

## Recipient Details

Name of organisation or individual: [O] Victorian Ecumenical System of Schools

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## Responses

### Curriculum and assessment

The Australian Curriculum provides a framework which, for the most part, meets the needs of young people in schools of the Victorian Ecumenical System. The major limiting factor is the lack of flexibility in Years 9 and 10. A number of our schools have innovative place-based Year 9 programs designed to energise the engagement of students at a pivotal point in their educational journey. The strictures of the Australian Curriculum make programming at this level difficult. At Year 10, the Australian Curriculum does not sufficiently acknowledge that students at that level may have a clear idea about their career path. The Australian Curriculum Science content, for example, based around Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Earth Sciences, would advantage students who intend to pursue studies in Science, whereas there may be a group within the Year 10 cohort who would be much more engaged by a Science program which revolved around Agricultural Science or Food Science.

Rating: 6

### Teachers and teaching

Assistance with accommodation can make it easier for pre-service teachers to take up internships or teaching rounds in regional schools, and to gain an experience of the warmth of community in such a setting. Similarly, it is easier to recruit graduate teachers if accommodation can be offered. Schools with boarding facilities can often make such offers.

Access to professional learning is difficult for many teachers outside the metropolitan areas.

Opportunities in a capital city may necessitate many hours of travel, and significant costs for travel and replacement teacher provision.

The Victorian Ecumenical System of Schools supports schools in this area. Next month, for example, we have a Saturday workshop with Ron Ritchhart from Harvard University which will be attended by 200 teachers from our schools across the State. The funding for this is made possible by the current "system weighted average" funding calculation, which was endorsed by the original "Gonski" review, and abolished in the latest revision of Federal Government funding. We contend that recommendations in the original "Gonski" review relating to System funding should be adhered to in future funding formulae, partly so that teachers in country schools can be assisted to maintain their professional currency.

Rating: 7

### Leaders and leadership

There is one strategy which would significantly improve the level of attention which Principals can give to the real business of education. That is to reduce the compliance burden which is plaguing all schools, but falls disproportionately on smaller schools, many of them regional or rural. Many larger

metropolitan schools have a full-time compliance officer. Smaller schools simply cannot afford this, so the load falls largely on the Principal.

In Victoria we have just had the introduction of the Reportable Conduct Scheme. While this is worthy in its intent, it can result in the Principal having to provide reports about the same incident, in four different formats, to the CCYP, the VRQA, the VIT and the Police. Child protection is clearly of the highest priority, but this burgeoning of bureaucracy is seriously ill-conceived. Additionally, CCYP processes appear to be based on the premise that the Principal's judgement about whether an incident is reportable cannot be trusted.

In terms of attracting quality leadership to regional schools, there is one area where I think we are falling down badly. I have recently been involved in the appointment of a Principal to a thriving, sizeable multi-campus regional school. Of 23 applicants from Australia, only four were women. Within our System of 17 schools, we will next year have only three female Principals. By international standards we are lagging here.

The tendency in independent schools, usually for good reason, is to appoint a Principal from another school. Within the metropolitan area, this translation does not necessitate dislocation of the family. But an appointment to a regional school can involve much more upheaval for the appointee's family. In my experience, female leaders are less able to make this transition. Would programs aimed specifically at developing female leadership in schools help here? Possibly.

Rating: 7

#### School and Community

Regional communities are great incubators for partnerships: they are already strongly interconnected. There have been great benefits to students from partnerships that various of our schools have with the Aero Club, the Special School, the regional University, the Surf Lifesaving Club, the Symphony Orchestra, the Red Cross, the Agricultural Society.... the list could go on exhaustingly.

Extending the notion of community internationally, we have seen students grow prodigiously in maturity, confidence and understanding from international experiences, for example on student exchange to Peru, or living in a Thai mountain village on a service project. Given a good international network, these experiences don't need to be expensive.

A number of scholarships already provided by philanthropic bodies open up educational opportunities for students at school and tertiary levels. It is not generally understood that scholarships and bursaries provided by regional independent schools extend well beyond the small number of academic scholarships on offer. In one school, for example, almost a third of students are on some form of fee remission; there are special bursaries for children from isolated regions, and free places for students from refugee or other disadvantaged communities.

Rating: 5

#### Information and Communication Technology

The main barrier to the fullest implementation of ICT strategies is broadband access. Some campuses of our regional System schools are gaining direct fibre access, which will result in significantly improved connectivity at substantially reduced cost.

For all the benefits that ICT can bring, it should not be seen as being able to substitute completely for a rounded education. Good teaching is based on relationships, which are harder to forge electronically. And the social skills which young people learn in a good school setting can't be

delivered via the internet: indeed some would say they can be undermined by inappropriate “screen fixation”. A modern boarding education can, especially for children from remote backgrounds, offer effective socialisation, good teaching, and the effective use of ICT for learning and for connection with home and family.

Rating: 5

#### Entrepreneurship and schools

One area which offers particular scope for entrepreneurship in the rural context is agriculture. While, with a plethora of career opportunities, there has been a resurgence in tertiary Agriculture enrolments, in Victoria at least the study is poorly supported in schools. Yet VCE Agriculture requires students to develop a small business of their own, from conception to production to marketing. In the course of this they are often developing partnerships. Rabbit farming, beekeeping, worm farming, quinoa growing ... with the entrepreneurial approaches of young people, there are endless possibilities.

A crucial element in the success of entrepreneurship in schools is the presence of teachers who are prepared to support students, individually or in small groups, in a diverse range of pursuits. This is time-consuming, and merits the consideration of school authorities.

It is also important that bureaucracy does not stifle these programs. The first principle espoused in the Victorian Education Department’s animal handling guidelines is “...where possible, replace ...” – in other words, use models, videos, etc. instead of live animals. This is a “metro-centric” view, accompanied by what could be burdensome reporting requirements. In the rural context, animal welfare can be enhanced by involving students in responsible animal management, guided by teachers who are trusted to advance these principles.

Rating: 5

#### Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

There is a tendency to associate boarding with high-fee independent education. A number of regional schools in the Victorian Ecumenical System offer boarding at moderate fee levels, not infrequently with additional fee remission. Regional schools are often closer to home, easier to access, co-educational, and not tied to Saturday sport. They therefore offer a boarding model which for many students enables closer continuing connection with family and community. For reasons like this, the numbers of Australian students boarding in these schools have increased in the past decade, despite the depopulation of country areas.

For students who are going to progress to tertiary education away from home, boarding is the ideal stepping stone, enabling the development of independence in a setting which offers many of the support and guidance characteristics of a good family.

The departure of young people for boarding may leave a local school in difficulty with enrolments and curriculum offerings. Perhaps this is where partnerships could assist. There are good examples of cross-sectoral partnerships – between independent and government schools, both in Australia and in the UK (where such activity may satisfy regulations regarding charitable status).

Rating for enrolments: 3

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 4

Rating for boarding: 6

#### Diversity

There is an interesting philosophical question as to whether education should be pointing students in a particular direction. Our contention is that good education should open students' eyes to the possibilities of the wider world, including those of their home community, and of the obligations which they have to that community, and then equipping them with the skills to navigate in whatever setting they choose.

There are no easy answers in this area. One of our schools has a partnership with the indigenous community at Kalumburu, a remote community of about five hundred in the Kimberley. Several years ago, the community there made the decision that secondary education in the town would be discontinued. They wanted their children to go away to schools where better continuity of education could be provided. They were conscious also that among the foremost leaders of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today are those who went away for schooling.

While the Government supports this practice through its Abstudy allowance, this still leaves moderate-fee boarding schools covering about half the cost of boarding education for these students. And some of the philanthropic bodies which support indigenous boarding focus their support on metropolitan boarding schools, where the cultural transition is more challenging than in many regional schools.

Rating: 5

#### Transitioning beyond school

One of our regional Victorian Ecumenical System schools has developed a campus in a high-rise building in the Melbourne CBD ([www.citycite.vic.edu.au](http://www.citycite.vic.edu.au)). This offers educational programs, between a week and a month in duration, mostly to Year 9 students from about thirty country and city schools. Country students often live with friends or relatives in Melbourne, learning what living, working and studying in Melbourne is like. For some, this the confidence which they need to "go away" for tertiary study. For others, this helps them decide that their future lies in work or further study closer to home. Again, this is about opening young people's eyes to possibilities.

Accommodation for country students studying in major cities requires very substantial expenditure, even with support such as Youth Allowance. A recent thrust to increase tertiary fees, and accelerate payback of student loans, adds to the disincentive which country students already face in the tertiary sphere. Any future proposals to change tertiary fee structures should be considered carefully in the light of impacts on country families.

Rating: 7

#### Additional Comments

A survey of the top Australian business leaders has shown that those with a country background are significantly over-represented within this cohort in relation to the proportion of Australians who live outside the metropolises. There is something special about "country kids" which can equip them well, not just to fend for themselves, but also to provide leadership in the world of the future. It is vital that our regional, rural and remote education provision builds on the special attributes of these young people to fulfil this potential.