



APPA Submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

ABOUT APPA

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is the national professional association for primary school principals in Australia, representing over 7200 principals from affiliated Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools in every state and territory.

APPA's advocacy is based on:

- Every child attending a school with high-performing leaders and quality staff;
- The knowledge that primary schools are where Australian children acquire the necessary foundational academic, social and emotional skills to lead fulfilled and enriched lives; and,
- Initiatives, actions and projects that are research informed and encourage contemporary professional learning and growth.

Australia's future is dependent upon an educated population that is responsive to a changing world and the challenges it brings.

OVERVIEW

This submission will focus on the key areas impacting achievements, as presented in the discussion paper. Our emphasis will be on identifying opportunities and presenting ideas for the panel to consider. APPA believes this Review into regional, rural and remote education can provide the policy and practice direction for addressing the needs of schools and communities across Australia.

APPA believes school principals need flexibility and the support to harness locally based decision-making processes in developing and implementing learning programs for students in regional, rural or remote locations. Additionally, the right level of resourcing is required to ensure support and interventions are implemented early in a student's career and sustained until objectives are met. A 'one size fits all' approach does not allow local communities to respond effectively to their needs and requirements. Education authorities should be working with principals and local communities to develop, modify or adapt learning approaches and programs for their community.

The following ideas and suggestions have been developed in consultation with the National Advisory Council (NAC) of APPA. The NAC is comprised of a representative from each of the state and territory principal associations covering Government, Catholic and Independent primary schools.

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

There is a strong expectation that schools respond to the demands of the workforce. What do children need to learn, but also be able to do to demonstrate through that learning? Employers see value in a move from a curriculum based around content, test and measure to a curriculum with a stronger focus on general capabilities that encourages inquiry, innovation, and exploring solutions.

The primary curriculum currently delivered in schools is too often crowded and complex due to the changing and often contradictory expectations and demands of industry and society.

Principals across Australia are dealing with the challenge of implementing a quality curriculum for their students, amid competing interest groups, political viewpoints, national agendas, and state and territory priorities.

In the years of developing the Australian Curriculum, the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) has consistently advocated for what works best in delivering high quality teaching and learning in our primary schools. That is, learning is not siloed but rather it is integrated, connected and meaningful. A strong curriculum is about developing the skills, knowledge and capabilities of our students to function successfully in work and society, today and into the future.

The primary curriculum today should be focused on integrated units of learning with easy access to resources to support the embedded learning. This allows teachers more time and energy to focus on the real needs of their students and improving *how* they teach. The teachers of today are building their capacity by accessing online professional learning on teaching tools, strategies and learning approaches. Professional learning can readily be sought as needed rather than as a system delivers or requires and, often, quality professional learning is found *in action and in the classroom*, with support and feedback from experienced colleagues.

In more recent years, the curriculum has narrowed along with a commensurate focus on national and international testing. While it is critical that, in the primary years, students should be given literacy and numeracy foundations, this should be balanced by a curriculum that is broad, balanced and rich, and allow for deep learning. A contemporary curriculum must provide the learning framework to engage students and allow them to connect to the world. Such a curriculum will inspire students to be innovative and creative as they face challenges. It allows for the view that children are not simply empty vessels to fill but are learners with unique needs, talents, curiosity, and the ability to learn. They are motivated to learn when exposed to opportunities that capture their interest and relate to their world. In rural, regional and remote settings, this is crucial.

We know the bar must be raised on the quality of teaching and learning within and, just as importantly, between schools and the community. We also know that when parents partner with schools and engage with their child's learning, the benefits are many. We need to create 'visibility' in the learning that draws others into what the child is doing.

APPA advocates for the vital role our regional, rural and remote primary principals have in being a leader of learning; a decision maker on curriculum for their students and community. These primary principals, focused on the students in their care, want to be confident and assured that learning is happening through a rich, concept-driven curriculum with deep knowledge and understanding. They are challenged with the task of setting students up to thrive through teachers who are confident and competent in teaching for a dynamic 21st century society.

Giving students in rural, regional and remote communities the best possible opportunity and, more broadly, lifting the achievement of these students requires clear targeting and solid resourcing. APPA recommends that all primary school students have access to a pre-school program that gives access to, and experience of, early childhood education and the support needed in the transition to school. Recognising that isolation, distance and transport present challenges, there could be opportunities in regional or rural towns for government and non-government schools to have shared facilities or early childhood services. For communities and families in remote areas, support for early childhood education would need to come through digital / virtual platforms or other connections with deliverers of services.

In the primary school, curriculum knowledge and development could be enhanced by the implementation of a cross-sector curriculum leader/coach, servicing more than one school in a town or regional centre.

APPA holds the view that the primary curriculum for regional, rural and remote communities needs to be relevant and connected to the community. Working with a curriculum that takes account of local context is far more likely to be engaging and therefore successful; students relate to it and outcomes are student focused. This is also relevant for assessment stimulus material. National assessment materials must have flexibility for stimulus material to be contextual for learners in regional, rural and remote settings. We are concerned that national assessments might be disadvantaging students, due to the context of the stimulus material or the experiences of students.

APPA contends that publishing school NAPLAN results on the My School website has narrowed the curriculum and created a 'labelling' of communities. This is particularly a concern for communities beyond major centres. The collection of data needs reviewing to ensure it is serving the school community and undertaken for a valid purpose. An APPA recommendation is that national assessments move to sample testing and reporting. This would allow states and territories to have system data and trend data for monitoring and reporting purposes. The reality is that primary schools regularly collect evidence of student achievement and make this available to parents and students. Teachers are constantly assessing to inform teaching and learning.

TEACHERS AND TEACHING

Principals and principal associations understand the importance and impact teachers have in schools. Ensuring we have quality teaching and learning in every classroom across Australia is vital to supporting student achievement. However, attracting and retaining teachers is a considerable challenge for principals and communities.

Members of the APPA National Advisory Council suggested the following:

1. Design and deliver a nationally coordinated approach to changing community 'mindset' about the role of teachers and school leaders in regional, rural and remote schools. Lifting the level of community respect for our educators will help attract and retain teachers and leaders in these settings.
2. Provide incentives, including salary and conditions, housing (safe), professional support for attracting and retaining teachers and leaders.
3. Ensure school staff contracts are long-term. This will build certainty in employment which in turn gains commitment.
4. Establish a sister-school program for country schools and urban schools. An MOU could address the needs of each school and be complementary. Many city schools have relationships with rural and remote schools. APPA would see the focus on support and building capacity in the local school, while providing a rural perspective and opportunity for teachers and leaders in urban schools.
5. Establish *Regional Teaching Schools*. Such a regional school could partner with a university that offers a flexibility of delivery by combining onsite and offsite course delivery with in-school experience and teacher educator support. This may offer a practical opportunity to people wishing to become teachers – a growing proportion of whom are mature entry and may find difficulty leaving home and community due to family or other circumstances. This could have the additional benefit of retaining teachers and leaders in regional and rural schools and thereby build a network of leaders to support new teachers and leaders.
6. Establish a national registration body for teachers. This would encourage teachers to move interstate and lessen the bureaucratic process currently in place. People would be more likely to apply for a position, knowing they have national registration and a much easier process for accepting.

LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

APPA is aware of the challenges facing authorities and communities on attracting and retaining leaders. APPA recent research highlights the increasing workload and compliance requirements impacting on principal health and wellbeing. Changes to policy and practice are required to improve the health and wellbeing of our leaders. To not do so, will result in more leaving the role or others not being attracted to the role.

Members of the APPA National Advisory Council suggested the following:

1. Provide professional learning for pre-principal and current principals in working with communities, developing partnerships, understanding the mindset and thinking of working in a rural setting.
2. Increase administration support for teaching principals and principals in small schools.
3. Provide cluster support for schools in addressing compliance and regulatory requirements.
4. Offer opportunities for principal and school leader exchanges from regional, rural and remote locations with urban settings to enable professional learning and to broaden the knowledge and experience of leaders.

5. Identify 4th year teaching graduates as possible one or two teacher school placements to undertake modules in leadership and management before taking up a teaching principal role. Additional mentoring and coaching support provided by an experienced principal or networked support.
6. Explore conditions and incentives needed to ensure positions are attractive and prove worthwhile in providing school communities with highly effective leadership.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

APPA believes this area has greatly impacted on schools and school communities. The rapid change in technology and increase in the need of access to technical support have placed many regional, rural and remote schools at a distinct disadvantage. Many schools do not receive funding for technical support or, if they do, it can be very limited due to contractual expense or access to high level support.

APPA supports connectivity being this area's first priority for governments. All schools connected by optic fibre should be the goal, not the dream. Schools should have access to online and nearby technical support. This could be provided by cluster arrangements or sister school collaborations.

Regional, rural and remote schools should have access to digital facilities and tools for video conferencing, online professional learning and sharing of resources. Such connectivity allows small groups to be connected by video conferencing and reduces the impact of distance. It would support a 'school in the cloud' concept and link regional and rural students with the world. Teachers and students being able to share learning and collaborate on challenges would be familiar practice in our schools. Online connection enables schools to source learning, especially with learning a language.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SCHOOLS

APPA suggests the following for consideration.

1. Encourage entrepreneurial practices such as sharing school facilities and expertise, combining classes and online classroom interaction with overseas schools.
2. Specialist support across schools and sector based schools in regional and rural towns.
3. Business opportunities within the community. Schools could link into the skill set of local business people and employees to outsource services and develop partnerships with businesses.
4. Schools as centres for other community services, e.g. health, housing, NGOs.
5. Cluster management through a business centre for non-teaching tasks and operations.

IMPROVING ACCESS – ENROLMENTS, CLUSTERS, DISTANCE EDUCATION, BOARDING

APPA suggests that there are opportunities for sharing resources and facilities, e.g. play areas, ovals and halls. Regional and rural schools would benefit from working with local councils/shires on the provision of facilities.

The opportunity to establish virtual schools is now more affordable and accessible. This would allow students and teachers to access courses and expert support. Policy change at the system level would need to ensure there was no disadvantage in having students attending one school but enrolled in a course across two or more schools. This will require a change on how we fund schools. The funding of schools based enrolment will need reviewing, so as not to be restrictive to innovative approaches to student learning or accessing online courses.

DIVERSITY AND SUPPORTING INDIVIDUAL LEARNING NEEDS

APPA brings to the attention of the Review a study and report titled, *Obstacles to Success Indigenous students in primary schools* (2012), completed by Edith Cowen University in collaboration with APPA. (A copy of the report is available from APPA.)

The study draws on the data gathered from a range of sources including visits to 17 schools with high Indigenous enrolments; interviews with principals, teachers, non-teaching staff, and Indigenous parents and community leaders; and, meetings with principals and system officials. The study reinforced the notion that most problem solving in relation to Indigenous students requires the school to gain support from family members and community leaders, and a sustained commitment from all concerned. Schools must be highly strategic in determining where to place their effort. The other important aspect to be identified was that the stability of staff and succession planning involving local Indigenous people are essential if earlier investments are not to be wasted.

The report highlights recommendations that focus on, firstly, better connecting schools to Indigenous reform and, secondly, specific support delivered through school systems to improve the delivery of support to primary schools with Indigenous students.

Additionally, we draw the attention of the committee to the 2014 *PALLIC* project (*Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities: Leadership for Learning to Read – ‘Both Ways’*). This project was initiated in 2011 by APPA and Griffith University with funding from the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations as part of the *Closing the Gap: Expansion of Intensive Literacy and Numeracy programs for Underachieving Indigenous Students*. It drew on the work of *Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL)*. The findings from the research program confirmed that improvements in children’s ability to read were supported by schools building a good working relationship with Indigenous leadership partners; expecting accountability for reading achievement from teachers; and, using data on teaching and learning of the *Big Six of Reading* to inform school planning.

The research project also found that the concept of ‘*Both Ways*’ leadership – the relationship between a principal’s leadership and Indigenous leaders working collaboratively within the schools to enrich their personal and professional partnerships, and the effects they might have on children learning to read – was critical for schools working with Indigenous communities.

Three implications from the project were highlighted:

1. The data are unequivocal about the growth in the capabilities of principals and their Indigenous leadership partners to lead improvement in literacy learning inside their school.
2. Additional work is required to support Indigenous leaders to be better prepared to move outside the school, confident they have useful knowledge, and practices gained from further professional development to share with parents and family members about learning to read; and,
3. The need to improve the support for communities to better identify, explain and apply strategies which offer helpful practical home and community support for children learning to read. Such efforts would include Indigenous parents and family members working with teachers and mentors from schools and communities.

The concept of an *Indigenous Leader of Literacy* is reinforced through the following comment by a principal,

“She’s the Indigenous version of me. She line manages all the teacher assistants in our school, runs meetings between parents and teachers, listens to what parents are saying and lets the teachers know.”

This is a practical example of the PALLIC concept of leadership *‘Both Ways’*. This is extending the concept that community members can be leaders of literacy in their community. The report identified that to improve literacy for Indigenous children and their families, we need a creative leadership approach that recognises, enhances and appreciates the great potential for *‘Both Ways’* leadership in learning to read. Unfortunately, these are specific capabilities that often remain untapped within Indigenous communities.

NATIONAL TARGET: CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS ATTENDANCE WITHIN FIVE YEARS (BY 2018)

APPA recommendations for Action:

1. The development of co-leaders in school community with significant Indigenous enrolments.
2. The establishment of Indigenous leader role as a member of the school leadership team.
3. Action on attracting, training and retaining Indigenous teachers and leaders.
4. Localised training programs supported by distance providers.
5. Professional learning in cultural understanding and awareness for all preservice and in-service teachers and leaders.
6. School communities to respond to community needs and learning needs of students by operating flexible learning environments.
7. Establishing a portal for the sharing of strategies that build community engagement and partnerships in learning.
8. A learning program that is evidence based for the context, and has short and long-term goals with pathway to work or further learning.

NATIONAL TARGET: HALF THE GAP FOR INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN READING, WRITING AND NUMERACY WITH A DECADE (BY 2018)

APPA recommendations for Action:

1. Schools complete PALL/PALLIC program.
2. All classroom teachers trained in explicit teaching strategies.
3. Whole school focus on a strengths-based approach to learning and building identity.
4. Establish of a portal that identifies suitable resources for learning programs.
5. Sharing of evidence-based pedagogical practices.
6. Community connections and partnerships to improve reading, writing and numeracy.
7. Early and sustained resourcing to address learning needs.
8. Preschool and playgroup experiences.

EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

APPA's NAC had a very open debate on what is success in a rural/regional community. We believe there needs to be rethink on the descriptions of success for small communities and the people leaving school. Authorities need to examine the measures and ensure they represent real success. For example, local students staying in the community and becoming trades people or gaining employment may be just as worthwhile as university entrant numbers. Additionally, it is the contribution to the community and ensuring the wellbeing of all the citizens is factored into success.

TRANSITIONING BEYOND SCHOOL

APPA would welcome an innovative approach by stakeholders to work with communities on strategies to address educational opportunities. We believe meaningful engagement of the community in the learning of students will lead to better outcomes and higher achievement.

CONCLUSION

APPA would welcome the opportunity to participate in a consultation focus group with the Review team. The development of recommendations will need the support of key stakeholders to ensure there is real change and that the implementation of innovative strategies has the resourcing required to achieve success.

APPA looks forward to the review report and recommendations. We thank the review panel for the opportunity to contribute to this vital and important work aimed at improving educational outcomes for regional, rural and remote students and their communities.

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