Internet access provides students with access to the world
- Textbook replacement, with capabilities such as text to speech, quick access to pronunciation, definitions, and synonyms
- Gives teachers the ability to individualise teaching, learning and communication
- Use of the internet for collaboration between teachers in regional, rural and remote areas, and special educators and other professionals based in other places.
- Use of the internet for contact and communication with families
- Use of the internet to deliver professional learning to teachers in regional, rural and remote schools, including the use of video to provide individualised coaching and feedback
- Assistive technology for students with and without disabilities
  - a. Communication (AAC, electronic PECS)
  - b. Behaviour (video modelling, FBA, BIP, social stories, social skills instruction, token economies)
  - c. Language and literacy instruction (oral language, reading, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, spelling)
  - d. Mathematics (conceptual understanding, procedural fluency, declarative knowledge, tools)

Although an evidence base for using mobile technology for teaching and learning is growing over time (Chambers, et al., 2017; Cumming & Draper Rodriguez, 2017; Stephenson & Limbrick, 2015), it must be noted that technology should be infused into evidence based teaching and learning practice.

#### *6.5.3 What are the main barriers to regional, rural and remote schools realising the full potential benefits of ICT?*

The key points may summarised as:

- Access to the Internet

- Access to hardware, which may be alleviated through the use of bring your own device (BYOD) programs (McClean, 2016)
- Lack of expertise to implement technology-enhanced teaching and learning
- Access to research on evidence based practice and how to effectively infuse technology into current teaching practice

## **6.9 Transitioning beyond school**

AASE advocates for quality outcomes for all students, with a need to use a lifespan perspective on learning and support. There are many critical transition points for people, and these highlight the need for effective systems of support and effective instructional methodologies. Typically, students will transition into school from home or a before-school setting (childcare or pre-school), from primary to high school and finally from high school to work, further education or other post-school option. For some students with special educational needs, a change of teacher every year is a transition challenge. Although transition planning is not federally mandated in

Australia, as it is in other countries, timely and careful planning of schooling transitions for students with disabilities is still considered to be best practice (NSW Parliament, 2012). One of the major recommendations of the Standing Committee on Social Issues (NSW Parliament, 2012) was “that legislation be introduced to mandate transition planning for students with additional or complex needs” (p. xi). This Committee also raised issues such as problematic access to and transfer of information, funding related to educational transitions of students with disabilities, and fragmented responsibility for these transitions across various specialised services that do not always communicate effectively with each other. Yet, many of these concerns remain not addressed five years later.

Transition from primary to secondary education can be challenging for students with disabilities (Chambers & Coffey, 2013; Strnadová & Cumming, 2016), yet this transition seems to be neglected in NSW schools. According to a recent survey study (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014), school visits and orientation programs in term 4 prior to transition to a secondary school, which are considered best practice (Carter Brock, & Trainor, 2014), are common in NSW schools. There is however an inconsistency in regards to the execution of this practice. The reported visits varied in length from one to four half-days, and only a couple of schools described more intensive transition programs. The respondents in this study called for better collaboration between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools, not only prior to but also post-transition. There are similar concerns about transition to post-school life. Strnadová and Cumming’s (2014) research into transition practices in NSW schools revealed that while some evidence-based practices are in place when it comes to transition planning for post-school life (e.g., supporting students with disabilities in visiting work expositions, and arranging for them work experience in years 10 to 12), other important evidence-based practices were missing (e.g., supporting students’ self-determination and independence, and developing individual transition plans).



*6.9.1 Are there changes that should be made to education, training and employment policies and practices which would improve post school opportunities for regional, rural and remote young people?*

Research suggests that there is insufficient teacher knowledge in:

- a. Inclusive education practices (Carter, Stephenson, & Strnadová, 2011)
- b. Proactive classroom behavior management practices (O'Neill, 2015; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012), and
- c. Transition planning and support (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Strnadová, Cumming, & Danker, 2016).

Furthermore, our research also indicates that students (especially those with higher support needs, such as with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder) are not involved in transition planning. Yet, there are numerous evidence---based transition practices and programs, designed for preparing students for transition planning in meaningful ways (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). This is worrying given Australia's commitment to United Nation protocols for such as the Convention for Persons with Disabilities. Despite no federal mandate for the provision of individual education programs or transition plans, the signing of international and national conventions does make us morally bound to provide both (see O'Neill, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2016), along with the use of evidence based practices in instruction and behaviour management.

In 2010, the NSW Parliamentary Committee recommended that additional resources and time be allocated to learning support teachers to develop individual education programs (IEPs). Transition plans and planning are an integral part of IEPs (O'Neill, Strnadová, & Cumming, 2016). We are concerned at teachers' lack of preparation or knowledge in the area of transition planning in NSW (O'Neill, Cumming, & Strnadová, in press; Strnadová & Cumming, 2014; Strnadová, Cumming, & Danker, 2016). An area which is commonly omitted and/or under---developed in NSW schools is student --- and family---focused transition planning (Strnadová & Cumming, 2016; Strnadová &

Cumming, 2014; Strnadová, Cumming, & Danker, 2016). Without adequate preparation, learning support teachers or transition specialists in high schools will struggle to address transitions adequately, leading to undue stress for students, their families, and teachers, as well as poor educational and life outcomes (Sitlington, Neubert, & Clark, 2010).

*6.9.2 Are there innovative models of accommodation delivery that could benefit regional, rural and remote tertiary students studying away from home?*

No existing models could be found, however, there is a depth of knowledge on evidence-based transition practices (see National Technical Assistant Center for Transitions, n.d.).

This knowledge is seldom offered to teachers as professional learning or courses in NSW. This is likely due to transition planning not being mandatory in Australia. The post-graduate course offered at UNSW (EDST5129 *Transitions in Lives of Students with Disabilities*) is, to our knowledge, the only post-graduate course dedicated to transition planning for individuals with disabilities in NSW. Likewise, the professional learning we offer includes a strong focus on transition planning for students with disabilities across the life-span.

We recommend that all special education programs include a course with a depth of evidence-based transition practices or increase their content in transition planning as part of instruction associated with the IEP. The NSW Department of Education, Catholic Education Office, and the Association for Independent Schools should all look for ways to offer increased professional learning in this underserved area.

Many of these practices require the services of a special education teacher, job coach, or transition specialist. If these do not exist in the area, options for providing services to young people in regional, rural and remote areas include tele-practice, which allows services to be provided via teleconference (Skype, video sharing, instant messaging, email, and telephone) or fly-in-fly-out practitioners who specialise in disability and have the potential to empower regional, rural and remote communities, by building capacity amongst generalist allied health practitioners, educators, and employers (Australian Institute of Family Services, 2016).

#### *6.9.3 What can be done to address the directional flow of regional, rural and remote students moving to cities for further education and/or training?*

The establishment of distance education programs, in both the university and TAFE sectors combined with local internships/employment opportunities. Beginning these programs at the local high schools in the senior years with a mentor/shadowing system. Spiers and Harris (2015) note that although attention has been brought to the lack of practicum placements for regional, rural and remote tertiary students, the problem remains.

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