



REGIONAL,  
RURAL AND  
REMOTE  
EDUCATION



NATIONAL  
**CATHOLIC  
EDUCATION**  
COMMISSION

August 2017

## Executive Summary

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education. The NCEC submission is based on input from State and Territory Catholic Education Commissions, Catholic Secondary Principals Australia and Catholic School Parents Australia.

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While this submission is not a comprehensive account of all the activities Catholic education undertakes in Australia's regional, rural and remote areas, it presents a rich overview based on the main themes of the independent review led by Emeritus Professor John Halsey. As the submission shows, the mission of Catholic education has inspired Catholic schools that serve students in regional, rural and remote areas across Australia, especially students that may be disadvantaged or marginalised. Indeed, in some remote areas of Australia, the Catholic school is the only school that serves families and students that wish to remain in their home community.

The NCEC submission shows that education in regional, rural and remote Australia is a complex issue. The educational outcomes of children in these areas is shaped by a range of in-school and out-of-school factors and their interface. The NCEC submission is framed according to the scope of the review in the terms of reference:

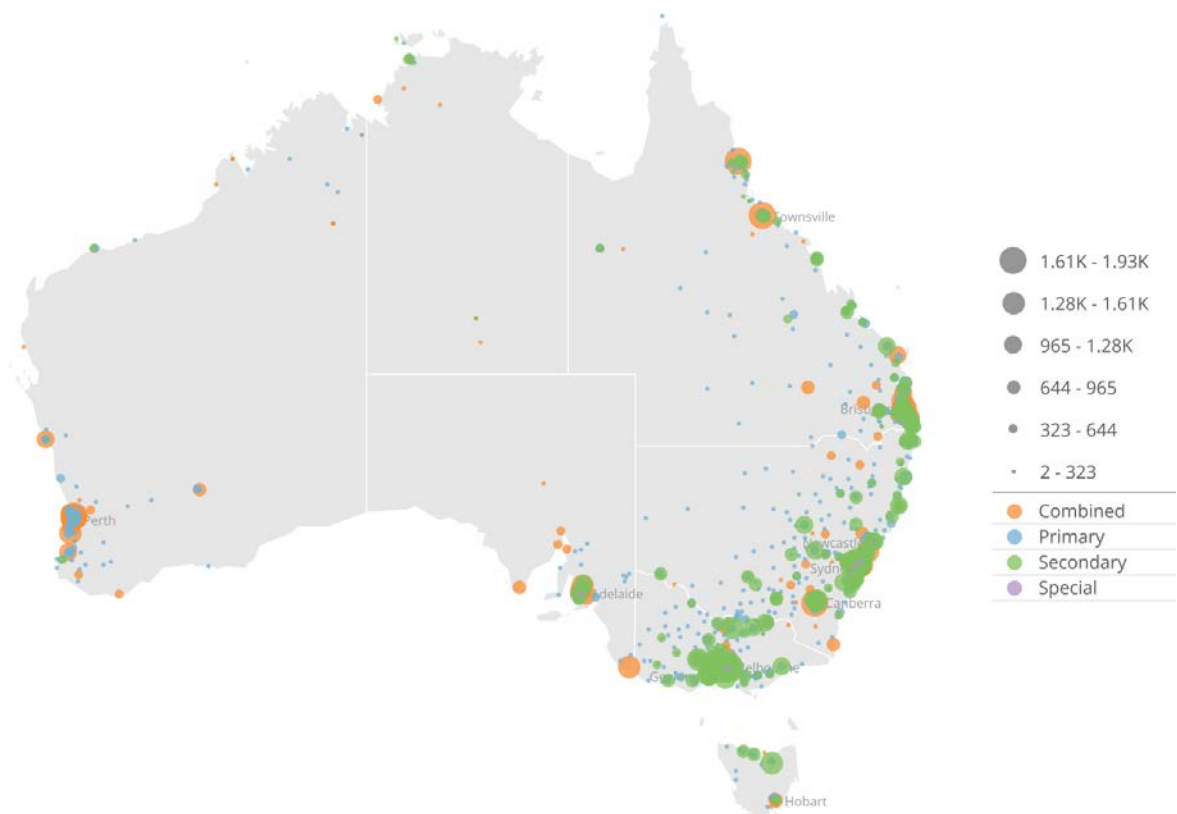
- the gap in educational achievement between regional, rural and remote students and metropolitan students;
- the key barriers and challenges that impact on the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote students, including aspirations and access issues;
- the appropriateness and effectiveness of current modes of education delivered to these students, including the use of information and communications technology and the importance of face to face regional, rural and remote education provision;
- the effectiveness of public policies and programs that have been implemented to bridge the divide;
- the gaps and opportunities to help students successfully transition from school to further study, training and employment;
- innovative approaches that support regional, rural and remote students to succeed in school and in their transition to further study, training and employment.

The NCEC submission begins with a brief introduction on Catholic education in Australia and provides some statistical information that is relevant in the context of the independent review. The submission then addresses each term of reference. The NCEC would welcome an opportunity to elaborate further on any themes in this submission that may be of particular interest to the independent review.

**Introduction**

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to represent the 1,737 schools across Australia, which educate one in five students and have been part of the nation’s education story for 200 years. Catholic schools support more than 765,000 students, including more than 20,000 Indigenous students and 35,000 students with disability. In some remote areas, Catholic schools are the sole providers of education for communities. Figure 1 shows the proliferation of Catholic schools across Australia, by density and type.

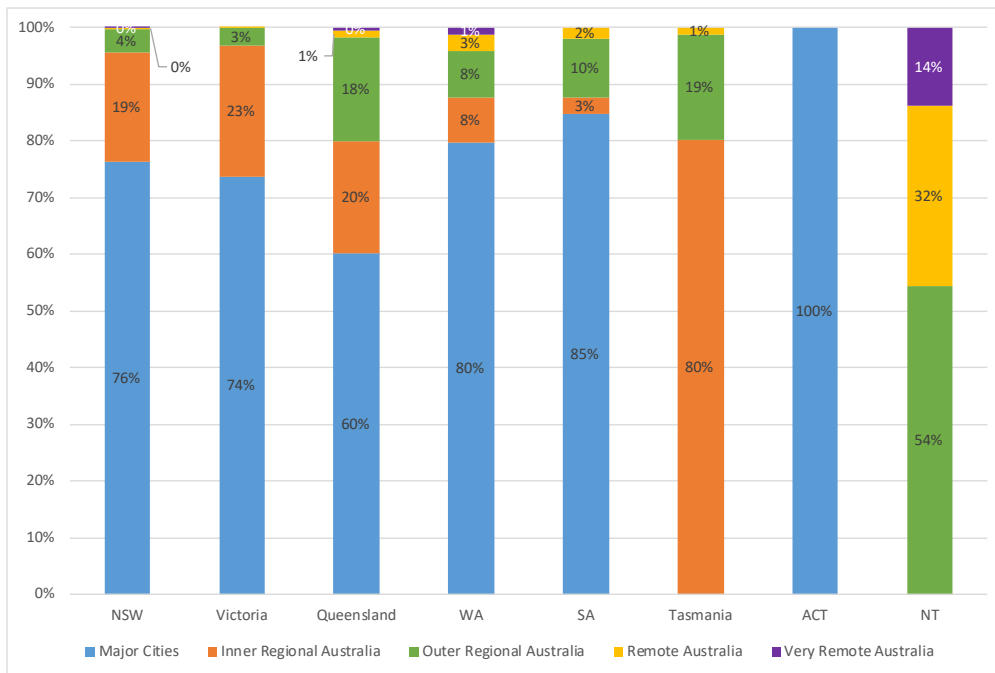
**Figure 1—Full-time equivalent students by Catholic school: Density and school type, 2016**



The mission of Catholic education, since its inception, has been to serve students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, with a particular responsibility for the disadvantaged and marginalised. A cornerstone of Catholic education has been that all children have an inalienable right to education adapted to their ability. Catholic schools strive to ensure students are not prevented from achieving their potential because of background or family circumstances, or because of the location of their schools.

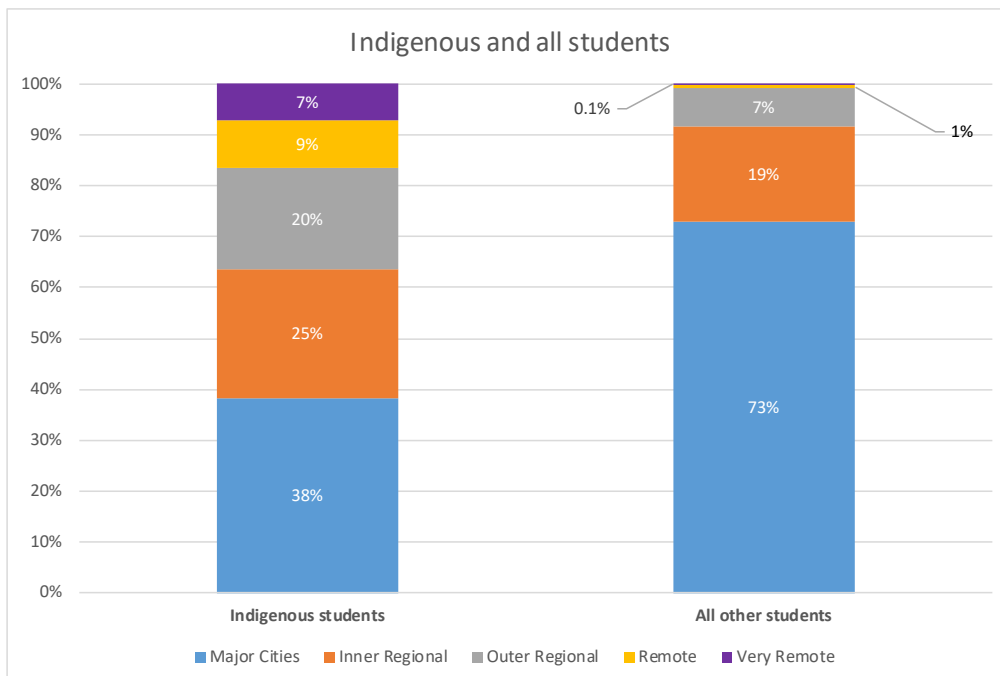
The student share of Catholic schools by remoteness across states and territories shows that Catholic schools are educating a significant number of students in regional and remote areas.

**Figure 2—Catholic schools’ student share by remoteness, 2016<sup>1</sup>**



As Figure 3 below shows, 62 per cent of Indigenous students enrolled in Catholic schools are in schools outside major cities.

**Figure 3—Catholic school students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, by remoteness, 2016**



<sup>1</sup> Catholic schools in Figure 2 and Figure 3 are classified according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) geographical classification of Remoteness Areas, based on the 2011 ABS Census of Population and Housing. The Remoteness Areas categorise Australia into the categories of Major Cities of Australia, Inner Regional Australia, Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia, Very Remote Australia. However, it should be noted that while the ACT is considered a major city, the Archdiocese of Canberra–Goulburn extends beyond Canberra and includes some regional areas of NSW.



### Gap in educational achievement

Insofar as regular attendance at school is linked to better student outcomes, student attendance is one of the greatest challenges schools face in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. Whereas Catholic school student attendance in major cities can be as high as 95 per cent, in some remote areas student attendance is as low as 50 per cent. There is a gap in school attendance rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, which widens as children age and tends to be significantly greater in remote and very remote areas. The following issues are some examples of factors affecting young people's attendance rates:

- intergenerational poverty and mistrust of social systems, including education;
- family conflict and/or dysfunctionality, which may impact on student engagement or create a limited capacity of families to prioritise education;
- cultural reasons such as movement of families from one community to another, disengagement of a small community with the wider community and periods of mourning associated with the death and funeral of a family member;
- climate and weather—heat, cold, wet season—that may hinder travel or even prohibit access to schools.

Some Catholic schools in regional, rural and remote areas with below average attendance rates are Special Assistance Schools, which work with disengaged young people. The importance of Indigenous communities embracing the value and significance of education and the need to cultivate parental engagement in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is supported through a number of strategies Catholic education adopts, including:

- Indigenous community liaison officers;
- assistance with transportation, meals and other amenities;
- interaction with other services such as health and housing.

Education cannot be seen in isolation in remote communities. Catholic education considers how and why a school is valued by the students and wider community. Employment pathways and social infrastructure are also important considerations.

Youth Plus Flexi Learning Centre in Mt Isa (a coeducational Catholic school) identified the following strategies used to encourage young people to attend classes:

- provision of meals daily for young people;
- provision of a pastoral school environment that includes a wellbeing room;
- a daily Welcome to Country;
- the establishment of local community links;
- the involvement of local community elders in employment processes;
- night school from 4pm–7pm on school nights. The group usually consists of 10–12 students with a teacher and youth worker. These staff do not have classes during normal school hours.

Families with students in Catholic primary schools in regional, rural and remote areas are increasingly choosing not to educate their children in a secondary school in these areas. In order to access what they regard as a better secondary education, parents are choosing to either move the family to the city, or a much larger regional centre, or to send their child to a boarding school. Students that remain in regional, rural and remote secondary schools are less likely to finish year 12 at that school, either because they do not complete year 12 or relocate to a larger regional centre or the city to complete year 12.

Student mental health is emerging as an issue that impacts educational achievement in regional, rural and remote areas. Programs such as KidsMatter and MindMatters are a positive response to

this issue. Catholic schools have a number of strategies that assist in responding to the needs of students who require support, including outreach officers and specific programs.

Students with disability in rural and remote areas are supported by Catholic schools but also face challenges, including:

- accessing local qualified medical or professional staff to support families, teachers and/or support a diagnosis/verification;
- parents who do not wish to acknowledge their child has a disability;
- students with high and complex needs requiring high levels of allied health support, which often is not available locally;
- access to important social and health services including allied health, family support, counselling and rehabilitation services to improve opportunities and outcomes is limited.

### **Key barriers and challenges that impact educational outcomes**

High-quality principals and teaching staff are essential for the delivery of education and improving educational achievement in remote areas. Attracting and retaining teaching staff is made more difficult when suitable housing is not available or when existing housing is unsuitable and is prohibitively expensive to repair. Recruiting principals and teachers with families to remote areas is extremely difficult. Better accommodation would provide a greater incentive for principals and teachers. Capital funding for staff housing in remote areas would greatly assist in addressing the level of educational disadvantage that exists in rural and remote Australia. Creating better pre-service opportunities and proactively assisting prospective staff who show interest in placements in regional, rural and remote locations would help with attracting more pre-service teachers to these locations. In some cases, targeted recruitment of staff who have a suitable outlook for service in regional, rural and remote locations would also be a strategy worth exploring.

Teacher shortages continue to be reported in the subject areas of science, mathematics and languages in regional, rural, remote and low socio-economic areas. The data around the staffing of many regional, rural and remote schools demonstrates that the turnover of teachers and leaders is much greater than that experienced in metropolitan schools. However, in some cases there are also signs that teacher tenure in regional, rural and remote areas was improving and providing more stability in primary school settings. Workforce challenges in regional, rural and remote areas include:

- Financial incentives—attracting highly skilled teachers to move from metropolitan areas is a challenge even with good financial incentives. High living and transport costs are a contributing factor. While Catholic school systems provide travel and accommodation assistance, as well as other teacher allowances and support programs, this does create significant budgetary challenges.
- Relief teachers in short supply—a major workforce issue in rural and especially remote areas is that there are few relief teachers available. This is particularly challenging in emergencies such as an outbreak of influenza that leads to many teachers being absent. There are significant financial costs to support an “extra staffing” model for these areas as an alternative to engaging casual relief teachers.
- Access to professional development and networking opportunities—these opportunities are difficult to access because of associated travel and accommodation costs. Aside from the costs, it is also difficult to provide teachers with these opportunities when the availability of relief teachers is limited.

There is also a critical shortage of allied health professionals in rural and remote areas. Catholic school systems are reconsidering their attraction and retention strategies, and assessing how they can respond to individual needs of staff rather than implementing a generic policy. Enabling individual input into issues such as accommodation, remuneration packages and professional learning opportunities may be more appealing for staff. However, as part of the ethos of Catholic schools, teachers are also encouraged to consider other incentives and how being part of the Catholic ministry of teaching in rural school communities can also be spiritually rewarding.

To ensure teachers are given access to professional support and development whether in regional, rural or remote areas, Catholic schools are utilising digital technology to deliver professional development. Teachers are also being supported at the school to access postgraduate qualifications. However, information communication technology is not always available or reliable in regional, rural and remote areas, which can impact the work and development of teachers and the learning of students. Some Catholic schools are endeavouring to improve communications by using the Google platform and by providing high levels of technical support. However, the staff needed to support this venture and the cost burden can be difficult for an education system to manage.

Establishing professional networks within and across Catholic schools has been particularly successful in linking principals of rural and remote schools to mentoring and growth opportunities. Catholic schools also recognise there is a need to have locally qualified people as role models in remote communities. Opportunities and support are given to youth workers who are employed in Catholic schools to move towards a teaching career.

The provision of opportunities for university students to complete their final-year practicum in a Catholic school in regional, rural and remote areas is an important attraction and retention strategy. Australian Catholic University students are given such opportunities and incentives include accommodation, living allowance and the offer of a position on graduation subject to a successful practicum outcome. This has resulted in several successful job placements in 2017. There is an opportunity for this program to be extended to other tertiary institutions.

Catholic Education Western Australia has a special recruitment program for teaching positions in the Kimberley region called “Kimberley Calling”. The remoteness of Catholic schools in the Kimberley renders the process of recruiting teachers a challenging one. “Kimberley Calling” is advertised in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney with presentations being made in these cities, then interviews arranged for interested applicants. A range of incentives is offered to teachers and leaders in these schools, including financial incentives, housing and utility subsidies, larger accrual for long-service leave, return flights and other transport subsidies.

In the Northern Territory, with ever-increasing enrolment of Indigenous students in the Catholic system’s Indigenous Catholic Community Schools, there is an ongoing challenge for these Catholic schools to attract, develop and retain skilled, experienced leaders and teachers. High staff turnover makes it difficult for schools in remote communities to deliver quality teaching by experienced teachers who understand the local environment and who can maintain the continuity of program delivery. Catholic Education in the Northern Territory, in partnership with Charles Darwin University, has established a joint venture approach to the preparation of Indigenous teachers, called “Growing Our Own”. This two-way approach to teacher preparation for Catholic schools was established in response to Closing the Gap and the Australian Government Emergency Response.

Induction programs can assist teachers and school leaders prepare for service in regional, rural and remote areas. In the Kimberley region, there is a four-day induction program in Broome for all teachers and leaders new to the Kimberley.

### **Appropriateness and effectiveness of current modes of education**

Catholic schools in regional, rural and remote locations around Australia strive to choose the most effective mode of education for their specific contexts.

Catholic Education Northern Territory has five Indigenous Catholic Community Schools. The diversity in provision is illustrated by the following examples. St John's College Darwin caters for remote Indigenous boarders as well as day students and St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre in Alice Springs has an enrolment of primarily Indigenous students who would otherwise not be engaged in schooling. The Indigenous Catholic Community Schools are based on the model of bi-cultural education (two-way teaching and learning) and provide an educational program that:

- acknowledges the culture of both the home and the school;
- reinforces the teaching and learning relationship between the elders and the younger members of the community;
- promotes engagement with the local community;
- recognises the importance of Indigenous languages and knowledge in the curriculum.

In Canberra–Goulburn, smaller high schools are delivering curriculum in creative ways. Some schools have integrated English and humanities units, while others might have a science and maths integration. This could arise from a pedagogy that makes learning more relevant or a practical approach to teacher timetabling and class size. The increased flexibility of the Australian Curriculum allows teachers to utilise the local area better in delivering curriculum outcomes. As a result, assessment processes are tailored to suit the needs of regional, rural and remote communities.

Boarding schools are one educational pathway for students in rural and remote areas to participate in high-quality education, but Catholic school systems are mindful of the need to:

- implement complementary strategies that continue to link students to their families and communities and overcome homesickness;
- promote flexible boarding school participation patterns that allow for shared programs of attendance across both local community schools and boarding schools.

Modes of education embraced by Catholic education in relation to Indigenous education in regional, rural and remote areas include the following:

- Catholic schools with significant enrolments of Indigenous students have personalised learning plans;
- best practice models used in Kimberley schools have resulted in the development of the Focus Schools Project where all schools in the Kimberley region have non-negotiable elements in their teaching and learning;
- the use of trained Aboriginal teaching assistants in Western Australia, which is integral to the success of parental and community involvement, and the development of appropriate teaching strategies for Indigenous students (this is also the case in other jurisdictions);
- the Connected Communities model of schooling is regarded as a best practice initiative for remote and very remote communities in NSW.

In South Australia, St Joseph's Catholic School in Peterborough has strengthened its educational philosophy through the implementation of play-based pedagogy. The school staff recognised that successful learners need a set of fundamental skills that are transferable and adaptable to



whatever the future holds. The school implemented a pedagogy that encompasses a range of teaching and learning principles to deliver quality, personalised learning with a high level of student engagement. The pedagogy engages students and provides greater agency, ownership and choice for them in their learning.

### **Gaps and opportunities to help students successfully transition to post-school pathways**

Access to vocational education and training (VET) subjects in the senior years of school has been a positive addition to the school curriculum in regional, rural and remote areas. However, it is not always possible to provide a breadth of options for students. Given the practical nature of VET courses, students need access to local businesses that can accommodate the students to undertake their practical experience. However, regional, rural and remote areas do not have the same range of options as metropolitan areas. There are also challenges in attracting qualified VET teachers to these areas. Distance education providers, like Karabar Distance Education, can assist students in these areas to access some of the subjects not available at the local school.

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In Queensland, the VET program in remote secondary schools supports community partnerships and provides alternate pathways for students. These include partnerships with registered training organisations such as Binnacle and Blue Dog and ensures that a variety of certification programs in addition to school-based VET programs are available for regional, rural and remote students. The Catholic College at Mt Isa has established strong partnerships with local mining industry to support school-based traineeships and apprenticeships in the Townsville Diocese. Rural schools have continued to support TAFE programs in a very important partnership. Two rural schools in the Townsville Diocese have benefited from onsite trade training while a third rural school is part of a school trade training facility.

An example of an employment pathway initiated by Catholic Education in the Northern Territory is the “Growing Our Own” program. In partnership with Charles Darwin University, “Growing Our Own” aims to develop a quality, local Indigenous teacher workforce, supporting Indigenous assistant teachers to become teachers.

### **Innovative approaches that support regional, rural and remote students to succeed**

Catholic school systems around Australia strive to be innovative and responsive to local needs and specific challenges in the context of regional, rural and remote education. Some examples of this work are provided below.

In Queensland, Holy Spirit College, which was established in 2015, is a designated special assistance school (Cairns and Cooktown) for disengaged young people. It was established in response to Cape communities’ concerns for students who were unsuccessfully travelling to major centres for boarding school. Holy Spirit College has a small boarding campus for up to 32 students at Cooktown servicing the Cooktown, Wujal Wujal and Hope Vale communities. Students have previously disengaged from their local school or from more distant boarding schools. The Cooktown campus offers weekly boarding to allow students to return to family and community at weekends. In the event of the need for family intervention, most families live within an hour’s drive of the school. The small size of the school also offers a more pastoral and supportive environment compared with, for example, a large metropolitan boarding school. Accommodation for staff at Cooktown will also be an option in the near future. However, this type of school faces some challenges, including:

- high cost of service delivery in a remote location with high-needs students;
- fluctuation of enrolments relative to the student censuses;
- duty of care issues arising from a high-need student cohort.

Some secondary Catholic schools in regional, rural and remote areas of Western Australia facilitate access to online curriculum materials distributed through the School of Isolated and Distance Education for their secondary students. This can be a costly approach (up to \$2000 per student, per year, per subject).

However, through the LEADing Lights digital transformation, which Catholic Education Western Australia is pioneering, there will be a coordinated partnership of schools developing online materials for upper school students in a variety of learning areas. The expectation is that these will be available for year 11 students in 2018 and then year 12 students in 2019. The LEADing Lights initiative seeks to establish a single digital ecosystem for all Catholic schools and early years centres in Western Australia. It is designed to ensure that every student, irrespective of the remoteness of any given school, can achieve their full potential, by giving teachers and principals the tools they need to help their schools and students flourish, including:

- adopting evidence-based, best practice methodologies, technologies and planning;
- introducing contemporary ways of using technology, while continually evolving to keep pace with the changing expectations of our staff, students and teachers;
- supporting and empowering students and staff to push boundaries and collaborate across distance and device;
- giving school leaders real-time information to accelerate continuous improvement in student and teacher performance, graduation rates, health, wellbeing and achievement—across a class, a school or the entire system;
- bringing parents closer to their child’s school journey through real-time information on how they are tracking and how to support their learning with direct access to information, people and services.

In South Australia, a program for aspiring leaders called “Leading from Within” is conducted in Catholic schools in regional areas of South Australia. This program acknowledges the importance of identifying, supporting and developing a diverse range of leaders to help face the complex challenges of educating students in regional areas. It provides an opportunity for individuals to self-reflect about their leadership capabilities and to contribute to the shared direction of their school and the broader system. The program fosters leadership in tandem with the strategic direction of the school and in collaboration with “cluster” schools.

This “cluster” approach is also employed in Canberra–Goulburn to provide professional learning for staff in regional schools. Programs such as Collaborating on Student Achievement, Literacy Numeracy Action Plan and Early Learning Initiative for Literacy & Numeracy enable schools in regional centres to be part of a system-wide approach to learning that ensures they are connected to a wider approach to school improvement. It reassures them they are using best practice and have access to contemporary pedagogy and support. This support also challenges the teacher to inspire students to be aspirational in their attempts to produce higher learning outcomes.