Review into Regional, Remote and Rural Education

Submission

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Introduction
The Smith Family welcomes the Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, given the importance of these communities to Australia’s economic, social, cultural and environmental prosperity.

The national context for this Review includes data which shows that a significant proportion of young Australians living in these diverse regional, rural and remote communities are not achieving key educational milestones, including in the early years, through school and into post-school transitions. It also appears that gaps in achievement between young people living in major cities and other parts of Australia, increase as young people move through school.

- There are relatively small differences between the proportions of children who are developmentally on track when they start school, based on their geographic location, with the exception being for children living in very remote communities, only 55.5% of whom are meeting key milestones when they start school.
- By Year 7 however, the difference in NAPLAN performance is over 7% between provincial and metropolitan students and around 20% between metropolitan and remote students.
- By age 19, there is a 14.3% difference in Year 12 completion between those living in major cities and those in inner regional areas, with the gap further increasing with remoteness. (Lamb et al. 2015)

Another important context for the Review is participation in university and vocational education training, the latter being particularly important for young people living in regional, rural and remote areas.

- Participation in higher education by age 24 is considerably greater for major cities than other areas of Australia (48.5% for major cities and 29.4% for outer regional areas), and for those who start university, a higher proportion of those living outside of metropolitan areas drop out prior to completion (34.7% for those from remote areas).
- Conversely, the VET participation rates for 20-24 year olds in inner regional, outer regional and remote areas is over 25%, compared with 15.7% for major cities. (Lamb et al. 2015)

The above data highlights some of the challenges facing young people living in regional, rural and remote areas, evidenced by their different levels of participation and achievement in education and VET, relative to their metropolitan peers.

The Smith Family
The Smith Family is a national non-government organisation with a mission to support the long-term educational participation of disadvantaged young Australians. It supports over 130,000 disadvantaged children, young people, their parents/carers and community professionals a year. We work in over 90 communities across each State and Territory. Around half of these communities are in regional and rural areas.
We are cognisant of the diversity of communities which fall under the umbrella of regional, rural and remote, with differences in location, population size and composition, history and economic base, among other factors, being important influences on the opportunities and challenges these communities face. Taking account of this diversity will be an important consideration for the Review.

This submission
This submission draws on the research, policy and practice experience of The Smith Family’s staff and advisory groups. The latter includes its Principals Advisory Group. While aware of the themes articulated in the Review’s discussion paper, this submission seeks to contribute to the Review by identifying, from The Smith Family’s perspective and across these themes:

- The major strengths of education in regional, rural and remote areas.
- The major challenges facing these areas with regards education.
- Examples of good practice and initiatives in regional, rural and remote areas which could be further expanded.
- Some other potential opportunities for enhancing education in regional, rural and remote areas.

The strengths of education in regional, rural and remote areas

Sense of community, networks and collaboration
An overwhelming strength of regional, rural and remote areas, is the positive sense of community they usually enjoy, with students, parents, school staff and the wider community better known to each other than is usually the case in large metropolitan areas. In regional, rural and remote areas, schools are a very integral part of the community. Strong personal relationships are developed which can be leveraged to support students. Students, families and staff are more likely to see each other outside of school and in multiple settings. This helps create a stronger sense of students being known as individuals, which in turn can support deeper engagement in learning and overall wellbeing. It can also help enhance students’ sense of safety. Small school populations maximises the likelihood that students’ individual needs will be noticed by school staff and others within the community.

Networks in regional, rural and remote areas are often strong, and this can facilitate productive collaborative efforts focussed on maximising and sharing available resources in order to support students. This can include for example, sharing curriculum and professional development across schools, strong levels of volunteering, and the engagement of community organisations and business within the school. There are often strong levels of pride and identity within the community which extends to and includes the schools and young people attending them. The strong levels of social capital within these communities can be harnessed to support young people.

These networks and the size of the communities, also support easier communication than is sometimes the case in large communities. They can facilitate innovation and more speedy and nuanced responses being developed and implemented, less hampered by more complex or bureaucratic structures.
In many smaller communities there is often only one high school which can mean that the student body includes young people from a diversity of backgrounds. This exposure can potentially support the development of a range of skills, such as communication, resilience and tolerance, which are important life skills and attributes.

**Multiple generations, school leadership and staff**

In some communities there will be multiple generations who have attended a school which can create deeper shared knowledge between the family and school. Similarly in regional areas (though not in remote areas), there is often considerable consistency of teaching staff over many years. This too can contribute positively to staff knowing families and students.

Schools and their staff, particularly principals, often play a central role within regional, rural and remote communities. They tend to be seen as leaders of the community and take on a higher and more significant profile than might be possible within larger communities. As such, this has the potential to make education a strong focus within these communities. It can also facilitate schools being more open to the community and acting as hubs for a broader suite of services that complement educational provision. This can include for example health, community services, training and early childhood programs. There is also the potential for more seamless educational progression for young people across early years, primary, secondary and post-school education, given the smaller number of young people, organisations and institutions involved and the strong collaborative relationships.

The reasonably high proportion of young teachers in regional, rural and remote schools provides an opportunity for new ideas to be brought to the school along with high levels of energy, enthusiasm and commitment.

**Challenges of education in regional, rural and remote areas**

Some of the inherent strengths of education in regional, rural and remote areas can potentially also give rise to some of the challenges these areas face. The frequency of contact between students and school staff within smaller communities can contribute to students feeling they have no sense of privacy or anonymity and for school staff there can be a sense of being permanently on duty.

**Difficult relationships**

If relationships between organisations are not strong or are problematic, there can be fewer alternatives than in larger communities. Similarly, if families experience difficulties with a school or particular staff, there may be no other realistic option that they can pursue. If there have been intergenerational experiences of a particular school or staff that have not been positive, and this can particularly be the case for families from disadvantaged backgrounds, it can be challenging for students and families. The impact of poor school leadership can be exacerbated for families and staff in small communities given there are few or no educational alternatives.
Curriculum offerings and broader supports
Curriculum offerings and subject choices tend to be more limited in regional, rural and remote schools. This can also be compounded by staff being required to teach in areas which are not their subject specialisation and the more limited availability of learning support. While the existence of multi-age classrooms can offer some opportunities for both students and staff, they can also be very challenging learning and teaching environments.

Access to a broader range of supports which are important for children and young people are generally more limited in regional, rural and remote areas. This includes for example important services such as speech pathology, mental health services as well as many enrichment programs which can positively benefit student engagement and achievement.

Extra-curricular activities are increasingly important for young people in the 21st century, as opportunities for them to develop a range of skills, build social capital and help them connect academic learning with post school participation in work and the community. Participation in these activities can be challenging because of costs, particularly transport, and because of more limited access to local resources and networks than might be experienced in metropolitan areas.

Connection to post-school education and employment
It can be particularly challenging for young people in regional, rural and remote areas to have a strong sense of what is possible for them beyond school, in terms of employment, further education and training. Higher levels of unemployment are experienced in some regional, rural and remote areas and this, coupled with local challenges such as the relatively sudden closure of a major employer (such as a mine or factory), can have a flow on effect to schools, with young people finding it hard to identify the point of school completion or further education.

Attracting and retaining staff
Attracting and retaining staff can be particularly challenging in rural and remote areas, with a constant churn of school leaders and teachers being detrimental to students and their families. In remote areas, it is often teacher aides who are the most constant presence in the school, but their ongoing professional development may not be prioritised. In some jurisdictions, for example the Northern Territory, we understand that in some areas principals are offered one year contracts in order to attract them to the school. This makes it extremely difficult to embed any consistent focus in the school or provide a sense of purpose to the community regarding education.

Accessing professional development opportunities can be more challenging for staff in regional, rural and remote areas because of cost, transport, time and a more limited staffing pool to provide backup.
ICT
Consistent, high quality and affordable access to Information Communications Technology (ICT) can be a challenge for some regional, rural and remote communities. This can impact on schools, although there are improvements happening in some areas. There can also be a significant impact on students’ home experience of ICT. Many of the families who The Smith Family supports do not have consistent access to reliable and affordable ICT services and this can negatively impact on students’ capacity to achieve educationally.

While ICT has the potential to support the development of virtual networks between school staff in an efficient way, its availability appears to have led in some areas to the reduction of face-to-face engagement. This in turn can limit the sense of quality relationships which can be drawn on for support and/or to celebrate success.

VET and university education
TAFE is often a vital part of educational provision for regional and rural communities. In some states however, costs associated with TAFE education appear to have increased in recent years, making it difficult for young people from low income families to attend. The much more limited access to universities within these communities can also make it particularly difficult for young people from low income families to consider university as an option, given the additional costs associated with transport and/or accommodation. Even when a university maybe what seems a relatively short distance away from a community (such as a 45 minute drive), the lack of public transport and the high cost of fuel, can make this prohibitive for young people from low income backgrounds.

Maintaining school facilities can be challenging in regional, rural and remote communities, often because of the costs involved, and particularly if schools are experiencing declining populations.

Initiatives and opportunities
The Smith Family would urge the Review to consider how the strengths identified above can be further supported and utilised to improve the educational outcomes of young people living in regional, rural and remote areas, while simultaneously examining how the challenges can be minimised or where possible, eliminated.

In addition, we would suggest a range of initiatives and opportunities that can enhance the education of young people living in regional, rural and remote communities. These initiatives target different stages of the education journey given that multi-faceted and integrated approaches will be required to support children and young people from regional, rural and remote areas to achieve educationally.

Strengthening core skills
Critical to ensuring that students from regional, rural and remote communities complete school and move on to post-school education and training is that they develop core skills, such as reading and numeracy at an early age and develop these skills across their primary and secondary schooling. The data cited earlier regarding NAPLAN indicates that there are challenges in this area for many young people from these communities.
Additional specialist support, particularly in the primary years, is important to ensure students don’t fall behind, because achievement in these areas is predictive of later school completion. Complementing efforts in the classroom can be programs which support the critical home learning environment. For example, The Smith Family’s student2student program supports many hundreds of students a year, including in regional and rural communities. The program is an early intervention peer reading program, targeting students in Years 3 to 8 who are up to two years behind in their reading. It matches them with trained reading ‘buddies’ who are good readers and at least two years older. The pair connect over the phone or online, two to three times a week for an 18 week period. The student reads to their buddy from books which are provided by The Smith Family, and appropriate to the student’s reading level. The program usually takes place at home at a time which suits the reader and buddy. Given it happens over the phone or online, it means a broader range of networks can be drawn on from beyond the student’s own community, including from metropolitan areas. Annual evaluations of the program show that students improve their reading age, enjoy reading more and are reading more frequently following participation in the program. Programs such as student2student, are effective and efficient at supporting improvements in the reading and engagement in learning of children from regional and rural communities. They could be further expanded with additional support.

Career pathways
Providing young people from regional and rural areas with the opportunity to discuss career opportunities and pathways in a safe and supportive environment, and helping them to set goals and to take the steps to achieve these goals, can play a critical part in supporting educational engagement, Year 12 completion and post school participation in education and employment. The Smith Family’s i-track mentoring program currently supports around 1,000 Year 9 to 11 students per year in this way, including many from regional communities.

i-track matches students with a supportive adult, who provides advice and guidance about workplace, study and career opportunities. The mentoring relationship is developed online through weekly chat sessions for approximately an hour a week, for around 18 weeks. The program helps students extend the networks of advice that they can draw on, including beyond their geographic location, at a key point in their lives.

The volunteer mentors are drawn from The Smith Family’s corporate and community partners and are trained and supervised to ensure the quality of their support. The on-line dimension of the program means that students from regional areas can access support from a very wide range of locations, including metropolitan areas. Annual evaluations of the program show that it:
- Motivates students to try harder at school.
- Inspires them to go onto further study.
- Increases students’ knowledge on what steps to take to achieve their career goals.

Programs such as i-track are cost-effective, given that they harness a range of partnerships. It could be further expanded to support more students in regional areas if additional resources were available.
Entrepreneurial skills and opportunities

Initiatives such as the Mitchell Institute’s entrepreneurial learning in schools project, which has recently been trialled with 23 schools across Victoria and NSW, including some in regional and rural communities, can also support student engagement, enhance confidence and increase the likelihood of students staying at school beyond Year 10. Entrepreneurial skills are particularly important in the 21st century to support young people’s ability to secure and retain employment, as well as to generate their own employment opportunities.

Over 12 months, school leadership teams, with students as key and active partners, have committed to co-designing and implementing action in their high schools, underpinned by three principles:

- Develop more personalised education experiences, so each student can pursue their passions and talents to excel in unique ways.
- Engage in creative and entrepreneurial product-oriented learning experiences that can benefit local and global communities.
- Cultivate and prototype new approaches, processes and/or products.

The aim is to support young people to develop the key capabilities of creativity, curiosity, resilience and resourcefulness which are necessary for success in the 21st century. The pilot involves each school identifying a key issue in their school or community that students are then supported through a student-centred learning approach to develop solution/s for, over multiple months. Projects have included starting a community garden to grow food and supporting unemployed people to grow and prepare food; building a website so students can upload assignments so ideas can be shared across the school and to other schools; starting small businesses to recycle and create work experience opportunities.

The pilot involves a range of local and beyond-community partnerships. An important part of the approach is the development of state networks, with each state supported by a network coordinator who sources international and local experts, coordinates network gatherings and communications, and advances peer to peer teaching. World renowned educationalist Professor Yong Zhao has been supporting the implementation of the pilot.

The network gatherings which bring together schools from diverse locations and backgrounds have highlighted the benefit of schools with common goals, interests and purpose working together. This commonality, rather than necessarily proximity, can be the key in establishing and maintaining effective cross-school networks and collaborations.

An evaluation of the initiative is currently being finalised, but the approach could potentially contribute to supporting young people to develop entrepreneurial skills and wider networks of collaboration, including in regional areas.

School community hubs

Some schools in regional and rural communities already function as hubs of community engagement, including sites of multiple service delivery focussed on improving the educational and wellbeing outcomes of students. There is considerable potential for expanding this approach in these types of communities across Australia. This potential however requires several considerations to be addressed, including how to appropriately
resource such hubs to ensure they meet priority student needs, are well planned and implemented and that coordination of services and supports does not rely on already stretched principals and teaching staff? There is potentially a strong role for non-government organisations in coordinating these hubs, given their experience in undertaking needs analysis, planning and implementation in response to those needs, as well as their ability to harness a range of community and corporate networks and support. Such coordination is critical for the success of these hubs and needs to be appropriately resourced.

Child and Parent Centres, such as those in Western Australia and similar models in other states which see early learning centres located on school grounds, including in non-metro areas, can help parents to access a range of education and other supports for their children and family from an early age. These Centres can also support more positive school transitions, including for highly disadvantaged families. They have an important role to play in improving the educational outcomes of children and young people in regional and rural areas and opportunities exist for maintaining and expanding such initiatives.

Supporting students to undertake tertiary study

Supporting more regional, rural and remote students to attend tertiary education will require a range of strategies and approaches. Research noted by the Victorian Regional Policy Advisory Committee identified a number of gaps in current programs and interventions in that state. It is likely that these gaps extend to other states/territories. These gaps include “the integration of financial support with other interventions to improve aspiration, particularly improved parent and community engagement”. While a number of universities offer scholarships and support for young people from non-metropolitan areas or disadvantaged backgrounds, the data cited earlier in this submission regarding university participation and completion, identifies that there is more that can be done in this area.

The foundations for university study are often laid early as young people grow and develop and move through school. These foundations include achievement, aspiration, opportunity and engagement in education. Efforts aimed at increasing the proportion of young people from regional, rural and remote areas who are participating in tertiary study, if they are to be effective, cannot just be focused on the later years of high school.

The Smith Family offers a long-term scholarship program, Learning for Life, to low-income families to support their children to achieve educationally, including to complete Year 12 and university or TAFE studies. The program is currently supporting over 37,500 low income young people in communities across Australia, around half of whom are from non-metropolitan areas. Around 20 percent of these young people are from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Over 1,300 young people are undertaking tertiary study through the Learning for Life program.

Parental engagement and high expectations are core principles of the program, with families entering into a Partnership Agreement with The Smith Family regarding a shared goal of their child achieving educationally. The program has three components:

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1 Research into educational aspiration for regional Victoria, 2013, Regional Policy Advisory Committee.
• A modest biannual payment to help families cover education-related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions.
• A *Learning for Life* Program Coordinator (The Smith Family staff member) who works with the family to support their child’s long-term participation in education.
• Access to a range of shorter programs that begin in the early years and continue through to the tertiary level. They include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities, for example the *Student2Student* and *I-track* programs referred to earlier in this submission. These shorter programs target different stages of a young person’s life as well as providing support to their parents around digital and financial literacy skills.

Students can begin on the program in the first year of school and continue through to the completion of tertiary study. This long-term support provides continuity over the various stages and needs that the young person and their family will experience. As young people move into the tertiary years on scholarship, they are able to access mentoring, careers advice and networking opportunities with a range of corporate and industry partners.

*Learning for Life* is achieving strong educational outcomes through providing integrated, long-term support for young people and their families. Such initiatives can make a considerable contribution to enhancing the educational and post-school outcomes of young people living outside of metropolitan areas.

**Universities**

Given the geographical distribution of Australian universities and the costs involved to regional, rural and remote students in attending them, a range of flexible approaches will be required to increase the proportion of these students commencing and completing tertiary education. Outreach by universities to regional and rural areas to promote opportunities to school students is helpful to support young people to understand the potential of university education. Flinders University, for example in South Australia, in partnership with The Smith Family, engages with school communities in Port Augusta and Whyalla in the delivery of the *River Journey* program, an aspiration raising initiative that enables young people to explore career and education pathways for their futures. The program includes the promotion of access pathways and potential university offerings that can be pursued through Flinders University, both in the respective communities and in Adelaide. Such initiatives help students better understand what is on offer and provide face-to-face opportunities for their questions to be answered. There is potential for expansion of such initiatives.

Maximising the potential for studying remotely through the use of ICT can also contribute to increasing the number of students in rural and remote areas completing tertiary study. Such study could be complemented by short blocks of face-to-face learning in regional or metropolitan areas. Ensuring that there are a broad range of learning supports for young people studying in this way, and that they feel part of a network of students connected to academic and support staff is important, in order that they don't feel isolated and overwhelmed.

Universities can also make a significant contribution to regional, rural and remote communities in ways which extend beyond them functioning as an educational institution for young people. They can also provide internships or training placements for students from a range of disciplines, including health, allied health, counselling etc in these
communities. There is also a significant contribution that universities can make in undertaking action based research and partnering with schools in regional, rural and remote communities in ways that address shared objectives.

**ICT**
The potential for using ICT developments to enhance the educational experience of children and young people living in regional, rural and remote areas is significant. Opportunities for video conferencing and virtual classrooms where students from smaller and more distant schools can be connected with larger schools could enhance curriculum offerings, learning support and strengthen engagement in learning. To realise this potential will require resources, training, support and coordination.

Considerations aimed at strengthening ICT provision to educational institutions in regional, rural and remote communities, must also include access for students at home, in order to maximise their educational participation and long-term outcomes. If students living in regional, rural and remote areas are not able to access affordable, reliable and accessible internet services at home, they will be educationally disadvantaged relative to their metropolitan peers. Considerations on how to strengthen home ICT access for young people in regional, rural and remote areas, should include how to ensure students, parents/carers and teaching staff in these areas have the technological skills of their metropolitan peers.

**Leadership, induction and support**
The Smith Family supports the Country Education Project’s recommendations\(^2\) regarding the development of targeted induction and support programs for educational leaders and new graduates working in regional, rural and remote areas. The broad ranging role that educational leaders fulfil within these communities, the potential challenges they may face, including isolation, requires strong initial preparation and ongoing high quality and accessible professional development and support. Establishing and/or supporting the development of formal and informal networks between leaders in these communities can also play a part in enhancing retention and capability and ultimately positively impact on student outcomes. A focus both for induction and ongoing support should include principal wellbeing.

Similarly, preparing and supporting new graduates to take on roles in regional, rural and remote communities, requires strong preparation during their undergraduate study and then holistic induction and ongoing professional development, mentoring and networking once they commence employment in these communities. Ongoing professional development, mentoring and wellbeing support should also be provided as teachers move through their careers. While some of this can be done on-line, the value of “face to face” opportunities is also important, as these provide the opportunity to build deeper relationships that can be drawn on for support.

\(^2\) *Rural Education Framework Discussion Paper, 2016, Country Education Project*
Practical initiatives, such as providing teachers in remote areas with the opportunity for a second uplift of furniture and possessions after six months within the community, as opposed to a one-off uplift when they first move there, could help create a greater sense of permanency for these staff. If staff have not worked in such areas before they may have a very limited awareness of what is available there, hence what they should consider taking. The opportunity to have a second uplift could help address this and contribute to staff feeling more settled and at home in remote areas.

Clusters and networks
There is considerable potential for strengthening arrangements between schools operating in regional, rural and remote areas. Clusters can be very useful, but they should not necessarily be based on Departmental regions or even state/territory boundaries. Clustering needs to follow natural relationships, shared interests and goals to be most beneficial. Informed and sensitive local discussions need to take place with schools to identify the most useful arrangements for clustering. Sister school relationships could also be further explored, including between metro and non-metro schools.

Transport
Transport remains a major challenge in most regional, rural and remote communities. Even when transport to school is available, it is usually not available or is very costly for extra-curricular or careers and work experience opportunities. One example of what has been done to address this, at least in a regional community, is the Shoalhaven Student Pathways Pass, which has applicability to other areas.

The Shoalhaven area is located on the NSW south coast and has a population of around 100,000 scattered throughout close to 50 towns and villages. Transport is a perennial issue, particularly for the more than 6,000 secondary students in the region. Under the NSW School Student Transport Scheme students are granted free bus travel to and from school with the bus operator which provides that journey. However, historically the free travel didn’t extend to travel to vocational training and work experience, nor did it cover travel across the region using other bus providers (there are five).

Through sustained cross-sectoral partnerships over nearly two years, led by a non-government facilitator, the Shoalhaven Student Pathways Pass was developed. In a state-wide first, the Pass provides local students with a free travel service for high school approved learning opportunities. Shoalhaven bus providers agreed to carry students free of charge on any timetabled bus if the student is participating in a school approved learning opportunity. This includes, but is not be limited to, TAFE, Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Work Placement, and Work Experience. Such initiatives have significant potential for supporting the educational and post-school outcomes of young people in regional and rural areas.

National clearinghouse
There is currently no systemic way in Australia for sharing evaluation and research efforts in education, including for regional, rural and remote areas. Other areas of public policy have developed Clearinghouses for sharing knowledge and good practice in ‘what works’ and ideally what ‘doesn’t work’. Other areas have also developed formal processes for accrediting evidence based programs (see for example the Commonwealth’s Communities for Children program). Yet these approaches are absent nationally in education, despite important contributions from organisations such as the NSW’s Centre
for Education Statistics and Evaluation. The lack of a national clearinghouse contributes to significant inefficiencies and a reduced likelihood of effective and scalable initiatives being developed and implemented across Australia, including in regional, rural and remote areas. The end result is potentially wasted resources but even more critically the failure to implement initiatives that positively impact on young people’s educational outcomes.

The Smith Family would urge the Review to consider how a national clearinghouse could support improvements in educational outcomes for young people from regional, rural and remote communities. A clearinghouse could act as a store for evidence of what works to improve educational outcomes, including for different groups of young people and under what circumstances. It could help facilitate more efficient and effective use of resources.

An important contributor in more effective support for young people from regional, rural and remote areas is to ensure that there is data available to understand how young people from these diverse communities are progressing educationally. Aggregate data at national or state/territory levels can ‘hide’ important differences across communities. As part of considerations regarding what data should be made publicly available at the level of regional, rural and remote areas, The Smith Family would urge that the Review also consider the value of a Unique Student Identifier so that the progress of students from all areas, including regional, rural and remote areas can be better understood and supported.

**Conclusion**

This submission draws on the research, policy and practice experience of The Smith Family, Australia’s largest non-government provider of educational support. It identifies the strengths and challenges that impact on the educational achievement of young people from regional, rural and remote communities in Australia. It also highlights some of the current initiatives that are supporting educational outcomes in these areas which could be further expanded, as well as highlighting some other areas which could support improvements.

The importance of regional, rural and remote communities to Australia’s economic, social, cultural and environmental prosperity coupled with current educational data from these areas highlights the value of further efforts.
References