



Rural and Remote Review


Review of the educational needs of geographically isolated families and the services available to them

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Contents

Purpose	3
Background	3
Consultation	3
Governance	4
Review Outcomes	
1. Rural and remote school workforce needs	4
Recommendations	5
Direct policy actions.....	5
2. Financial assistance for rural and remote families	6
Recommendations	7
Direct policy actions.....	7
3. Flexible schooling services for geographically isolated and home-based students	8
Recommendations	9
Direct policy actions.....	9
4. Wellbeing of staff in rural and remote communities	9
Recommendations.....	10
Direct policy actions.....	10
Conclusion	10
Implementation overview.....	11



Approximately half of Queensland's state schools are located in rural and remote areas, providing schooling to around 115,000 students each year. The Queensland Government and the Department of Education, Training and Employment (the department) are committed to addressing the educational needs of geographically isolated families and ensuring that all students, irrespective of where they live, have access to a range of high quality education and training programs delivered by a well-prepared and professional teaching workforce.

Purpose

The purpose of this Review was to:

- identify the educational needs of geographically isolated students and the issues related to the provision of these; and
- develop policy responses to better meet the needs of geographically isolated families.

This document provides an overview of the policy considerations and actions identified by the review and supported by the department for further investigation.

Background

In 2012, the department, on behalf of the Queensland Government (the government) undertook a review of the educational needs of geographically isolated families and available educational services. It followed on from a series of whole-of-government and departmental policies and reviews, including the *Blueprint for the Bush*, an initiative focused on building strong and economically sustainable communities across rural and remote Queensland, and *A Flying Start for Queensland Children*, a series of educational reforms that includes the move of Year 7 to high school in 2015.

The Review was influenced by the Queensland Government's *Action Plan for Rural and Remote Education 2011–2015*, the *Closing the Gap Strategy*, which addressed the challenges inherent in delivering high quality education and training services to rural and remote areas of the State, and the department's *United in our pursuit of excellence*, which outlines core priorities for state schooling.

Consultation

Consultation related to the Review was undertaken across 2012 and 2013. During this time the department sought feedback from peak parent bodies, principals' and educators' associations and the non-state schooling sectors, on initiatives and significant issues that affect rural and remote educational services. The consultation process identified the following elements as critical to meeting the educational needs of geographically isolated families and state schools:

1. address specific rural and remote school workforce needs
2. provide financial assistance for rural and remote families
3. support flexible schooling services for geographically isolated and home-based students
4. enhance the wellbeing of teachers and school leaders in rural and remote communities.

Governance

The Review was led by the Human Resources branch of the department and overseen by Flying Start for Queensland Children Program Implementation Board, including the Deputy Director-General, Corporate Services and the Deputy Director-General, state schools and representatives from Queensland Treasury and the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The scope of the Review includes the identification of policy considerations and actions, project governance, stakeholder engagement and communications.

Review Outcomes

1. Rural and remote school workforce needs

- Investigate the supply and demand of specialist staff, to support students with special needs.
- Identify policy responses that ensure students in rural and remote communities have access to staff with the required skills, knowledge and experience, including identification of strategies to attract specialist teachers.





The department currently implements a range of strategies aimed at attracting a highly capable workforce to rural and remote locations. While these strategies are having a positive impact on the number and quality of teaching and non-teaching staff seeking employment in rural and remote settings, analysis of the department's human resource data confirms there is still work to be done. Some regions and schools report facing increasing challenges in attracting high quality teachers, particularly for some specialist teaching fields.

While these issues are shared across most Australian States and Territories, and have been acknowledged in the Australian Government Productivity Commission's 2012 *Schools Workforce* report, the department recognises that further work is required to ensure that schools have access to the specialist staff required to support students.

Recommendations

- Develop and implement a dedicated recruitment and marketing strategy, focusing on attracting the best teacher candidates and specialist staff to teaching positions in rural and remote state schools.
- Ensure teaching scholarship programs have a strong focus on service in regional, rural and remote Queensland.

Direct policy actions

A teacher attraction marketing campaign for rural and remote communities was prioritised in the *A Fresh Start: Improving the quality and preparation of teachers for Queensland schools* strategy. The *Teach Rural* initiative widens the *Make a Difference. Teach* recruitment and marketing strategy to incorporate a dedicated focus on attracting the best candidates to work in rural and remote schools. *Teach Rural* was launched in April 2014 by the Minister for Education, Training and Employment, and includes:

- a dedicated presence on the *Make a difference. Teach* website, promoting benefits and opportunities from rural and remote service
- a range of resources including a series of video vignettes and a suite of promotional materials, highlighting the career and lifestyle opportunities for teachers in rural and remote locations
- *Teach Rural* information sessions targeting applicant, preservice and current teachers in South East Queensland
- the introduction of the *Teach Rural Cinema* initiative, providing an opportunity for school communities to promote their school and community to teachers through film media. These short films developed by schools will be available for viewing on the *Teach Rural* website
- highlighting the department's suite of scholarship and grant programs that support schools in rural and remote communities to attract and recruit high-calibre teachers.

The significant and positive interest in the *Teach Rural* campaign and encouraging feedback about the information sessions, will support the continued implementation of the campaign during 2014 and 2015.

The department continues to support the *Beyond the Range Professional Experience Grant* program, which provides financial assistance to preservice teachers, to support their professional experiences in rural and remote schools. Reports indicate preservice teachers who participate in the program are also likely to accept a teaching position in a rural or remote school.

Eighty-five percent of graduates who have participated in this program between 2011 and 2013 have applied for employment as teachers with the department, with more than 75 percent gaining employment in schools outside the South East corner.

Human Resources, in collaboration with teams supporting students with disabilities, have rolled out a targeted marketing campaign focusing on services provided by Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists and Speech Language Therapists. The campaign included updated content on the department's website, plus a suite of materials to promote employment opportunities in state schools for therapists, including opportunities and benefits in rural and remote communities.

2. Financial assistance for rural and remote families

- Review the validity of the current criteria and list of schools approved for bypassing under the Living Away from Home Allowances Scheme.
- Assess the impacts of the current indexation rate applied to the Remote Area Tuition Allowance component of the Living Away from Home Allowances Scheme.





The department provides a suite of financial assistance packages to families in rural and remote locations to ensure that students have access to a range of high quality education programs, to help them reach their full potential, including the Living Away from Home Allowances Scheme (LAFHAS).

One component of the scheme is the Remote Area Tuition Allowance that assists families to meet the costs of school tuition fees when students are required to live away from home and board at approved non-state primary or secondary schools.

LAFHAS payments are increased annually by Queensland Treasury and Trade, in line with changes to the broad Consumer Price Index (CPI).

Tied to the financial assistance available for rural and remote families is the classification of 'Bypass Schools'. Schools in rural and remote locations that are unable to deliver the required range of programs within a year level can be classified by the department as a bypass school, provided they meet certain conditions.

Families can choose to bypass these schools, which are then disregarded (or 'bypassed') when distance criteria are applied, when assessing an application for support under LAFHAS. The criteria for classification of bypass schools had not been reviewed for a number of years and the transition of Year 7 to secondary school in 2015 provided an opportune time to conduct such a review. The government has committed to increasing the LAFHAS rates for Year 7 students to the higher secondary rates from 2015 to align with this transition.

Recommendations

- Consider the implications of an amended rate of indexation for the Remote Area Tuition Allowance component of the scheme.
- Review the methodology for determining eligibility for classification as a bypass school under the Living Away from Home Allowances Scheme to account for the transition of Year 7 to secondary school.
- Amend review timeframes currently provided in the Bypass Schools policy to a yearly basis (rather than two-yearly) for a period of three years from 2015.
- Make provision within the LAFHAS application process to ensure that siblings of currently eligible students maintain eligibility irrespective of a school's continuing eligibility for bypass status.

Direct policy actions

The broader Living Away From Home Allowances Scheme was considered as part of the Review. This included a proposal to amend the rate of indexation for the Remote Area Tuition Allowance component of the scheme and align it to the education sub-index, instead of CPI. The education sub-index more closely reflects the actual cost of educational services and over time has risen at a higher rate than CPI.

The Queensland Government acknowledges that rising educational costs are of significant concern to rural and remote families in Queensland, and as such the department will provide additional funding for the Living Away From Home Allowances Scheme in 2015, to support the transition of Year 7 into secondary settings. This additional funding will provide financial support to geographically isolated families through an increase to the Remote Area Tuition Allowance rates for 2015.

The Bypass Schools policy was reviewed and has been revised. Bypass eligibility continues to be based on student enrolments and from 2015 will reflect:

- enrolments of less than 35 students in Years 7–10 for two consecutive years; or
- enrolments of less than 25 students in Years 11–12 for two consecutive years.

This will accommodate the expected increase in enrolments resulting from the transition of Year 7 to high school. To ensure that the policy change is appropriate and continues to meet the needs of rural families, an annual review of the Bypass Schools list will be conducted over the next three years.

Provision has also been made within the application process for siblings of students currently accessing financial assistance through bypass provisions to be granted eligibility irrespective of a school's current bypass status. This will provide greater certainty for families making decisions about their children's education.

The department will, however, continue to monitor the scheme and its various components, and work with stakeholders to identify issues that may arise.

3. Flexible schooling services for geographically isolated and home-based students

- Ensure that eLearning and distance learning programs are well positioned to effectively deliver Year 7 in accordance with the Australian Curriculum from 2015.
- Identify the options available to the department to provide home tutors with support and access to relevant learning resources.





The department provides distance education services through seven state schools of distance education, providing enhanced learning opportunities for geographically isolated students. The department recognises that home tutors play a vital role in supporting students of distance education. These home tutors are often family members and may not have formal qualifications in education. They work closely with distance education teachers but are often isolated from other home tutors because of their geographic location.

Currently, home tutors can access a tutor training program through the schools of distance education, however the Review consultation process identified that further development of their skills, and increased opportunities to engage with other home tutors, share resources and establish networks would be beneficial.

Consideration was also given to how the move of Year 7 to high school in 2015 might impact distance education programs. By 2015, the government will offer Year 7 as the first year of secondary education for all state schools providing distance education.

Recommendations

- Investigate mechanisms for providing home tutors with professional development through greater access to the Learning Place, enhanced networking opportunities for sharing information and resources, and increased availability of learning materials.

Direct policy actions

The department has identified a range of options to improve home tutors access to digital resources and online networking, and is currently consulting with relevant stakeholders to determine the best options that meet educational goals and are cost effective.

The options currently being explored include:

- establishment of Virtual Classrooms to provide support to home tutors
- local and/or statewide live web conferencing sessions on specific topics
- extending access to national digital learning services, including Scootle and Scootle Community, to home tutors.

When Year 7 joins high school in 2015, it will become a part of the Junior Secondary years in state schools, including schools of distance education. Schools of distance education will also continue to provide services to enhance learning opportunities by offering wider subject choice for mainstream school students, and providing a service for by-choice home-based learners and students in a range of alternative education centres.

Year 7 students studying by distance education will be supplied with learning materials appropriate for their level of development. A range of support materials will also be provided to assist students and their tutors.

4. Wellbeing of staff in rural and remote communities

- Ensure that current wellbeing programs and services are flexible to meet the needs of schools and staff in rural and remote communities.
- Partner with the associations to provide targeted support to staff in small, rural and remote school communities.

The wellbeing of teachers and school leaders is critical for delivering sustainable, world class education services and to maximise learning outcomes for students in rural and remote communities. There are a range of departmental initiatives available to support staff wellbeing, and the department is committed to helping teachers and school leaders in small, rural and remote schools access appropriate programs.

Recommendations

- Ensure that current wellbeing programs and services are aligned to teachers' needs, to maximise the opportunities for staff in rural and remote communities.
- Ensure teachers and school leaders starting at small, rural and remote schools have access to targeted induction programs.
- Partner with principals' associations to re-invigorate initiatives that support school leaders in rural and remote communities, through appropriate training and effective promotion.

Direct policy actions

The department's *Health, Safety and Wellbeing Management Framework, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Strategic Plan 2011–2015* and the *Creating Healthier Workplaces* website provide a simple framework for implementing local wellness programs that take into account the specific needs and interests of staff in rural and remote communities, and capitalise on resources within the school or broader community.

The Employee Assistance Program also provides principals and school-based staff with direct access to an independent service to assist with workplace issues, such as conflict in the workplace, workforce morale and developing a performance-based culture.

The department has also partnered with principal associations to focus on the needs of rural, remote and small school staff. The Strong Leaders initiatives build on existing models, including the Principal Connect network, and acknowledge the complex roles undertaken by staff in schools by:

- establishing a principal-to-principal statewide support service
- providing training to increase principals' confidence and competence to support staff wellbeing at a local level
- encouraging staff to form a mutually supportive network for their personal wellbeing and professional growth
- providing confidential statewide support services and practical assistance.

Conclusion

The Department of Education, Training and Employment, on behalf of the Queensland Government, is committed to ensuring students, families and their teachers, located across Queensland's most remote and isolated locations are given the most appropriate educational services and support possible. While there are a number of existing policies and initiatives in place, the department will continue to build upon past successes and work towards more effective implementation of specific actions, with regular reviews.

The table, on the following page, provides an outline of each of the four key actions and associated activities currently being implemented by the department. These will continue to be actioned through to 2015 and subject to ongoing review.



Implementation Overview	2012	2013	2014	2015	Review
Key Actions	S2	S1 S2	S1 S2	S1 S2	
Review Terms of Reference established	●				
Review consultation completed	○	●			
Rural and remote school workforce needs					
Teach Rural marketing campaign launched			○ ●		Annually
Therapists attraction strategy implemented			○ ●		Annually
Scholarship and grant programs offered		● ● ● ● ●			Annually
Financial assistance for rural and remote families					
Assessment of indexation rates completed			○ ●		
Bypass schools policy and procedure reviewed			○ ●	●	Annually
Flexible schooling services for geographically isolated and home-based students					
Year 7 resources provided to home tutors				○ ● ●	Annually
Professional development and networking opportunities provided to home tutors			○ ● ● ●		Ongoing
Wellbeing of teachers and school leaders in rural and remote communities					
Availability of resources to support staff wellbeing		● ● ● ● ● ●			Ongoing
Wellbeing initiatives implemented			● ● ● ●		Annually

- Development and consultation phase
- Implementation phase

