



Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments

26 February 2020

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments. The Australian Professional Teachers Association is a federation of state and territory joint councils representing teacher associations. These associations represent a network of up to 200,000 teachers from government and non-government schools, early childhood services and centres. The vision of APTA is to provide national leadership that supports and advances the teaching profession.

Our strength as an organisation lies in our ability to directly represent the interests of practicing classroom teachers across Australia. We are a voice for teachers and an effective conduit between decision-making bodies and the classroom.

APTA knows that the Inquiry is considering a broad range of issues impacting on teachers, students and communities in remote locations. We have elected to focus our submission on matters related to teachers and teaching associations.

Cheryl Brennan
President
Australian Professional Teachers Association

Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments: submission from the Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA).

The Australian Professional Teachers Association (APTA) is pleased to make this submission to the inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex environments.

Teachers working in remote areas of central Australia know that while education jurisdictions end at state and territory borders, the movement of young people for family and cultural reasons occurs frequently. A child may start part of his or her education in one jurisdiction and move – often frequently – to another over the course of their schooling. The difficulties this poses for monitoring and tracking of students, particularly with regard to school attendance, is well known. Approaches such as the Trans-Border Attendance Strategy have been enacted to support cooperation between jurisdictions in sharing data on student movement.

Many teachers and educators who belong to professional teaching associations will be well versed in the specific issues associated with the Terms of Reference of the Standing Committee. As the parent body for state and Territory joint councils for teaching associations, APTA has elected to focus our submission on areas specific to teachers and teaching associations and the role they play in supporting teachers and educators across Australia.

APTA believes that the work of professional teaching associations can provide valuable input into discussions relating to education in complex environments. We also know that professional teaching associations provide invaluable support and professional learning to teachers across Australia. Listening to and learning from teachers is essential.

Effective government initiatives, past and present, that support remote communities to enable greater educational outcomes, including those that have improved attainment in literacy and numeracy

Teachers working in remote, complex environments are frequently required to adjust or amend their teaching practice to facilitate new programs or strategies, and some have developed a degree of cynicism about this. Many teachers believe that programs are given insufficient time to determine efficacy and that decisions with regard to new strategies are based on political or ideological grounds (such as debates over direct instruction or bilingual education). It is not APTA's role – nor do we have the expertise – to judge the veracity of these claims, but in our role as advocates for teachers we strongly recommend that discussion and deliberations with regard to new (or returning) initiatives be done in collaboration with experienced teachers.

The value of engagement to an intervention program should not be overlooked – students must be engaged to learn effectively, and engagement and attendance are closely linked.

Teachers who are committed to schools and communities are best placed to offer recommendations on the needs of their students and on programs and strategies that will best engage them.

Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities that could be more generally applied

Consistency in teacher professional development

The Standing Committee has asked for recommendations regarding innovative approaches to workforce development. Professional teaching associations can play a very valuable role in this important aspect of education in providing professional development and support to improve teacher quality and wellbeing.

The Standing Committee is no doubt well aware of the challenges faced by educational systems in our federal system. Teachers within a state or territory have some consistency of support from education departments or state/territory-based support providers. They may use similar curriculum documents or support programs from school to school, and so teachers may be better placed to support transient students. This consistency is much reduced when students cross state or Territory borders. Curriculum resources, support providers and education programs will vary based on the priorities of each jurisdiction. We believe that there is scope to consider how non-government bodies operating on a national level, such as national teaching associations, can better support teachers regardless of their location. It would be feasible – with appropriate funding – for a national teaching association to enhance cross-border professional development in a more consistent way. For example, a national association could facilitate a conference in central Australia during a school holiday period that teachers from any jurisdiction could attend, where they can receive consistent professional learning as well as enhancing communication and networking of teachers working in similar cultural and environmental contexts, but across state and territory borders.

Already, many state-based professional associations and national associations are facilitating professional learning across jurisdictional boundaries. Examples include national conferences in specific areas, such as science or English teaching. Teachers in remote locations can and do access these events, demonstrating the value of professional associations play in providing consistent professional learning across the country.

There are also jurisdictional events run by professional associations which only have reach within state and territory borders but would have benefit for a wider audience. For example, one of our member associations – the Professional Teachers Association of the Northern Territory (PTANT) is organising a professional development roadshow across six locations in the NT, from Central Australia through the Barkly to the Top End and Arnhem Land. This roadshow will provide professional learning support in EAL/D instruction, teacher wellbeing and differentiated curriculum. This event demonstrates the value that

professional teaching associations can play in supporting teachers working in the most complex of environments, and could serve as a model for a national approach across state borders.

APTA Recommends that the Australian Government consider ways to support national non-government organisations to deliver professional learning opportunities to educators working across state and territory borders.

It is important to note that APTA is not denigrating the valuable work of education departments and other service providers who support teachers in remote and complex locations – rather, that other platforms in providing support be considered, particularly when these can more easily cross state borders.

The value of professional support and networking in promoting teacher retention

Professional support is essential for improving retention rates, particularly in complex environments. In some isolated communities, teachers may be working in single-teacher schools, or may be the only teacher for a particular subject (such as music or art) or specific stage of schooling (such as middle years). While small schools and communities can provide much support, specific advice with regard to pedagogy and programming can only be provided by experienced practitioners. Professional teaching associations play a very valuable role in providing this support.

Some associations provide mentoring support or a “buddy system” to connect new or inexperienced teachers with more experienced practitioners. In 2020, PTANT is developing a mentoring program to better support teachers working in remote or complex environments. Other associations make use of ICT such as Skype or Zoom to connect teachers in isolated locations and develop online professional learning communities (PLC) to enable flexibility in how professional learning can be delivered. It would be feasible that a national teaching association such as APTA, appropriately funded, could develop online professional learning communities with the potential to work across borders.

It is also important that the Standing Committee recognise that online professional learning does have limitations. There is great value in the informal networking opportunities in face-to-face professional learning events. Additionally, teachers are frequently required to complete online professional learning in their own time, which has flow on effects for planning and programming, and the ability to develop and maintain an appropriate work/life balance. These facts can impact on the sustainability of online professional learning.

However, there are challenges faced by teachers in remote schools regarding the ability to access emergency relief teachers to provide cover while teachers attend professional learning events. Limited transportation options and the distance between a teacher’s school and the venue for the professional learning can be considerable. Rather than abandoning these teachers to virtual professional development, jurisdictions should

implement logistical support and additional funding to support these teachers to attend face-to-face events.

APTA recommends that discussions regarding the role of professional learning and support for teachers as a means of improving teacher retention actively involve professional teaching associations.

Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum (including STEM) in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students, including examples of innovative ways in which the curriculum is being delivered in remote schools

Teaching associations and curriculum support

Professional teaching associations play a valuable role in supporting teachers to plan for and implement the Australian Curriculum. Associations consist of experienced teachers and educators committed to particular fields or learning areas. Each year, associations deliver professional learning events and other forms of support to teachers across Australia.

Professional associations are frequently aligned to a learning area, with members drawn from a range of education contexts. Associations affiliated with PTANT, including the Science Teachers Association NT (STANT) explore ways in which STEM learning can be applied to remote and complex learning environments.

Decisions and discussions related to how schools can apply the curriculum in flexible, innovative ways should actively engage with professional teaching associations directly supporting teachers in complex schools. There will be many examples of highly effective planning and delivery of curriculum programs that can be learned from engaging with teaching associations.