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RDA Wheatbelt Submission to the Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education

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Acknowledgements

This submission has been prepared with the benefit of 280 community responses to a survey targeted at the Terms of Reference of the Independent Review. RDA Wheatbelt wish to recognise and thank the community for their engagement on this important issue.

Extensive contributions were also received from:

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Executive summary

In writing this submission to the Regional, Rural, Remote Education Review, Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt (RDAW) conducted a survey of parents and teachers across the region. The survey received a total of 190 responses from parents and 90 responses from teachers and this submission is a collation of those responses and additional research.

The responses of parents and teachers indicated a plethora of challenges for the regions regional, rural and remote schools. In turn, responses also proposed or described innovative practices and solutions that could be or were being implemented.

From the parent's perspective, 92% considered costs associated with ensuring their children receive a secondary education as an important consideration while 89% viewed distance from a secondary campus as an issue. Yet despite these constraints, 97% of parents thought it was important that their children complete year 12.

Similarly in regard to attending university, costs associated with living away from home were identified by 92% of parents as a barrier to their children attending university while 88% cited their children having to move away from home as restraining factor. However 66% thought it was important that their children attend university.

There was an underpinning theme of a lack of funding derived from low student numbers which had a direct link to limited options within the curriculum and for co-curricular activities. This resulted in low diversity in schools and was identified as having an adverse impact on the quality of education in the Wheatbelt.

Although there were many responses from parents and teachers as to what could or needed to be done to address the various issues, the majority included increased funding. While a wholesale increase in funding for regional, rural, remote schools, is at best problematic in the current economic climate, there were some options offered that may warrant consideration for strategic funding.

In some cases these options included innovative approaches such as forming partnerships or alliances with other secondary campuses, tertiary/TAFE campuses and city based businesses. Options suggested included:

- Increased opportunities to visit universities and TAFE institutions in the city.
- Student participation in city based work experience programs.
- Increased school based work/training career expos delivered by professionals that are available to all secondary students in the school.
- Cross campus opportunities involving students spending extended time on a campus and living near or on the campus.
- School partnerships with city based businesses who would provide work experience and accommodation for rural/remote students.
- Linkages between Senior Secondary City Schools and rural/remote District and Senior High Schools to facilitate transition for students who will be continuing their secondary education in the city schools which could include student exchanges between the city and rural/remote schools.
- Travelling roadshows delivered by career educationalists in rural/remote areas that bring the latest education and career information and are presented in an engaging format.

In addition both parents and teachers concurred that there were in some cases, issues with the quality of teachers and leadership in schools. It appears that these issues were derived from the difficulties in attracting and retaining quality staff to regional, rural, remote areas. The difficulties identified as impeding the attraction and retention of staff included: internal department policies that shaped 'going country' as a negative career option; high rental cost of Government accommodation; lack of professional mentoring and development; substandard infrastructure and limited resources. For the most part finding solutions to these issues rests with the Education Department.

It has also been brought to RDA Wheatbelt's attention that DH schools of under 150 students, currently with a level 5 principal will in future be replaced with a level 4 principal after the current principal moves on, further impacting on attracting and retaining quality leadership in regional, rural, remote schools.

However there was one innovative solution that has been implemented in the Bruce Rock District High School, a school in one of the Wheatbelt's remote regions, that: a) has improved education outcomes; b) increased the number of students progressing to post school education and training; c) encouraged parent and community engagement and d) increased diversity in the school.

This is a mentoring program that was implemented by the school's administration in 2011 and delivered in collaboration with True Blue Dreaming. Initially the program was delivered to year 10 students but had been extended to students in year six through to year 10. The program matches a student mentee with a young adult mentor from outside the Bruce Rock community, who in most cases is a university student. After an initial face to face meeting at an organised event that includes parents, the mentoring is mainly conducted via skype, email and phone with some intermittent organised events during the year allowing additional face to face interactions.

Outcomes of the program are having an impact on students in exposing them to options and opportunities that they and their parents had not considered and for the most part has encouraged them to continue their education post school. In addition, the program has engendered a whole of school and broader community ownership and approach that is best exemplified by the comments of two parents who wrote:

"We love the True Blue Dreaming Program implemented in our school."
and

*"The staff at the Bruce Rock District High School are continually developing themselves and learning up to date teaching methods and this is being driven by a **proactive Principal**."*

From a funding perspective the program has operated on the proverbial 'shoe string' budget being largely driven through the passionate volunteer efforts of school staff and community members.

As such this program potentially represents a strategically affordable, and 'doable' option that could be implemented by schools and local communities throughout the region without requiring substantial inputs and resources.

Other community collaborations focussed on improving educational outcomes exist throughout the world and RDA Wheatbelt is interested in exploring models such as the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) model that works on influencing educational outcomes by providing extensive community support mechanisms including mentors, out of school clubs for academic support and a range of other out of school options. In a rigorous Harvard University study of the academic achievements of students at the HCZ schools, results were reported as a "miracle" by the New York Times – found that the program produced "enormous gains" in the outcomes for children. We have a theory that when school resources are tight and our influence to change the 'system' minimal, communities can still have a big impact on the educational outcomes for their children by banding together to create a collective

impact. This is particularly so when other support mechanisms such as mental health resources, are not readily available within schools. To be effective, there needs to be support for the community via community funding mechanisms and engagement of all stakeholders towards a common goal.

RDA Wheatbelt's 2016 study into Entrepreneurial Innovation in the Wheatbelt noted that "Innovation is an open process, in which businesses, customers, investors, education and research institutions, government and other organisations work together in complex ways to add value. It is a fluid, non-linear process where ideas move easily across organisational boundaries. It can benefit from proximity of people from diverse backgrounds which facilitates the flows of knowledge and the unplanned interactions that are critical parts of the innovation process."

To date education in regional areas has been considered very much the responsibility of schools. RDA Wheatbelt believes that a more collaborative "it takes a village" approach may be needed to encourage innovative approaches to improving educational outcomes in an environment where our schools have very limited resources. A positive side benefit of this approach where it has occurred elsewhere in the world is an enhanced civic society and an improvement in the quality of life not just for students but for the whole community.

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Overview

RDA Wheatbelt is a locally based, not-for-profit, incorporated association governed by a volunteer committee, and funded by the Federal Government. The key role of RDA Wheatbelt is to build strong and effective partnerships across all levels of government, industry, community groups and other regional stakeholders to boost the economic capability and performance of the Wheatbelt.

The Wheatbelt Region covers 154,000 square kilometres and is made up of five Sub regions being: Avon; Central Coast; Central East; Central Midlands and Wheatbelt South. The population of the Wheatbelt is 73,704, which includes 3,313 Aboriginal people, dispersed across 42 Shires and over 200 communities.

Available information indicates the Wheatbelt region encompasses 69 government schools, including 44 primary schools, 21 district high schools and 4 senior high schools. A further 2 agricultural colleges, 10 non-government schools, 4 residential colleges and 1 education support centre bring the total year 1-12 education facilities to 88. Two exclusive Brethren schools are included in this assessment.

Strong educational outcomes are a key priority in ensuring a sound foundation for the ongoing social development and economic growth of the region. Of concern is that the latest data (ABS 2017) indicates that the Wheatbelt is below state averages in key education measures. The 2016 Census data shows only 7.8% of the region's population were undertaking a higher level of education (post school) compared to the states average of 20% (Figure 1) This represented a slight decrease between 2011 and 2016 while the Western Australian average rate remained the same. Similarly secondary education levels in the Wheatbelt at 17% of the population were below that of the overall state levels of 20%.

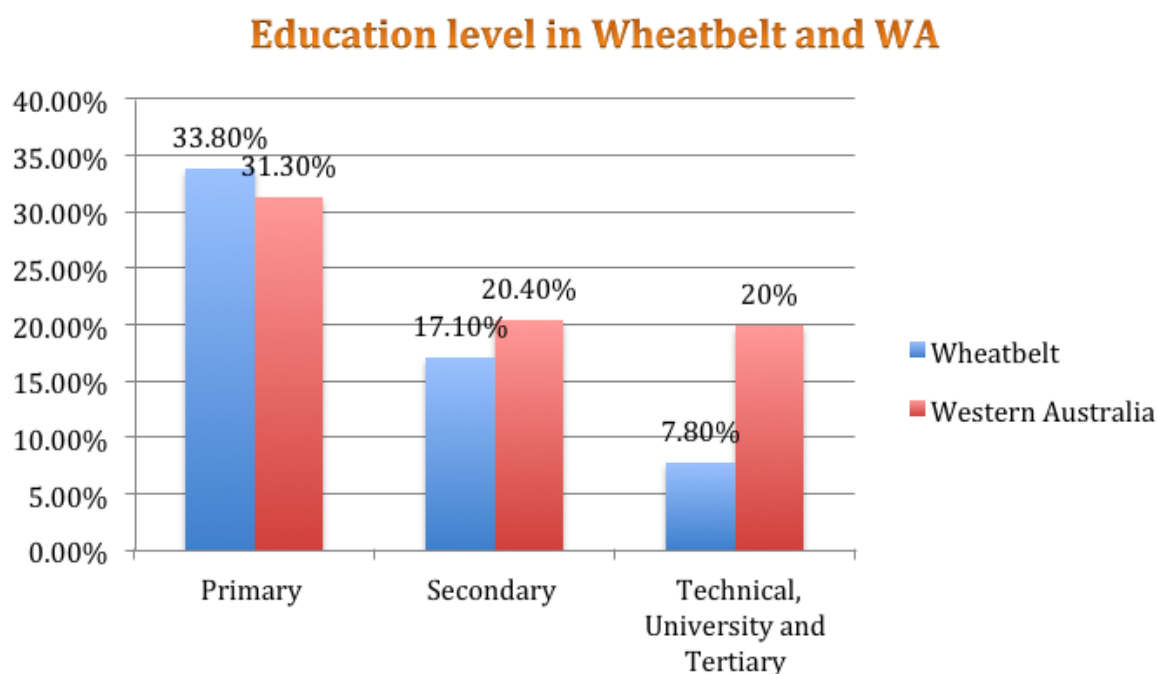


Figure 1

Introduction

In preparing its submission for the Education inquiry, Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt (RDAW) Inc. conducted surveys with parents and school teaching staff in the Wheatbelt regarding the issues and challenges associated with post school education and training in rural, regional and remote areas.

The surveys while addressing the same issues differed in the delivery approaches with parents responding to a series of closed questions structured on a five point Likert scale ranging from 'Not at all' to 'Very important'. The parents were also offered the option to give open ended responses to a series of five questions and a final section for further comments. On the other hand, the survey for teaching staff largely involved open ended questions with just two closed question responses. These closed questions were also included in the parent's survey.

The analysis of the closed questions was based on a numerical value ascribed to the text response where 'Not at all' was valued as one and 'Very important' was valued as five with an additional option of 'Unsure' also available.

The approach adopted in this submission was to use the parents and teachers narrative of challenges and potential solutions drawn from their responses to the survey.

Background of survey respondents

The majority of parents who responded to the survey were female (95%) with the most predominate age group being 35-44 years old (64%). All five Sub regions of the Wheatbelt were represented in the parent's responses with the highest number of responses coming from the Central East Sub region (40%) and Wheatbelt South Sub region (37%).

Alternately, in the teacher's survey, while most respondents were female there was a higher representation of males (21%). There was a high level of teaching experience among the respondents with 79% having more five years or more experience comprising 46% with 21-50 years' experience. Equally there was a high level of experience in teaching in regional, rural and remote areas with 73% having five or more years' experience and a third (36%) having between 21 and 50 years' experience.

Four of the Wheatbelt's Sub regions were represented in the teacher's responses with the highest numbers of responses being from the Avon (37%) and Central East (36%) Sub regions. Unfortunately there were no responses recorded from the Central Coast Sub region.

1. Curriculum and Assessment

1.1 Barriers: Curriculum and Assessment

Both parents and teaching staff identified a restricted curriculum as a barrier to educational outcomes during secondary schooling and progressing to post school education. A quarter (25%) of the parents who responded to the question regarding barriers to secondary education, believed the curriculum choices offered their children were limited which in some cases were viewed as a direct flow on effect of lower funding levels due to the lower student numbers in their local schools as shown in the parents comments below.

Secondary Student Parents: Central East Sub region- outer regional/remote areas

"There are a lack of opportunities at local schools due to lack of funding/lower student numbers."

"A big barrier are the limited funds and resources for schools in the Wheatbelt under one line budgets and low student numbers."

Secondary Student Parent: Wheatbelt South Sub region - outer regional area

"There is a lack of quality of education and opportunities to extend academically or a lack of opportunities due to school size and isolation."

The completion of year 12 for their children is a prerequisite for 97% of the Wheatbelt parents surveyed but parents remained concerned that the secondary school curriculum in the region will not deliver the necessary levels of education as illustrated by the following comments.

Secondary Student Parent: Avon Sub region- outer regional area

"Lack of options in the Wheatbelt for secondary subjects at school."

Senior Secondary Student Parents: Wheatbelt South Sub region- outer regional area

"ATAR subjects need to be taken online as there is a possibility that won't be enough students to make a class."

"Lack of subjects offered."

Based on the responses, the issues of a limited curriculum resonated more with the teaching staff in the region. In response to the question concerning key barriers and challenges to educational outcomes, 27% of the 167 responses identified issues with the curriculum and 27% identified the associated issues of limited funding and resources as the key barriers and challenges to outcomes. This was articulated by various teaching staff throughout the region.

Secondary teacher-Central Midlands Sub region: outer regional

"Low numbers are making classes for some ATAR subjects unsustainable. Funding shortfalls due to low student numbers affect students with a need for specialist teaching. Low numbers are making classes for some ATAR subjects unsustainable."

Secondary teachers- Central East Sub region: remote

"...lack of funding to smaller schools which limits choice at those schools"

"Distance from educational experiences - choice of specialist subjects especially in secondary education."

"Lack of access to a wide variety of teaching and learning opportunities."

The issues associated with the secondary curriculum extend beyond academic concerns to the limitations of funding of both human and logistical resources that comprise the equally important educational parallel of the specialist curriculum as well as the broader co-curriculum.

Secondary Student Parent: Central East Sub region- remote area

*"The schools are smaller meaning the **ability to provide a wide range of varying topics** cannot be covered in small classes. They cater to the majority not having the expertise to identify an individual child's needs. If they **do identify the child's needs** the **lack of resource** prevents anything being done about it."*

(Author's highlights)

Secondary Student Parent: Wheatbelt South Sub region – outer regional area

"If educated locally, there is a distinct lack of co-curricular activities and opportunities. Also, if they complete their secondary studies locally they are discriminated against as there is a widespread perception that local high schools are second rate, regardless of if that is correct."

The lack of resources were also viewed by teaching staff as a major impediment to achieving positive educational outcomes. A key area of concern was the limited accessibility to developmental and psychology educational specialists as shown in the comments of teaching staff in the following section. This is a key area of concern given the levels of developmentally vulnerable children within the region equating to an average of 32% with 30 out of the 42 shires above the national average of 24% (RAI, 2014).

Secondary teacher - Avon Sub region: outer regional

"Lack of readily available services e.g. Speech Pathologists, Paediatricians, and not enough Educational Psychologists available for assistance."

Secondary teacher -Central East Sub region: outer regional

"Poor resourcing for increasing numbers of students with special needs who are mainstreamed. Lack of intervention by allied health in the early years."

"Lack of funding, particularly for students who have gaps in literacy and numeracy (e.g. dyslexia). Students get no extra assistance because of lack of funding and struggle in main stream classes."

Primary School teacher- Central East Sub region- remote

"Distance is a major barrier for accessing services needed outside the school domain. These may be health (speech therapy), disability services (vision). Also children with learning difficulties may go undiagnosed."

Primary School teacher - Avon Sub region- inner regional

"Access to services such as OT and speech, to behaviour centres SEN services and language centres."

Secondary teachers -Central Midlands Sub region-outer regional

"Funding shortfalls due to low student numbers with a need for specialist teaching."

"Inadequate resources to provide the learning support for the complexity of the issues that the students at this school have. Small schools are penalised under the current funding criteria."

This represents an area of concern as access to these specialist may address various matters that: (a) determine students short and long term educational outcomes: (b) respond to ensure students psycho-social wellbeing in school and the broader community and (c) prevent vulnerable or at risk students 'falling between the cracks'.

This last point is of particular relevance for the region's Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. The year 12 attainment levels for the Indigenous population is substantially lower at 22% than the non-Indigenous 15-64 years population at 43% (ABS¹, 2017). Furthermore these regional attainment levels are markedly lower than the city areas in the state (68%) (ABS, 2016). Additionally it should be recognised that although the Indigenous population of the Wheatbelt represents just 4.5% of the region's total population, the Indigenous student population (5-19 years) comprise 9% of the overall student population (ABS² 2017).

The risks associated with the limited resourcing is further illustrated in teaching staff observations in meeting the differing educational needs within class cohorts.

Secondary teacher: Avon Sub region- outer regional

"Lack of funding means not having the ability to stream students and not having the money for resources for split ability classes"

Secondary teachers: Avon Sub region- inner regional

"Funding for disengaged students and the development of programs to cater for their needs and Resources. Students leaving country schools for city schools leave country schools with less than critical numbers to run some courses. This also leads to a greater percentage of less able students and students with greater behavioural problems. Resources are required to staff remedial and difficult to teach students."

"Limited Moderation opportunities - small groups of kids in certain years, lack of extra-curricular opportunities (sports, languages - limited access to teachers and resources)."

These comments highlight the challenges limited curriculum choices and resources available to Wheatbelt secondary students present and the issues that arise from such limitations. The second element of the education inquiry was to investigate innovative practices and solutions to overcome such challenges. In examining responses, the RDAW survey asked parents and teaching staff if:

- They were aware of any innovative approaches being used
- What approaches were effective.
- Could they identify additional gaps and opportunities.

Responses to these questions are detailed in the following section.

1.2 Effective approaches, gaps and opportunities: Curriculum and Assessment

1.2.1 Effective approaches

In assessing parent's knowledge of approaches to bridge the education gap between, rural, regional, remote students and urban students, they were asked if they knew of any such approaches. Just 6% of parents responded in the affirmative with only 4% identifying an approach. The most common approach identified was 'mentoring' of students. Two mentoring programs were mentioned as operating in the region with one being in the Central East District High School of Bruce Rock, classified as a remote school, and one in a Wheatbelt South Senior High School. The mentoring programs involved students from two universities in Perth mentoring either senior secondary students (year 11 and 12) in Wheatbelt South Senior High School or the whole secondary cohort (7-10) and year 6 in the Bruce Rock District High School.

An initial discussion with Bruce Rock DHS staff and community stakeholders involved in the implementation and administration of the program indicated that the program was a viable option to redressing the disadvantage and education gaps confronting Wheatbelt students and their parents. Permission was sought by RDAW with the relevant stakeholders to conduct a case study and include it in this submission. With their permission, the case study with accompanying analysis undertaken by RDAW is presented below.

Case study. Bruce Rock District High School and True Blue Dreaming Mentoring

In 2011 True Blue Dreaming Mentoring and the Bruce Rock District High School (DHS) collaborated in delivering a mentoring program to the year 10 cohort with the objectives of encouraging the students to progress to year 12 and further post school education and training. From 2012 the program was extended to the year 7, 8, and 9 cohorts with an introductory program for the year 6 cohort instigated in 2015.

The program is structured on pairing a young adult mentor from outside of Bruce Rock with a Bruce Rock DHS student who engage regularly via email, skype and or phone and face to face intermittently. The aim of the mentoring is to provide support and encouragement to the students along with broadening their views of the options and opportunities available to them in completing year 12 and continuing their education post school.

A preliminary analysis by RDAW identified a number of positive psycho-socio and educational trends that were most likely attributable to the program. From the psycho-socio perspective over half of the students in the 2016 mentee cohort appreciated the opportunity to talk with a person they trusted that had a high degree of separation from the local community. This is shown in the following responses to the question: "What was the best aspect of the program?"

"An adult to talk to who isn't your parent and is out of our town."

"I always have someone to speak to, they are always a friend."

"Getting to communicate with someone older than you who understands what you are going through."

"Can trust my mentor, tell her my problems, and tell her what's going on – her being there for me."

Equally the program had a positive impact on supporting the student's educational outcomes and increasing their educational aspirations as exemplified in these responses.

"Getting to hear the experiences from an older person, how they did it, and how I can get through it - support is there if I need it."

"It's been life changing – found what a doctor really does."

"Someone to talk to about the future, getting help with how to do things when not sure, learning from them."

"Being able to do a lot more than I could before. She has given me more confidence."

"My confidence. He has helped me set goals and solve problems."

The positive impacts of the program are also shown through the changes in what the year 10 cohort were going to do after the year they had completed year 10 compared to the years preceding the implementation of the mentoring program.

In 2011 there were no Bruce Rock 15-24 year olds attending university or further education and technical training institutions (ABS 2011). The number of students studying at university decreased from five to zero between 2006 and 2011 (ABS 2006). All of the five students studying in 2006 were females. The number of 15-24 year old university graduates between 2006 and 2011 also declined from five to three. Given that there were five female students studying in 2006 and three (female) graduates in 2011 it could be suggested that two of the five studying in 2006 did not complete their degree or had not completed their degree by 2011. Notably no males between the age of 15 and 24 undertook or gained a university degree during the same period.

In comparison between 2011 and 2014, five students including one Indigenous female completed year 12 and progressed onto university. Over the same period, four other students undertook further

education or technical training. Of the seven students in the 2015 year 10 cohort, six were completing year 12 while one was attending a VET institution.

The outcomes described in this case study indicate that mentoring programs such as the one implemented in the Bruce Rock District High School have a role in overcoming the disadvantages faced by regional, rural, remote students and engaging students aspirations in completing year 12 and attaining post school educational qualifications. However it should also be noted that this program largely exists as a result of the dedication and voluntary efforts of teaching staff, parents and community members and functions on a very limited level of funding.

The short and long term social and economic benefits of youth mentoring including Indigenous youth mentoring have been well documented internationally and in Australia (DuBois et al. 2011, Ware 2013, Victorian Youth Mentoring Alliance 2011). Given the student outcomes that have occurred in Bruce Rock DHS since 2011, it would seem that mentoring programs structured on a similar framework have the potential to deliver similar outcomes for regional, rural and remote students across Australia.

For more information regarding the Bruce Rock DHS and True Blue Dreaming Mentoring program contact Mr. Bob Southwell, CEO True Blue Dreaming or Ms, Janine Dayman, Deputy Principle, Bruce Rock DHS.

1.2.2 Other innovative approaches

Some of the other innovative approaches suggested by parents and teachers followed the theme of Bruce Rock District High School's mentoring approach in exposing students to further education and employment options and opportunities in the city and country areas. The approaches suggested by parents involved activities such as:

- School excursions to career expos in the city.
- School open days with guest speakers that students have access to.

Similarly teaching staff thought students needed access to information and experiences that would help them transition from rural/remote education to senior secondary or tertiary/VET education in the city through programs or events including:

- Increased opportunities to visit universities and TAFE institutions in the city.
- Student participation in city based work experience programs.
- Increased school based work/training career expos delivered by professionals that are available to all secondary students in the school.
- Cross campus opportunities involving students spending extended time on a campus and living near or on the campus.
- School partnerships with city based businesses who would provide work experience and accommodation for rural/remote students.
- Increased funding access for rural/remote students moving to the city to enable further study, training or pursue employment opportunities.
- Linkages between Senior Secondary City Schools and rural/remote District and Senior High Schools to facilitate transition for students who will be continuing their secondary education in the city schools which could include student exchanges between the city and rural/remote schools.
- Travelling roadshows delivered by career educationalists in rural/remote areas that bring the latest education and career information and are presented in an engaging format.

Generally parents and teachers felt there was a need to increase students understanding through experience of the options and opportunities as well as the logistical elements associated with living away from home. As such, these proposed activities also represent a proactive approach to improving regional, rural and remote student's education outcomes and assisting students to transition from secondary to post school education, training and employment.

2. Teachers and teaching

While it may have been anticipated that there would be a divergence in the views between parents and teachers on the topics associated with teaching staff and their effectiveness in the education processes, the survey showed this was not necessarily the case. For the most part parents and teachers concurred on the issues of staffing and teaching. In response to the effectiveness of face to face education delivery mode in the Wheatbelt's High Schools, teaching staff believed they were somewhat more effective compared to the parent's assessment (Figure 1). However the mean value of parent's responses to the effectiveness of face to face delivery mode was at 4.1, only 0.2 less than the mean value of 4.3 derived from teacher's responses.

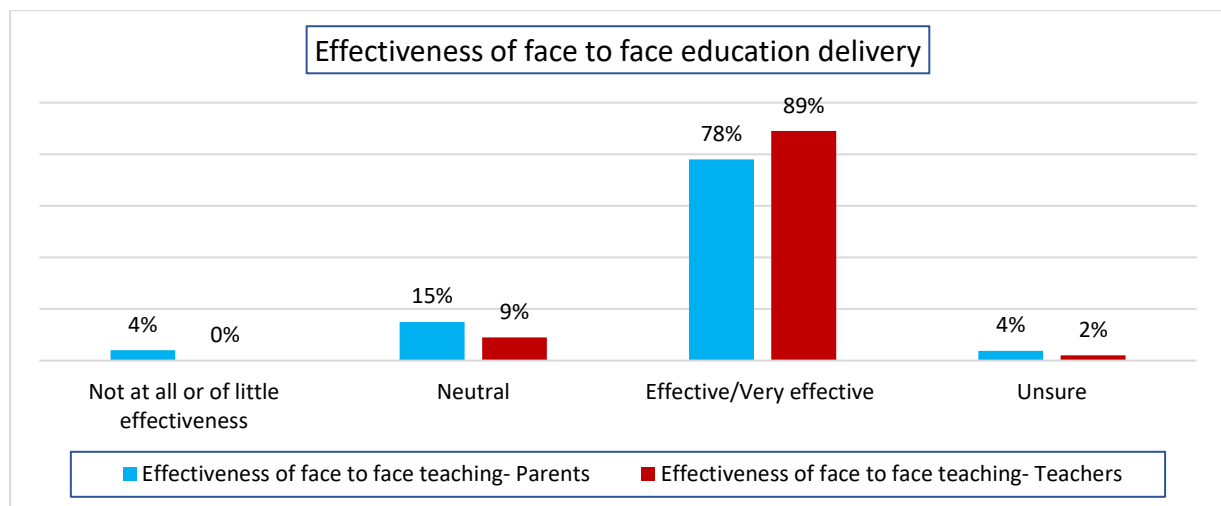


Figure 2

2.1 Teachers

The comments of some parents and teachers point to issues of competency with some teaching staff which is linked backed to staffing budgets, appointment processes along with an inability of rural/remote schools to attract and retain quality staff. For parents it was mainly a matter of short comings in teaching competencies but it was also acknowledged that there were difficulties in attracting and retaining competent staff and issues with under staffing.

Secondary Student Parents: Central East sub region- outer regional

Barriers: *"Teaching ability of teachers. Son's year is having a rough run with teachers which started in primary while daughter's had amazing teachers."*

Barriers: *"Teachers teaching subjects they are not qualified to teach. This puts the children behind and they struggle to catch up. This is the reason some family send their children away to school."*

Barriers: *"There is a lack of qualified teachers in yr. 11 and 12 subjects that students require for Uni entrance."*

Primary School Parent: Central East sub region- outer regional

Barriers: *"Ability to attract and retain quality teaching staff therefore having consistency in quality classroom teaching."*

Secondary Student Parents: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

Barriers: *"There is a lack of quality teachers, particularly in the Maths learning area."*

ATAR subjects need to be taken online as there is a possibility that there won't be enough students to make a class"

Barriers: *"The quality and turnaround of teaching staff and principals."*

Barriers: *"Unmotivated teachers teaching out of their area of expertise and teachers whose accents make them difficult to understand"*

Barriers: *"Staffing levels in regional high schools. Lack of teacher aides."*

Barriers: *"Lack of quality teachers, interruptions in teaching programs due to Long Service Leave, lack of adequately qualified relief teachers, and lack of local ATAR revision courses."*

In turn teachers also acknowledged that there were problems with the 'quality' of some teachers that was exacerbated by the inability to either retain new graduates past their first or second year in the country or attract and keep experienced quality staff in regional, rural or remote postings. In addition, teacher's comments highlighted reduced staffing levels and high workloads for teachers as other areas of concern.

Primary School teacher: Central Midlands sub region- outer regional

Barriers: *"Lack of consistency in teaching staff- there is such a high rate of staff turnover that students often have a different teacher every year if not up to 3 teachers in a year. Lack of experienced and quality teachers- moving to regional areas does not have enough incentives for experienced and quality teachers to apply. They would rather stay in city areas. So we often get first year graduates that take a lot of time and effort to mentor with the majority of them leaving after a year and the school being left to start the process again."*

Secondary Teachers: Central East sub region-outer regional/remote

Barriers: *"Finding quality secondary teachers prepared to go country to work."*

Barriers: *"Attracting and retaining quality staff at the school. Having relief staff available to cover staff taking sick leave or attending professional learning."*

Barriers: *"Lack of experienced staff. Teachers overworked with internal relief. Teachers expected to teach out of their specialist area in secondary."*

Secondary Teachers: Avon sub region-outer regional

Barriers: *"Limited funds and limits with staffing e.g. limited relief therefor teachers are overworked, teaching overtime."*

Barriers: *"Inability to attract quality teaching staff and to keep them in these areas. Because there are so many students sent to boarding schools in the city, the local high schools suffer very small numbers and as a result have limited access to any quality curriculum and teachers."*

Barriers: *"Keeping long term staff."*

The observations show a level of congruence between parents and teachers comments about teaching staff issues.

Further comments highlighted issues with fundamental structural infrastructure that could be seen as a less than acceptable aesthetic and professional presentation of an educational environment to potential staff or new staff placements as well as adversely impacting on student's learning outcomes.

Primary School Teacher - Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

"There is a lack of resources, difficulty with computers for student use, run down old schools which need significant repairs but everything is done to minimum standard."

Secondary Teacher: Central East sub region-outer regional

"Facilities are in much need of an upgrade. This impacts on the students attitudes about the school and their learning. When buildings, facilities and technology are aging and breaking down constantly they don't respect their school. This affects their attitude to learning as they think they are thought of as a lessor student. They think they aren't good enough and can't succeed."

Other teachers indicated that the source of the problem in attracting and retaining quality staff could be attributed to conditions attached to staff accommodation, limited opportunities for professional development and limited government incentives for teachers to teach in country areas.

Secondary Teacher: Central Midlands sub region-outer regional

"Cost of Government housing- The Government recently increased the rent for teachers and it is astronomical. We pay \$330 a week to live in a town that has 50 people, no services except for a service station and a pub. Teachers will not move to a rural area with no services and pay the same rent as the teachers in Perth would for a better house and more services."

Secondary Teachers: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

"There is a lack of access to quality professional training and development for teachers."

"State and Fed Government policies show little genuine regard for rural students. e.g. in WA Country teaching program incentives are limited and don't even apply to many schools. Going country can be seen as a bad career move as for teachers."

(Author's emphasis)

For the most part, responding to these issues remain the concern of Federal and State Governments but should be attended to if regional and remote development and growth is to be progressed. A possible solution to addressing this particular set of issues is summarised in the comments of a teacher from a remote region in the Wheatbelt who wrote:

"More incentives for teachers to go country are needed (not necessarily financial). Look at what is working in those country schools who are closing the gap and work to duplicate it. Quality leaders in schools plays a large part too - in some instances there is a lack of quality leaders as nobody wants to go country. There isn't a lack of quality teachers and leaders, there is a lack of who wants to go country."

This is an important consideration given the following comment which indicates a level of inequity between incentive packages for regional, rural and remote staff and their city counterparts.

“There are schools within 250km of Perth which are considered ‘remote’ under federal criteria, yet the teachers in those same schools get absolutely zero additional incentives to be in those schools. XXX DHS is one of them. Not every rural school attracts incentive packages to help attract and retain teachers – yet there are some Perth metropolitan schools considered hard to staff which do attract teacher incentive packages.”

This comment also underlines the importance of quality leaders in schools and a perceived difficulty in encouraging this leadership capital (Principals, Deputy Principals and Senior teachers) to country and remote areas.

It has also been brought to RDA Wheatbelt's attention that DH schools of under 150 students currently with a level 5 principal will in future be replaced with a level 4 principal after the current principal moves on, further impacting on attracting and retaining quality leadership in regional, rural, remote schools

3. Leaders and leadership

Quality leadership in schools was described in a 2007 review of teaching and leadership (Zammit et al. 2007) as providing direction through influence and intention being ‘vision-driven’ and ‘value-based’ and extends through and beyond principals to include a diversity of leadership roles within schools.

The review further clarifies that:

“...quality school leadership matters. It affects school outcomes including students’ social and academic achievements, teacher performance and school-community relations. Changes in school, teacher and student performance are partly attributed to changes in leadership contexts, to differing practices, organisations, structures and processes of leadership, and/or to the qualities and capacities of leaders themselves.” (page. 19).

Comments by two parents and a teacher indicate that a lack of or continuity of leadership is a factor affecting education outcomes in the region.

Primary student parents: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

Barriers: *“Quality and turnaround of teaching staff and principals.”*

Barriers: *“Quality of teaching staff and a consistent Principal mentor. High turnover of teaching staff, especially where Principals are concerned (due to ownership of roles) creates unsteady staff moral and in turn graduate teachers are not given the support and guidance they need.”*

Primary School teacher: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

Barriers: *“Access to quality professional training and development for teachers, lack of support for technology systems and hardware, expense of excursions to provide learning experiences for students, constant change to Principals in schools are serious issues.”*

Arguably the problem could be addressed through the suggestion tabled in the previous section whereby policy initiatives are enacted to eliminate the negative stigma of ‘going country’ for leaders and quality teachers.

The benefit of policy makers taking such action is exemplified in the positive outcomes of the Bruce Rock DHS mentoring program featured earlier in this document as a case study of different/innovative approaches. It should be acknowledged that, it was the leadership of the principal and deputy principal of Bruce Rock DHS in collaboration with community stakeholders that led to the establishment of the program. In addition it was the school’s leadership that facilitated the extension of the True Blue

Dreaming model from being available to just disadvantaged students to include all secondary students in the school.

The impact of such leadership is succinctly summarised in the statement of a parent, who wrote: *“The staff at the Bruce Rock District High School are continually developing themselves and learning up to date teaching methods and this is being driven by a proactive Principal.”*

In addition to staffing levels, attracting and retaining principals and quality staff along with limited funding for resources or degraded resources and infrastructure, Information and Communication Technologies (ITC) as an education deliver mode also raised some concern among parents and teachers. The ensuing section reviews the state of digital connection across the Wheatbelt and details the problems as well as the solutions that were identified in the survey.

4. Information and communication technology

Coupled with the issues of the state of the physical infrastructure in some of the region’s schools are difficulties related to IT access, infrastructure and resources. This is of particular concern as Information and Communication Technology is seen by parents and teachers as a (innovative) solution to increasing subject options in the curriculum and improving the quality of education Wheatbelt secondary students receive. Additionally online tertiary and TAFE courses are viewed as a feasible option to attain post school qualifications for Wheatbelt youth who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to access city based campuses. Parents and teaching staff responses as well as details and discussion of the issues and implications for education are examined in the following section.

Digital connectivity has been a long standing problem for the Wheatbelt Region to which the rollout of the NBN as it currently stands, may only address part of the problem (RDAW 2016, RDAW 2017) for the broader community. That being said, the Department of Education has and is connecting 98% of the state’s schools to fibre (Wheatbelt DHS admin staff pers comm 2017), which should obviate any digital connectivity problems and issues with data available for schools in the Wheatbelt.

However reliable connection, adequate speeds and data availability may continue to present constraints for students with homes connected to the Sky Muster service. While the service has allocated additional data for households with students and there are further provisions to double data allocations by October 2017 (McKillop 2017), there remains the potential for less than adequate service delivery in relation to speeds as well as comparatively higher service costs.

This is of particular relevance to the Wheatbelt Region given that modelling undertaken by RDA Wheatbelt (2016) based on the NBN’s construction plan (2016) indicated that approximately 18% of Wheatbelt households and businesses would be connected to Sky Muster services. This is substantially higher than the estimated national level of 3% (ITNEWS 2016) and could be as high as 73% in Wheatbelt South and 49% in the Central East Sub region which have the Wheatbelt’s highest number of schools and students in remote areas.

It should also be noted that home internet access for some students in the region, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, including Indigenous students can be extremely limited. An analysis of the latest Wheatbelt statistics (ABS³ 2017) show that 22% of non-Aboriginal households and 44% of Aboriginal households are **not** connected to the internet in the region. In addition, the highest numbers of households not connected to the internet are in Central East and Wheatbelt South Sub regions with 24% and 25% of non-Aboriginal households not connected in the Central East and Wheatbelt South Sub regions respectively along with 51% of Aboriginal households not connected in the Wheatbelt South Sub region.

There is no readily available information in regard to the extent in the number of students affected by this lack of connection or poor connectivity in the Wheatbelt. Given this, it would be prudent for those responsible in developing online education programs and courses, not to assume that every student is able to access coursework and materials at home.

4.1 ICT-Challenges in delivering educational outcomes

From the parents and teachers perspective education delivery via Information and Communication Technology (ICT) mode is seen as effective by 54% of parents and 36% of teachers in the region with almost a quarter (23%) of teachers viewing it as of little or no effectiveness (Figure 3).

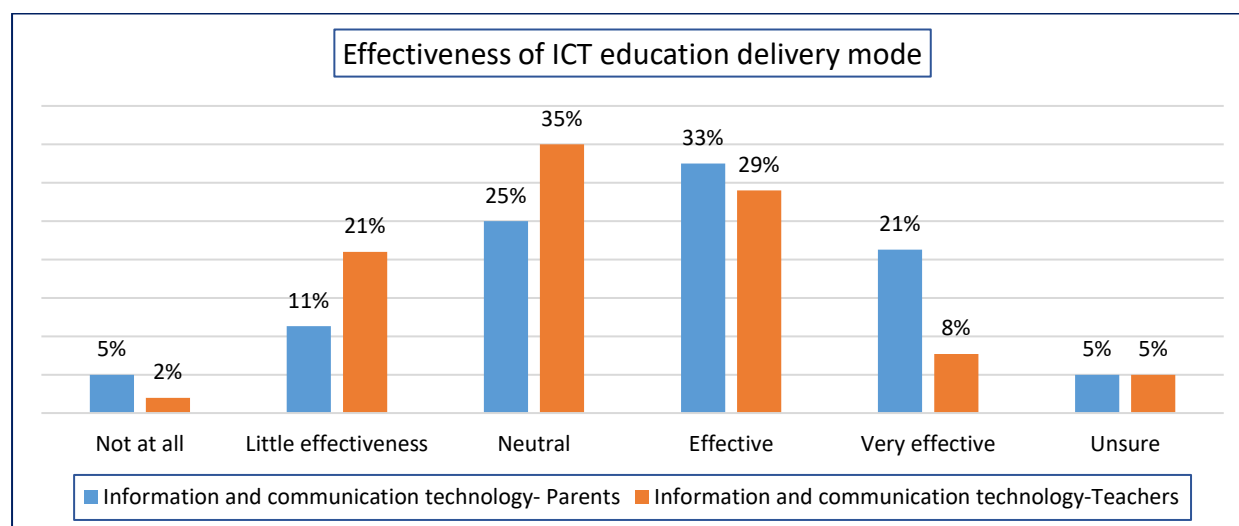


Figure 3

The constraints with ICT identified by parents and teachers in the survey were associated with access, obsolete or inferior technology and or technological infrastructure in addition to the broader issues of reliable digital connectivity. As the comments below illustrate, parents and teachers viewed these limitations as impediments for students to access a quality education as well as a diverse education.

Parents: Central East Sub region- outer regional/remote areas

"Internet access is an issue when only a few students can access at one time."

"Internet access (stable and affordable) at home for homework and research is an issue."

Parents: Wheatbelt South Sub region- outer regional

"Disappointing as most approaches are headed towards IT based delivery models and we don't have the technology and quantity of data that makes this viable."

"The simple issue of internet connectivity is causing more of a gap for our students at the moment."

Secondary teachers: Central East Sub region- outer regional

"There are a lack of funds for technology and a greater range of subject selection."

"Lack of resources, particularly ICT including wifi and proper ICT support."

"Availability of technological resources (ie stable internet etc) are issues."

"Access to adequate internet."

"Limited amount of money allocated to the upkeep of these schools - particularly in relation to internet connection." (Secondary teacher in a remote area)

Secondary teachers: Avon Sub region- outer regional

"Internet reliability and resourcing IT are barriers"

"Slow speeds and poor continuity of internet connection (and mobile coverage) often impacts on our students ability to research and learn via the internet. Often any more than 3 or 4 students on the internet at one time means that connecting or downloading from websites is impossible."

Secondary teacher: Wheatbelt South Sub region- outer regional

"Lack of support for technology systems and hardware."

Although the parents and teachers identified shortfalls in the current state of delivery education via the ITC mode, they also recognised the potential for ICT and improved digital connection to enhance educational outcomes for rural/regional/remote students. The opportunities and solutions along with the broader issues associated with delivering better educational outcomes in regional and remote areas are explored in the following sections.

4.2 ICT educational options and opportunities

Responses from RDA Wheatbelt's Education Inquiry survey as well as information derived from another survey conducted by RDA Wheatbelt for a revision of the Wheatbelt's Digital Action Plan (2013), show that parents and teachers recognise the potential online education in conjunction with better internet connectivity has for improved educational outcomes in the rural and remote regions. For example, in the Digital Action Plan survey, 82% of parents agreed that better internet connectivity would give country students better education and employment opportunities. The solutions and or practices suggested by parents and teachers in the following section reflect the importance they place on ICT in delivering improved outcomes for secondary and post school education and training.

For parents it was a question of their children being able to undertake secondary and post school education and training while remaining at home or in the local area. This could be seen as overcoming the barriers of distance and cost to post school education as identified by parents in the survey. While 66% of parents thought it important that their children attend university and 68% attributed importance to their children attaining a TAFE qualification, 70% viewed distance from a campus as a barrier. Additionally 75% believed that their children moving away from home was a constraint with associated costs being an issue for 88% of parents.

In addressing these challenges, a number of parents thought variations of online education including short periods on campus offered a solution.

Secondary student parent: Avon sub region- outer regional

"More opportunities for online university or perhaps structure online courses similar to apprenticeships so that training can be done online and a short period on campus."

Secondary student parents: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

"More opportunities and ability to do distance education/ online learning."

"More options for satellite university centres that provide off city campus options with maybe short blocks of attendance at city campus for practical training, similar to some TAFE programs."

"More post-secondary opportunities, e.g. more government sponsored short courses such as first aid, online educational facilities through CRC's, libraries, and work place opportunities."

Secondary student parent: Central East sub region- outer regional

"Online study is an opportunity. Children can get a job, study and have the support of home."

Teaching staff also acknowledged the potential of online education, adding more specific detail as to how it could should be utilised to not only improve educational outcomes but increase curriculum diversity in smaller regional/rural/remote schools. In as much as both the parents and teachers see the potential in online education, three teachers also identified the underlining short comings in service delivery that act as restraints in delivering on the potential. These being reliable connectivity, down and up load speeds and bandwidths.

Secondary teacher: Avon sub region- outer regional

"Access to highly speed, reliable internet and resourcing to purchase and maintain quality IT resources to enable interactive, virtual access to specialist programs e.g. music, languages, literacy and numeracy as well as senior schools/university programs."

Secondary teacher: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

"Better and faster access to ICT. Our service is slow and unreliable in rural areas - this would help the sense of connectedness to the outside world."

Primary School teacher: Central East sub region- outer regional

"Improved bandwidth so that online learning can occur from Primary through to tertiary education."

Secondary teacher: Avon sub region- inner regional

"More creative use of technology to deliver quality, really effective programs locally, so students wanting a greater subject choice can have it without needing to move away."

It would seem that the WA Education Department in taking the initiative to rollout fibre optic cable to an estimated 98% of the state's schools will substantially increase the capacity to deliver education programs online which will address many of the ICT challenges cited by parents and teachers. Equally the increased usage of the ICT education delivery mode would enhance schools capacities to provide diverse and engaging learning programs that will complement existing on ground program and or offer more options for students.

5 Diversity

The responses of many parents and teachers in the survey reflected concern at the limited offering of diversity in the curriculum and co-curricular options. The comments indicated that students in the Wheatbelt were unable to access as cited in the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education Discussion Paper (2017) a: *"rigorous, relevant and engaging learning programs... (that) encompass cognitive, affective, physical, social, and aesthetic curriculum experiences"*.

However there was less a feeling that parents held the school totally accountable for being unable to: *"...do whatever is necessary to ensure that my child/children is/are successful and happy."* (Halsey 2017, page 40.) and more that a funding rationale based on (low) student numbers in schools was responsible.

There was a palatable sense of frustration in many of the teacher's responses who could see the learning benefits that would be derived from a more diverse, better resourced and funded curriculum.

5.1 Lack of diversity

Some of the parents in identifying the short comings of diversity in their children's schools exuded a sense of resignation that this was the way it is in the country and nothing would change. The concern this represents is that a lack of diversity in regional, rural remote schools can ultimately exclude

students within those areas from optimising their abilities and talents to the potential benefit of themselves, the State and nation. This resonates in the statement of a parent that:

"Talent doesn't only live in the city."

(See comment box below for the full comment)

Secondary student parent: Central East sub region- remote

"The schools are smaller meaning the ability to provide a wide range of varying topics cannot be covered in small classes. They cater to the majority not having the expertise to identify an individual child's needs. If they do identify the child's needs the lack of resource prevents anything being done about it."

Secondary student parent: Central East sub region-outer regional

*"Lack of opportunities at local schools due to lack of funding/lower student numbers. A rural student has a gift best served at a city school but there is no support to help her realise it. Country schools don't appear to have the privilege of offering specialised programs. Why is that? **Talent doesn't only live in the city.**"*

Secondary student parent: Central Midlands sub region-outer regional

"I think small student numbers is a problem. In Perth if a school doesn't have enough kids interested in a subject, they can try another school, that isn't an option here. If the school doesn't run the subject a child wants, they can't do it. A school can't afford to run a subject for 4 interested kids, so they miss the chance to study it."

Secondary teacher: Avon sub region- inner regional

"More creative use of technology to deliver quality, really effective programs locally, so students wanting a greater subject choice can have it without needing to move away."

Other parents saw the lack of diversity as a short coming in the broader education system that place an imbalanced emphasis on literacy, numeracy and academic abilities at the expense of the arts, music, technology and the practicalities of employment.

Secondary student parents: Wheatbelt South sub region- remote

"The current school system is not designed for individuals or creativity. It would be great to see more diversity and understanding that each student has of their own natural abilities. The system as it is today only focuses on a few academic abilities of students and if a student happens to fall outside of these parameters they are not encouraged, educated or grown as a being with their own abilities and interests and therefore get left behind, or left out."

Secondary student parent: Central East sub region-remote

"The three R's are covered and equal, but the opportunities for extracurricular activities are severely limited - particularly exposure to culture and arts, modern and up to date technology, variety of job opportunities."

Secondary student parents: Central Midlands sub region-outer regional

"Lack of diversity in education at regional primary schools. i.e. limited or no music programs, no languages. Just literacy and numeracy."

However essentially there remained a level of resignation among some parents epitomised in the comment:

"I think there will always be a gap as rural students do not get the same teacher consistency and subject courses and funding is not an equal playing field."

Correspondingly teacher's responses correlated with parents responses in identifying a lack of options for students as a result of limited funding compounded by the additional constraint of distance from available resources.

Secondary teacher: Central East sub region- remote

"...small numbers at school means students do not get to choose from a range of options, all must do a semester of home ec and a semester of wood work, rather than specialising in their elective subject of choice."

Secondary teachers: Central East sub region- outer regional

"Lack of courses that can be offered to the students. With small numbers many subjects offered at other schools just aren't viable here or we don't have the staff that are competent to take the courses."

"(A key barrier is) Distance from educational facilities offering extra curricula activities ie music, robotics."

"Access is costly to get to various educational activities and to get people to come to us."

"Limited PEAC access. No Instrumental Music offered. Challenge to access cultural events. Small numbers limits social interactions. Limited academic competition."

Secondary teacher: Wheatbelt South sub region- outer regional

"Schools are operating on a shoestring and are not able to run diverse programs to cater for wide range of abilities and interests."

5.2 Opportunities

While many parents and teachers felt that increasing the diversity in education was reliant on increased funding, other responses showed that schools in the region were taking action through entering into partnerships with other schools or tertiary institutions. In addition other schools had implemented their own programs including mentoring or programs linked to The School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE).

Secondary School parent: Wheatbelt South Sub region: outer regional

"University contact and programs linking with local high school are excellent. Funding for indigenous programs helps from that angle. Murdoch University program with NSHS linking in with yr7-12 students for day programs, study skills programs etc."

Secondary School parent: Central Midlands Sub region: outer regional

"I hear the SIDE program is good. I think it's the only saving grace of regional education at the moment."

Primary School parent: Wheatbelt South Sub region: outer regional

"A private Perth School Hale School has initiated a program at our local primary school called Hale 21 which is fantastic. Hale 21 was offered to yr 6 children at our school. It was not based on academic achievement but it certainly made my daughter high school and IT ready."

Secondary School parent: Wheatbelt South Sub region: outer regional

"I don't know if they are policy but programs that have seen ECU attend Kukerin PS for science week etc. definitely help to bridge a deficit of cultural and academic exposure children in rural areas face."

Secondary School parent: Central East Sub region: remote

"The Bruce Rock High School runs a very good Design and Technology program and have a TAFE teacher undertake with the students every Wednesday. This has given the students who are interested in this area an opportunity to gain a certificate at the completion of year 10 before they go onto their next educational institution."

Teacher's responses also recognised the potential improved digital connectivity would offer in developing more diverse learning experiences for students as well as the benefit in increasing specialist competencies among staff in small schools.

Secondary teacher: Wheatbelt South Sub region- outer regional

"Access to high speed, reliable internet and resourcing to purchase and maintain quality IT resources to enable interactive, virtual access to specialist programs e.g. music, languages, literacy and numeracy as well as senior schools/university programs."

Secondary teacher: Avon Sub region- outer regional

"Opportunities to take part in bridging courses that include a short living away from home component to ease young people in to the experience of studying /working away from home."

Secondary teacher: Central East Sub region- outer regional

"Exposure to opportunities and facilities outside of their local area, extra support in upskilling teachers to provide specialist knowledge to students particularly in District High Schools to meet the demands of an ever changing curriculum within a small staff where the number of specialist teachers is small."

Secondary teacher: Avon Sub region- inner regional

"Mentoring programs before the students actually begin their course and while they are involved in the course."

6 School and community

There were challenges articulated regarding the lack of collaboration between parents, the broader community and schools in achieving positive education outcomes for students. Both parents and teachers noted behaviour problems in the class room which are affecting education processes however behaviour issues as a recent Australian Council of Education Research report showed (Thomson et al. 2015), are universal and not just confined to regional, rural, remote school settings.

6.1 Challenges

That being said, regional, rural, remote teaching staff are confronted by family and social issues that they inevitably have to address without the support that their colleagues in metropolitan areas have access to. As one staff member from a school in one of the Wheatbelt's remote regions wrote:

"Over time we have seen more and more dysfunctional families move to rural WA in pursuit of cheaper rentals. However, many of the rural communities they move to do not have, within even a 100km or more proximity, any of the agencies (e.g. mental health, parent/family, employment, centrelink, adult learning) which in the metro would be available to provide family support. This places additional strain on schools who end up being the only agency available to support these challenging families."

In effect, their continuing commitment to the wellbeing of students and the lack of support services means teaching staff take this work on even though it is often outside their area of specialisation.

Outside this specific challenge, instances of differing values between communities and educators were highlighted in comments. In some instances it was a case of community disengagement while in others it was a divergence between the community's local socio-cultural values and the relevance of the broader view educational values. As one parent observed, a key barrier to further education was

"(Students) Not setting their sights high enough due to living in an insular rural community."

6.2 Options

In response to the increased pressure on regional and remote teaching staff to respond to social issues, one staff member suggested a more collaborative approach with social service providers via:

“Case conferencing for at risk students involving all external agencies working in tandem with the school and families.”

In examining parent’s responses to barriers and solutions for bridging the gap, only three parents acknowledged the role parents and community have in education and that a lack of engagement is a barrier. On the other hand two parents highlighted the need for a greater engagement between community, parents and schools.

“Teachers and community need to acknowledge the importance of on-going education in a world view rather than just from a community perspective. People who live regionally are so worried about losing young people but not the opportunities available or promoted such as doctors, nurses etc that require university qualifications. Even farming has progressed into requiring further education. We need to also look at living regionally but able to tap into the world workforce through technology and other innovative ways to have the best of both!”

“Parental support and at home supplementary teaching is a critical factor - schools need to encourage this more.”

These views were supported by comments from the teachers with one suggestion being the need for:

“...some form of program to assist older students with literacy and numeracy learning that they missed out on previously. Their levels are low and they are not attending school. Maybe some programs to build trust and support within the family and with parents/carers to raise the profile of education so parents take greater responsibility for sending their children to school and encouraging responsible behaviour while at school.”

The processes of addressing the first part of this suggestion in reference to numeracy and literacy programs for older students ultimately rests with education policy makers and funding. However the second part of the suggestion in building trust and support within the family and with parents/carers to raise the profile of education could be actioned through school mentoring programs and/or other community collective action strategies such as that employed in the Harlem Children’s Zone.

Our local Wheatbelt example of the True Blue Dreaming Program operating at Bruce Rock is directed at engaging the students however the parents are also engaged in the process. Discussions with education and community stakeholders involved in the implementation of the mentoring program indicate that the student’s exposure to future education options and opportunities, not only increases the value they attribute to education but also their parent’s viewpoints.

The intrinsic value of the mentoring program in developing a collaborative and unified partnership between the staff, parents and community in seeking to optimise Bruce Rock secondary student’s education potential is a viable example of how socio-cultural issues can be addressed and attitudes changed.

7 Other associated issues with further education

At the time of writing, the Government funding support of the only on campus university undergraduate course available in the Wheatbelt Region, delivered on the Muresk Campus through Charles Sturt University is under Departmental review.

The Muresk campus has had a long history in delivering post school education in the agri-industry sectors being established in 1926. In 1987 it became part of Curtin University and continued to deliver undergraduate courses in the agri-industry sector until Curtin University withdrew from the arrangement in 2009. In 2014 after a five year hiatus, an agribusiness undergraduate course was offered on campus and delivered by Charles Sturt University. While there was growth in enrolments in the succeeding two years, there was a marked decline in 2017 enrolments attributable less to a dearth of interest and to have more likely have occurred due to difficulties potential students had with accessing the online enrolment link. These difficulties were compounded given this was the only option available to enrol in the course.

Currently it appears that the preferred option is to deliver a diploma level course. In as much as this means that agri-industry courses will still be available in the region, it also means that those students seeking university level qualifications will have to move to the city. It should also be noted that the Wheatbelt Region has three TAFE sites situated in the Avon, Central East and Wheatbelt South Sub regions through which a diploma level course could be delivered.

This challenges the concept of equity in regional, rural, remote students being able to access secondary and or university education as was pointed by many parents and teachers in the RDA Wheatbelt survey, that the majority of children in the city do not have to leave their home for either form of education.

Additionally studies have shown that national retention rates for regional, rural, remote university students were 60% compared to an overall rate of 74%. In comparison the Charles Sturt University (CSU) Bachelor of Agricultural Business Management degree being delivered on Muresk campus has been matching metropolitan university retention rates of 75% in 1st year and 80% in 2nd and 3rd years. It is most likely that this high comparative rate of retention is attributable to small class sizes where staff come to know students well and students have access to Student Support Services for the emotional and social welfare 24 hours a day, 7 days a week as well as on site Residential Assistant students as a first point of contact in residences (CSU Muresk source 2017).

To put these results in a broader context it should be recognised that over 80% of higher education students relocate from regional/remote areas to Perth to study compared to other states and higher education participation rates in WA regions are lower than in comparator regions across Australia (ACIL ALLEN Consulting 2014).

The need to address the higher education imbalance between regional, rural, remote students and their city counterparts is further highlighted in that as quoted in the Australian Newspaper, rural people access university education at 50% of that of city people (Trounsan 2015) and that the gap is increasing (Loussikian 2015).

As well as the potential to level the playing field through the physical presence of regionally based university campuses, there are broader associated functions and derived benefits as described in Charles Sturt University's submission to the 2009 Inquiry into Rural and Regional Access to Secondary and Tertiary Education Opportunities (pp.10 &11). These include:

- Bringing the knowledge economy to the regions;
- Providing educational opportunities for regional populations and areas;
- Providing centres for regional and international excellence in research;
- Widening the employment base of the regions and providing opportunities for employment and retention of graduates in their home region and
- Developing cultures of lifelong learning.

Given the decreasing rates of regional, rural, remote participation in university education along with CSU Muresk's healthy retention rates it is conceivable that any decision to withdraw delivery of a university course from a regional location is counterproductive to the stated aim of increasing regional, rural, remote higher education rates.

In addition such a decision could also be counterproductive in terms of increasing Aboriginal participation in university education in the region. This is of particular relevance to Muresk campus which is located in the Noongar Ballardong Country. This should be considered within a future orientated strategic framework of capacity building in anticipation of the eventual finalisation of the South West Native Title Settlement which will see managed and natural land assets ownership resumed by Noongar people. There is a growing imperative to build business and economic capacities within the Aboriginal population in the region to ensure that they are able to utilise the assets to the benefit of their communities and the enterprises they engage in are sustainable and succession assured. This is likely to require ongoing skills based training including business management skills.

In conclusion it would be judicious for policy makers to consider the current challenges of supporting continuing education for the adult and business community for all our community members when assessing options for the Muresk campus.

8 Discussion

This submission has been structured on the narrative of parents and teachers in the Wheatbelt as to the challenges each party face in ensuring Wheatbelt students have some opportunity to access a 'quality' education. As detailed in the submission the challenges and problems outweigh the solutions if increasing funding is excluded from the options.

There were, however, some potential solutions such as cross campus partnerships and mentoring that offered to achieve better outcomes and go some way to bridging the rural, urban education gap that would not require a large injection of funding. Alternately improved digital connection offers the opportunity to increase the choice of subjects and improve diversity in the schools which would also enhance education outcomes and could be delivered within existing budgets or require a minimal funding increase.

While these are viable options, they are only achievable with dedicated and competent staff and appropriate staffing levels. The comments of both parents and teachers indicate that attracting and retaining 'quality' staff is a problem which to a large extent is out of the control of the communities and school administrators. Judging by the comments of some teachers, it would seem that the Department of Education should investigate options to encourage teachers to 'go country' and remain there for an acceptable period of time.

As this submission illustrates, there are a plethora of problems and challenges that constrain education outcomes in regional, rural, and remote areas. Added into these issues is a societal change in parental expectations of how education is delivered and a shift for educators in the education paradigm from the rigidity of the hierarchical industrial revolution pedagogy to the more agile digital revolution processes of facilitated iterative action learning.

From RDAW's perspective, education is the corner stone of social development and economic growth in the Wheatbelt and will underpin the entrepreneurship and innovation that will ensure the future of the region. In considering education strategies and options for regional, rural, remote regions, it would be prudent on the part of policy makers to remember that:

"Talent doesn't only live in the city."

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