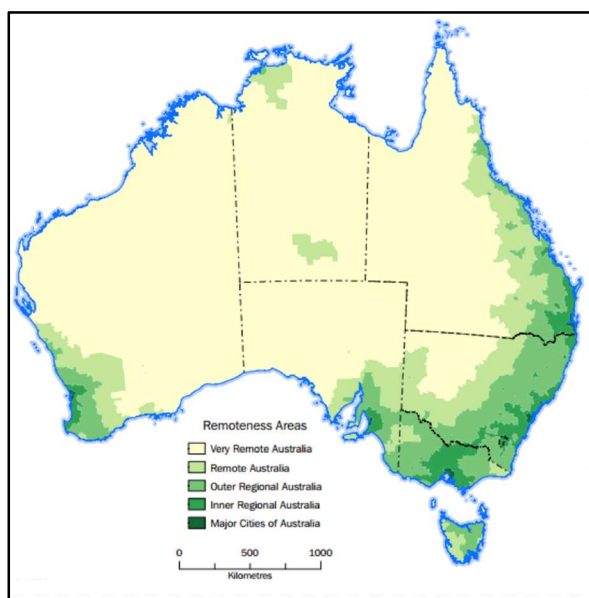# Rural and Remote Education in Australia

What is rural and remote in Australia?

The term 'rural and remote' encompasses all areas outside Australia's Major cities. Using the Australian Standard Geographical Classification System, these areas are classified as **Inner Regional, Outer regional, Remote or Very Remote**.

The map developed by the Royal Flying Doctor Service in 2018, illustrates how much of Australia is rural and remote.

How many people live in rural or remote areas in Australia?

Around 7 million people – or 28% of the Australian population – live in rural and remote areas, which encompass many diverse locations and communities (ABS 2022e).

Distribution of students and schools across regional and remote locations

- Nationally, about 27.6 per cent of Australian students attend schools outside major city locations based on 2020 figures – 18.0 per cent in inner regional, 7.8 per cent in outer regional, and 1.8 per cent in remote or very remote locations.
- The proportions vary by jurisdiction. For example, in Victoria no students attend schools in remote or very remote locations, 5.6 per cent do so in Western Australia, while 40.8 per cent do so in the Northern Territory.
- School size declines with distance from major cities to the extent that 63 per cent of schools in remote or very remote locations have fewer than 100 enrolments, and remote and very remote primary schools, on average, are almost one-fifth the size of those in major cities.
- Majority of schools in rural and remote areas are government schools. Few 'choices' exist.

Lack of schooling choice

In stakeholder consultations and submissions to the review, a number of stakeholders raised the issue of the lack of choices available to families seeking to give their children the best possible educational opportunities. This is particularly an issue once children reach secondary school.

While families in regional and remote areas may have relatively easy access to a small local primary school (or be able to handle distance education at primary school level), by the time their children reach high school the options can be more challenging:

- Any 'local' high school may be a considerable distance away, meaning extended time spent travelling to and from school. Local high schools are more likely than those in major cities to have a smaller student population and struggle with staffing, which can also limit the breadth of curriculum program offerings. Problems with internet access may limit other subject options. Extra-curricular activities may also be limited.
- Distance education might not be an option due to erratic/non-existent internet access, and/or it may not suit the family (e.g. resources to set up a school room, lack of personal contact with other students/teachers, lack of confidence in this style of learning).
- Sending their children to boarding school may be parents' only option for their children to have more extensive curriculum options and opportunities to undertake a larger range of extra-curricular activities. But this means children are separated from family, and the financial costs may be a considerable drain on family resources.
- Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students must move off country to attend secondary school. This separation from family, community and country further exacerbates feelings of isolation, which can contribute to disengagement from schooling.

Students' educational opportunities decline with the level of remoteness

A consistent finding from research on regional and remote education is that in all available measures of learning and educational outcomes, students from regional and remote areas perform, on average, below their major city peers.

Cassells, Dockery, Duncan, Gao, & Seymour, 2017; DESE, 2020; Halsey, 2018; Holden & Zhang, 2018; Lamb et al., 2015; *The Senate Standing Committee on Rural & Regional Affairs & Transport,* 2009, cited in CIRES at Victoria University (to be published) *Literature review for the Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings*: *Report prepared for the National School Resourcing Board*, p 6.

Problems of rural and Remote Schools
> *"…smaller schools tend to have fewer resources, are often less able to employ specialist staff or offer specialist subjects or programs, have to use composite multigrade classes, provide fewer opportunities for professional development, have more difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers, provide less support for special needs students and offer fewer options for courses."*

Lamb, S., Glover, S. (2014) *Educational disadvantage and regional and rural schools*, ACER Research Conference Abstract, Australian Council for Educational Research

Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that in 2018, at the point of entry to school, 20.8 per cent of major city children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. In comparison, 22.3 per cent of children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in inner regional areas, 24.6 per cent in outer regional areas, 26.6 per cent in remote areas and 45.5 per cent in very remote areas.

Department of Education and Training, Australian Early Development Census National Report, cited in CIRES at Victoria University (to be published) *Literature review for the Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings*: *Report prepared for the National School Resourcing Board*, p 6.

NAPLAN performance

Students living in Australia's major cities continue to outperform their peers from regional and remote communities. NAPLAN data shows that this is the case across the primary and secondary years – from Year 3 to Year 9 – and across the different NAPLAN domains.

Source: DESE, ACARA NAPLAN data.
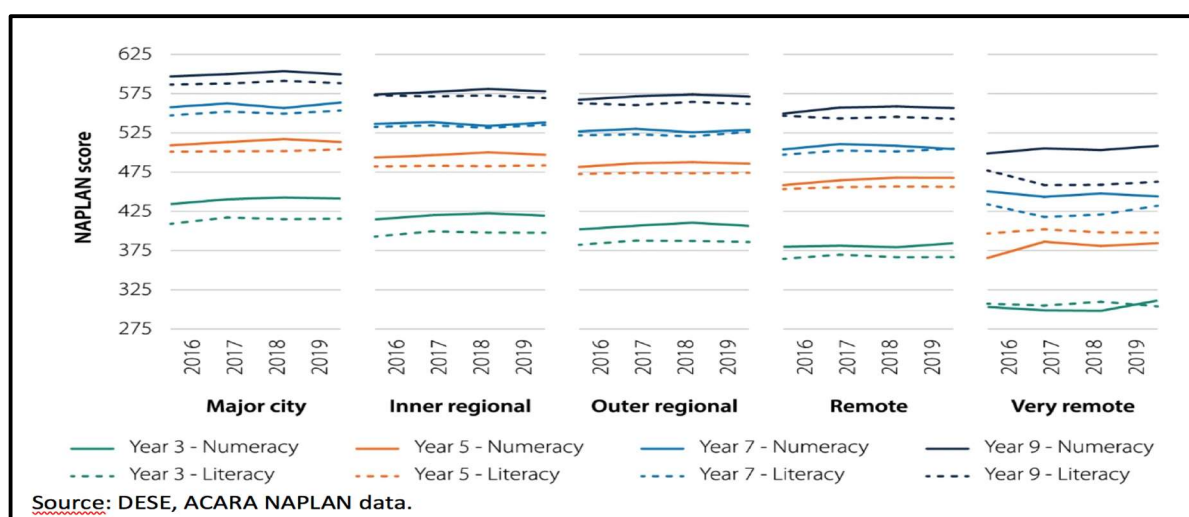
Performance in international student assessments

Analysis of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 shows that on average:

- students from regional areas were the equivalent of around two-thirds of a year (22 points) behind their peers in major cities in reading literacy
- students from remote areas were almost a year and a half (49 points) behind their peers in major cities in reading literacy
- similar gaps are evident in science literacy (regional two-thirds of a year and remote a year and a half) and mathematics literacy (regional over three-quarters of a year and remote around a year and three-quarters).

S Thomson, L de Bortoli, C Underwood and M Schmid, *PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results. Volume I Student Performance*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019, https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa, p 33, p 77, p 157, p 218, viewed 10 February 2022.

Challenges faced by regional and remote schools

The challenges faced by regional and remote schools and students have been documented in a number of reviews and inquiries and were prominent in the consultations with stakeholders conducted for the review and the submissions received.
The challenges include:

Attracting and retaining experienced staff:

- Board from Victoria University identified that staff who are qualified, experienced and committed to their school and its community are essential to the success of regional and remote schools.
- There is often a higher proportion of less experienced staff, including principals, in regional and remote schools than in metropolitan schools.
- The 2013 Staff in Australia's Schools survey revealed that for the remote school workforce, 45 per cent of primary and 30 per cent of secondary teachers are early career teachers, compared to 22 per cent and 18 per cent respectively across all schools.
- Primary principals in remote areas have 6 years less experience on average than their metropolitan counterparts, and secondary principals have on average 4 years less experience.

Curriculum breadth and extra-curricular opportunities

- In regional and remote schools, staffing issues often limit schools' abilities to provide high-quality educational opportunities for their students.
- In combination with the small size of many regional and remote schools, this often means that the breadth of curriculum on offer is limited, restricting schools' abilities to cater to a broad range of student interests, particularly in the secondary years.
- Academic and vocational curricula are often less diverse in regional and remote schools.
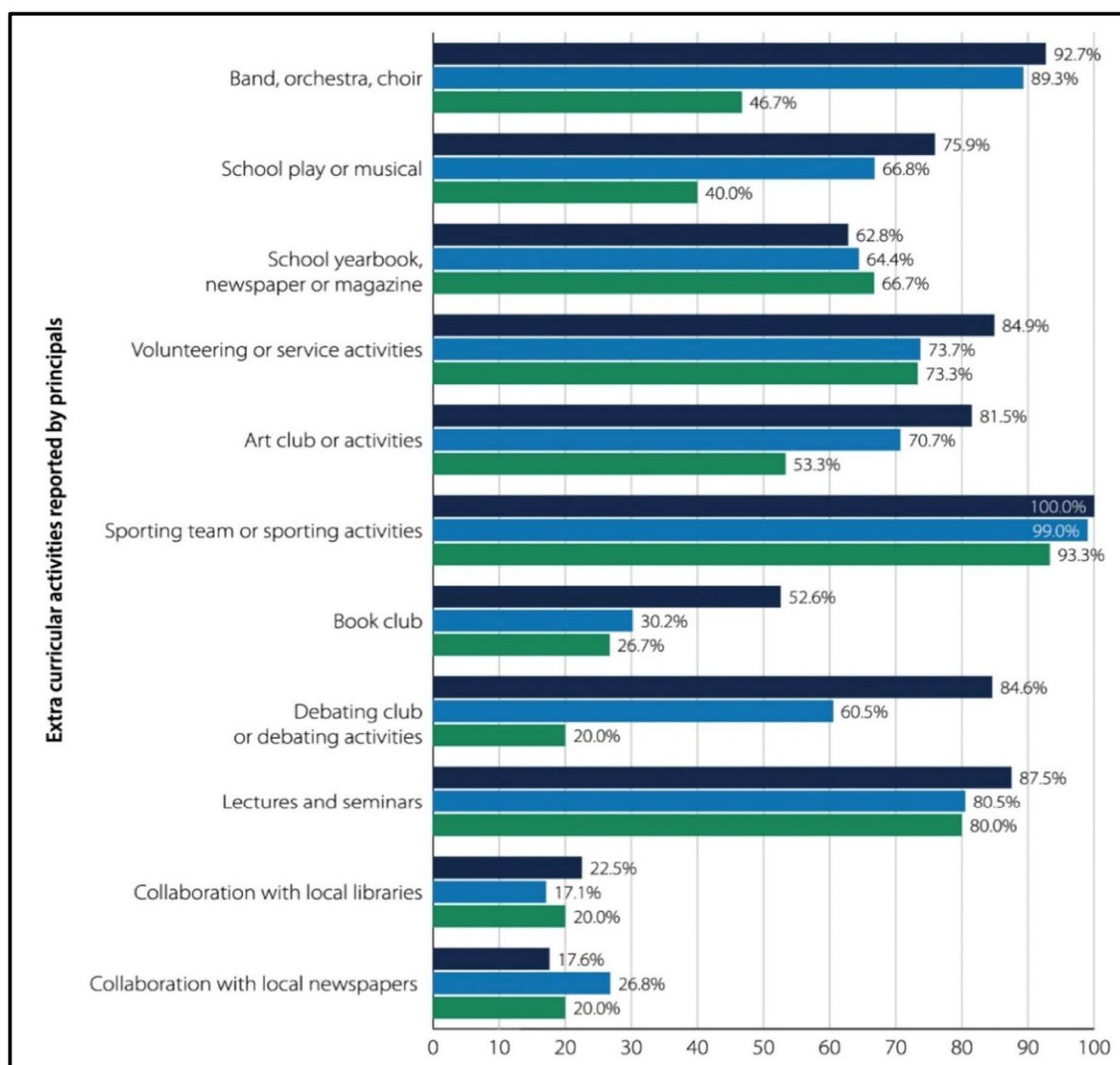
Extra-curricular activities by major city, regional and remote location 2018 - Source: PISA 2018 data, analysed by ANU.

High cost of, and access to, goods and services

Goods

The higher cost of, and access to, goods and services in regional and remote areas was raised by stakeholders throughout this review, including freight costs which represent a significant cost pressure.

The Queensland Government described the complexity and cost of its 24 school campuses on islands with no road links:

Tagai State College has campuses on Thursday Island and the outer islands of the Torres Strait. One of their campuses, the Stephen Island campus, has no air strip. As it is 180 kilometres from Thursday Island, a ferry service is not feasible, meaning it can only be accessed by helicopter. This unique transport requirement incurs higher costs due to fuel and limited cargo space (requiring multiple trips to transport freight or visiting groups of staff).

National School Resourcing Board 'Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings: February 2023'

Auxiliary and support services

The costs associated with schooling in regional and remote areas can include costs associated with distance education (e.g. home tutors or supervisors), costs of extra-curricular activities (e.g. sports carnivals or excursions), transport, and provision of support services.

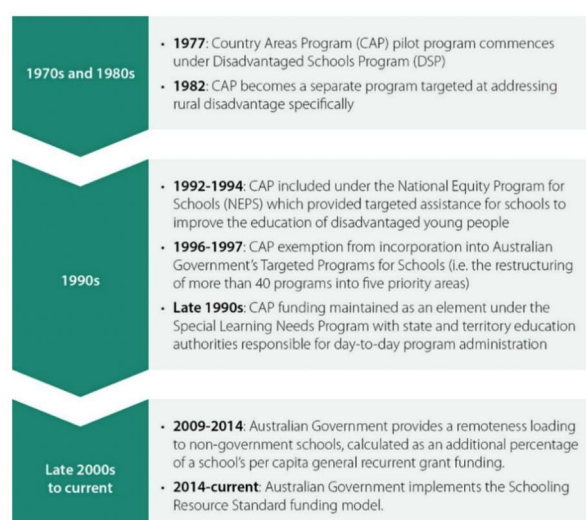### *Access to high-quality and reliable ICT*

Access to high-quality and reliable ICT, as well as fast-response and affordable support for ICT maintenance and use, is an ongoing challenge for many regional and remote schools. The lack of reliable internet services in many parts of Australia caused some stakeholders to express the need for alternatives to online delivery, underscoring the notion that online delivery is not the sole solution here.

As part of the PISA 2018 School Questionnaire, principals were asked to what extent they agreed with a set of statements about their school's capacity to enhance learning and teaching using digital devices. The survey confirms perceptions that there is a digital divide between schools in major city, regional and remote areas, particularly in relation to satisfaction with school bandwidth (77.4 per cent in major cities compared with 67.9 per cent and 50 per cent in regional and remote areas respectively) and teachers' access to resources to learn how to effectively make use of digital devices (77.2 per cent in major cities compared with 59.6 per cent and 62.5 per cent in regional and remote areas respectively).

Promoting community engagement and raising educational aspirations

Regional and remote schools have to undertake activities to promote community engagement and raise educational aspirations to a greater extent than major city schools. The educational aspirations of regional and remote students are lower, on average, than students attending schools in major cities.

providing an adequate breadth of curriculum and extra-curricular opportunities, giving students access to high-quality and reliable ICT, meeting higher infrastructure costs, and negotiating diminished community involvement and educational aspirations.

1970s and 1980s
- **1977**: Country Areas Program (CAP) pilot program commences under Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP)
- **1982**: CAP becomes a separate program targeted at addressing rural disadvantage specifically

1990s
- **1992-1994**: CAP included under the National Equity Program for Schools (NEPS) which provided targeted assistance for schools to improve the education of disadvantaged young people
- **1996-1997**: CAP exemption from incorporation into Australian Government's Targeted Programs for Schools (i.e. the restructuring of more than 40 programs into five priority areas)
- **Late 1990s**: CAP funding maintained as an element under the Special Learning Needs Program with state and territory education authorities responsible for day-to-day program administration

Late 2000s to current
- **2009-2014**: Australian Government provides a remoteness loading to non-government schools, calculated as an additional percentage of a school's per capita general recurrent grant funding.
- **2014-current**: Australian Government implements the Schooling Resource Standard funding model.

Associated with the challenges are effects on student learning and outcomes. Student performance and educational opportunities decline with the level of remoteness. This applies to school attendance, school retention, and to academic and post-school transition outcomes. Various other factors, such as family socio-economic status, influence student outcomes in regional and remote locations, but in absolute terms outcomes are poorer in regional and remote locations compared to major cities.

Sources: Research, Analysis and Evaluation Group (2003). *National Evaluation of the Country Areas Program, 2002–03*, Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, June 2003, Canberra.

M Harrington (2011*), Australian Government funding for schools explained,* Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, 31

Recommendations of the National School Resourcing Board 'Review of Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings: February 2023'

Recommendation 1

The Australian Government should require under Sections 35 and 36 of the Australian Education Regulation 2013 that approved system authorities report the amount of Commonwealth financial assistance allocated to each school by the base amount and loadings.

Recommendation 2

The Australian Government should work with states and territories to develop a specific measure of remoteness for the school education sector. This measure should be targeted and consider:

- alignment with the Australian Bureau of Statistics' definitions of remoteness
- population centre size
- population density – proximity to other population centres
- proximity to other schools and broader service infrastructure (isolation measure)
- that school systems generally operate within jurisdictional boundaries.

Recommendation 3

The Australian Government should adopt the most recent data available for the calculation of the Schooling Resource Standard, including for the measure of remoteness, used for the location and size loadings.

Recommendation 4

Given the consistency in defining schools by size across school systems to which the Board had access, and no evidence to suggest that the current settings are not appropriate, the Australian Government should retain unchanged the thresholds used for the school size loading as defined in the *Australian Education Act 2013*.

Recommendation 5

The Australian Government should include full fee-paying international students in the enrolment numbers for the calculation of the school size loading so that it more accurately and fairly reflects the economies of scale of each school.
This would require relevant changes to the loadings as defined in the *Australian Education Act 2013*.

Recommendation 6

The Board understands that the Department of Education (the department) is considering the settings for the students with disability loading. In considering the review's findings, the department should consider the merit of applying the maximum size loading to very small special and special assistance schools regardless of their location.

If a change is recommended, this may require relevant changes to the loadings as defined in the *Australian Education Act 2013*.

Recommendation 7

The Australian Government should consider the redesign of the location loading and school size loading as calculated in the Schooling Resource Standard so that:

- the size loading includes adjustments for school location and
- the size factor is removed from the location loading formula.

This would require relevant changes to the loadings as defined in the *Australian Education Act 2013.*

Recommendation 8

The Australian Government should consult with the states and territories on the commission of a survey of a representative sample of schools from across Australia. This would enable a detailed assessment of the additional costs associated with operating schools with different characteristics (whether they be related to geolocation, size, student characteristics, etc.). Costs based not only on existing expenditures but on the expenditures required for a school to meet the specific challenges and costs resulting from their characteristics should be considered. If required, the National School Resourcing Board could undertake this survey and assessment work.

Recommendation 9

The Australian Government should negotiate with states and territories in the next National School Reform Agreement to include clauses related to the provision of data to support the National School Resourcing Board in its independent oversight of Commonwealth school funding arrangements.

Recommendation 10

The Australian Government should work with state and territory governments to review the support provided to regional and remote boarding schools and boarding school students to assess whether the support is appropriate. This should also consider the extent to which any additional support is required for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students with socio-educational challenges who come from remote and very remote areas with few alternatives available to access quality schooling opportunities.

Recommendation 11

The Australian Government should work more closely with state and territory governments to ensure their cross-border agreements and networks are negotiated to ensure they recognise the impact of schooling related issues on students, families and communities who move between jurisdictions on a regular basis; provide opportunities for the sharing of resources; and facilitate solutions for students, families and communities.

Outcomes?

The Albanese Government has, according Prasser, 'Policy Insights', December, 2023 :

- Sent 3 recommendations to the temporary Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System group due to report in October. This is an ad hoc body lacking the professional and informed judgments necessary;
- has rejected 3 recommendations;
- identified 3 as either 'under further consideration' or 'noted' – read what you might into those expressions, it generally means they will not be further considered; and
- A recommendation incorporating consideration of children with disability / disabilities has been noted for 'acceleration' but has no deadline.
- A final recommendation was delayed due to Covid impacts.

What if you and your family were part of the 7 million Australians who live in rural or remote areas serving Australia in raising beef, sheep, crops such as cotton, wheat, barley, other crops or in the mining industry?

https://www.education.gov.au/national-school-resourcing-board/review-regional-schooling-resource-standards-loadings