

COALITION OF REGIONAL INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA

SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION

RESPONSE TO THE FUTURE FOUNDATIONS FOR GIVING DRAFT REPORT

February 2024

From the COALITION OF REGIONAL INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA (CRISA)

The Coalition is a group of thirty-seven independent schools from regional centres in all States, except South Australia, and in the Northern Territory. Many of these schools have served their communities for decades, in some cases more than a century, with philanthropy having been a keystone in the foundation and development of many of these institutions. (Members are listed at www.crisa.org.au)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This Coalition endorses the Government's intended increase to overall philanthropic funding contribution to community.
- CRISA schools have relatively low fees and many have declining government funding income in real terms, hence limited capacity for development without external fund-raising.
- DGR philanthropic funding has underwritten the development of many regional schools, supporting equity in the provision of education in regional areas.
- Many regional areas face elevated construction costs.
- Regional schools are closely connected with their communities, partly through the sharing of facilities funded with DGR support.
- In regional areas with significant population growth, schools are under pressure to expand, but this requires huge capital commitments.

1. GROWTH IN PHILANTHROPY

The objective of doubling the nation's philanthropic contributions is worthy. Given that many people see the education of young people as the most worthy cause to support, it seems counter-productive to suggest a restriction of donations to school building funds.

2. CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL EDUCATION

Fees at CRISA schools are commonly significantly lower than at similar metropolitan schools. This reflects the fact that these schools cater for a broader demographic and wider parental income distribution. This fact is not accounted for in the DMI school funding model, so many of these schools will see Federal funding declining in real terms this decade. These factors mean that philanthropic support for the development of these schools is particularly important.

3. DGR FUNDING SUPPORTING EQUITY IN REGIONAL EDUCATION

Access to DGR support for capital projects is one mechanism which regional schools use to keep their fees below the high-fee stratum, despite elevated construction costs in most regional areas. It appears that the proposal to remove DGR status from school building funds is based on perceptions surrounding a minority of high-fee schools, ignoring the majority of independent schools, including those in regional areas, where philanthropic funds provide for broader access.

DGR funding for scholarships and bursaries is clearly a basis for more equitable access, and many regional schools are known to offer a particularly broad range of financial support, which has helped to maintain enrolments through the vagaries of the rural economy.

4. COMMUNITY BENEFIT FROM DGR-FUNDED CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN REGIONAL SCHOOLS

The intimate links between regional schools and their communities is something that needs to be experienced to be understood. In many centres, you can see this manifesting in co-operation, for example, between government and non-government schools. It is also evident in the extent to which school facilities, of all sectors, are shared with the broader community: sports facilities, auditoriums, playgrounds, classrooms – mostly after-hours. And given that schools operate for less than two-thirds of the days in a year, this makes good economic sense. The broader benefit to society of a DGR-funded facility is apparent. A case study illustrating this benefit is below.

5. CHALLENGING DEMOGRAPHICS FOR REGIONAL SCHOOLS

In a number of regional areas there has been unexpected population growth of late, straining resources across all education sectors. The retention of DGR funding for school building funds would assist in meeting what is currently unmet demand.

At the other end of the scale, some more remote regional areas are experiencing depopulation. For schools serving these communities, DGR scholarship funds may assist them in remaining viable and continuing to provide education options which these communities deserve.

CONCLUSION

DGR-approved funding of school building and scholarships is potentially of greatest extended benefit to regional communities and removal of this DGR status would have significant long-term effects on schools and society in regional Australia.

CASE STUDY: WENDOUREE CENTRE FOR PERFORMING ARTS

The newly-amalgamated City of Ballarat decided that the dilapidated Wendouree Civic Centre was surplus to requirements, although its auditorium was still being used by the adjacent Ballarat Grammar and Wendouree Primary Schools and other community groups. With a commitment to continuing community access, Ballarat Grammar was able to acquire the site and commence a campaign for the development of a modern performance facility.

The large performance space often used for school productions and presentation functions, the Ballarat Civic Centre (of similar vintage to Wendouree Civic Centre) was mothballed for want of upkeep, leaving a community performance space vacuum in the City. With DGR status for the Wendouree Centre building fund as a school project, the campaign was able to attract major donations from nine corporate entities, four charitable trusts and thirty-three individuals, significant support from another four corporates, three charitable trusts and thirty-six personal donors, plus generous donations from over three hundred individuals.

This made possible the construction of an 850-seat auditorium, opened in 2006, then the largest in Ballarat. Students from over thirty schools in the region have attended events at the Centre.

Wendouree Primary School and the Ballarat Specialist School use the venue free of charge. Ballarat Heath Services and Victoria Police have used the Centre. It is the performance home of the Ballarat Symphony Orchestra, but also hosts the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Other local groups such as the Ballarat Light Opera Company use the Centre, and travelling artists such as David Hobson and the Russian Ballet have performed there. And the fastest-selling events have been performances by The Wiggles!

The Wendouree Centre has been heavily booked of late and of even more obvious value to the community while Her Majesty's Theatre in Ballarat has been closed for refurbishment. It is a concrete demonstration of the extensive benefits brought by DGR status for school building funds.

Stephen Higgs OAM

Chair