

17 September 2024

Draft Regional Education Strategy: Submission.

Thank you for providing an opportunity to make comment on the draft Regional Education Strategy.

BACKGROUND

The North Eastern Wheatbelt Regional Organisation of Councils includes the local governments of Dowerin, Wyalkatchem, Nungarin, Trayning, Mt Marshall, Mukinbudin and Koorda. The NEWROC is a voluntary organisation of seven Councils, who have been working together for 27yrs. The group meets monthly and includes Shire Presidents, CEOs and a resourced Executive Officer.

The NEWROC establishes the framework for the joint and collaborative progression of community and economic development actions, initiatives and priorities across the member Shires. Key statistics of the district relevant to our submission are that:

- There are more than 2,500 people across the 7 Shires;
- There are more than 570 businesses;
- 1,460+ jobs in 2021;
- \$460m+ in agricultural production was generated;
- \$250m+ per year in regional exports comes directly from businesses in the 7 Shires;
- There was \$300m+ Gross Regional Product in 2022; and we have
- Three district high schools (Mukinbudin, Dowerin and Wyalkatchem) and five primary schools.

The NEWROC region contributes just over 6% of the Wheatbelt's total GDP, indicating it's high economic performance and significance to Western Australia's economy. For this to be sustained and grown, the provision of the current primary and secondary schools in the NEWROC needs to be retained at a minimum, a stronger focus on improved educational outcomes for our rural students needs to be prioritised and the recognition by the Department that the presence of a school and resident, committed staff in a rural community can significantly influence the sustainability (or decline) of a community.

Research from Regional Development Australia highlights that quality education is a key factor in attracting and retaining families in rural areas, which in turn supports local businesses and services. Monash University studies also point to the role of schools in rural development, where successful educational institutions promote civic engagement and encourage infrastructure development. They attract young professionals (teachers, support staff and administrators), providing leadership and stability to communities.

INTRODUCTION

Students across Western Australia should be provided with quality education and given opportunity to achieve equitable learning outcomes regardless of where they live.

NEWROC strongly supports the development of a Regional Education Strategy.

However, we encourage the Department to acknowledge that the six non-metropolitan educational regions in Western Australia are diverse and different (unique characteristics of the communities, population, level of remoteness, disadvantage etc) and therefore the implementation of the Regional Strategy requires additional supporting plans for each of these six education regions when the Regional Strategy is eventually adopted.

NEWROC is also concerned that in the current Regional Strategy there are no specific, timely or measurable strategies. We feel the Strategy demonstrates what the Department has achieved, is currently working towards and certainly outlines its intent, but it is not nearly specific enough. Nor measurable in its current structure. We also support further detail on short, medium and long term timeframes within the Strategy.

PILLAR ONE: Build the capability of our regional workforce

There lacks acknowledgement by the Department that to deliver continuity of learning for the achievement of educational targets and outcomes identified in each School's Business Plan and ultimately contributing to the reputation of the schools in our communities, there needs to be **continuity and longevity in school leadership**, specifically Principals and Team Leaders.

Schools in the NEWROC have experienced numerous Principals and teaching staff that have been highly transient and often on short term placements. This is not well received by rural communities nor does it demonstrate commitment to genuinely connect with the school community.

Our above statements are evidenced through the 2023 average NAPLAN data for the schools in the NEWROC. Where the mean / average score is highlighted in orange indicates greater than 20 points below the State average, red indicates the schools average is 50 points below the state average.

School	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	Year 9
Nungarin P.S				
Numeracy	336			
Reading	350			
Writing	319			
Trayning P.S				
Numeracy	249	425		
Reading	218	361		
Writing	147	385		
Mukinbudin DHS				
Numeracy	401	480	580	576
Reading	333	441	543	613
Writing	392	424	541	597
Bencubbin PS				
Numeracy	390	411		
Reading	416	412		
Writing	353	412		
Koorda PS				
Numeracy	403	505		
Reading	378	474		
Writing	432	489		
Wyalkatchem DHS				
Numeracy	319	293	498	557
Reading	265	344	479	510

Writing	412	363	471	535
Dowerin DHS				
Numeracy	355	450	517	564
Reading	353	445	518	546
Writing	387	470	481	518

** Beacon PS reports unavailable.

It is clear that the current programs to attract, retain and develop quality teaching staff as well as school leaders who are accountable, in regional schools needs further review and additional support by the Department.

The Strategy mentions the Growing Great Leaders in our School trial where metropolitan Principals will be able to retain their appointment in a city school while undertaking a non-metropolitan position. There is no mention of how long this is for. There is also no mention if the Principal is a poor fit for the school, how school communities or school boards can rectify the situation. We have witnessed first-hand how school culture can be damaged by poor school leadership, with immediate ramifications on the wider community (homeschooling increases, students are placed in neighbouring schools and this follows through to local sports participation, expenditure at local businesses etc).

Principals are the most senior educators and administrators, so too one of the most recognised leaders in our rural communities that contribute significantly to the reputation and ultimately success of the school and community. Allowing metropolitan Principals to retain their appointment to a city school whilst undertaking a regional placement will continue to damage the reputation of regional education and does not commit Principals to the continuity of leadership or learning required in our schools.

It also evokes a perception that regional education and placement in the country, is from a deficit position.

This approach implies that regional Principal positions are temporary, leading to the idea that they are merely stopgap roles that don't require full commitment, are stepping stones or lower-tier career options compared to their metropolitan counterparts and regional schools are not worthy of the same level of commitment or priority as metropolitan schools, which could affect both morale and performance in the regional education sector.

We recommend the Department seriously review the Growing Great Leaders program in light of the above feedback and incentivise teaching staff and Principals to commit to schools and the community, as well as consider relocation packages.

The Department could also consider supporting current groups of schools such as the Eastern Wheatbelt Education Network (EWEN) with specialist teaching staff, mentoring and opportunities for teaching staff to collaborate (provide schools with additional relief teaching budgets etc). This supports the provision of professional networks for staff in the regions.

NEWROC would also welcome the return of graduate teaching programs, where newly graduated teachers receive incentives for completing 2 consecutive years in a rural school. This program ensures a steady supply of teaching staff to regional schools and contributes to the stability of the local population.

It is disappointing to note that there is no reference to providing quality housing in attracting and retaining the regional workforce. The Department should include this in the Regional Strategy. Our member Shires have provided local government houses to accommodate teachers either on a short term or longer term basis because they recognise the importance of these positions to our community and economy. This is not the role of local government and impacts the attraction and retention of their own workforce.

We are aware that Nungarin Primary School has been unable to accommodate a new member of staff in the town because there was no housing available. This has significantly increased the workload of current staff and impacts morale.

Housing for Department of Education staff is a responsibility of the Department. The Department needs to advocate to the State Government to address this significant challenge and include it in the Regional Education Strategy.

Pillar Three: Expand Curriculum Delivery

NEWROC was pleased to read the Department's initiatives in Quality Teaching Strategies as well as small group tutoring and hopes this program can be expanded in the regions.

We encourage the Department to consider a review of career support and advice to rural students. Close partnerships with local industry, Regional University Hubs, TAFE and other such providers is important, the delivery of taster programs is valued, however current career development support services to district high school students is inconsistent and limited. Training should be provided to district high school staff in career conversations or dedicated resident practitioners well versed in local / regional industries to support groupings of DHSs (hub and spoke model).

Pillar Four: Developing Partnerships to Create Opportunities

We are pleased to read about current initiatives between schools and early childhood providers e.g. day care providers, to support 0 – 4yr olds preparation for school. Greater collaboration between early childhood teachers at rural schools and local childcare services should be formalised to ensure children are school ready and have a smooth transition into formal education e.g. 6 week pre-kindy program, and the best possible start to school.

Additional Considerations

The Strategy does not reference the role of School Boards at independent public schools or P&Cs.

The board and the P&C each play important yet different roles in supporting rural schools. They have separate functions which are legislated but work together to achieve common goals and when they work collaboratively, jointly plan and communicate regularly, they have significant, positive impact.

Firstly, the school board contributes to good school governance so that school resources are used efficiently, and community expectations and school priorities reflect the needs of students. The school board is also responsible for monitoring the achievement of the School Business Plan and any School Reviews. They have a significant role to play in ensuring accountability of school leaders and helping them to achieve the goals in the School Business Plan. This ultimately contributes to desired outcomes of strategies such as the Regional Education Strategy, so too educational performance.

Likewise, P&Cs support cooperation between parents, teachers, students and members of the community. They add strength to the school budget by fundraising, which contributes to improved student outcomes and to the achievement of the School Business Plan.

NEWROC would like to see further education and support of School Boards to assist them in understanding their roles and responsibilities. We understand there is a governance support team within the Department, however we suggest further resourcing this unit to attend School Board meetings and support School Boards in person, offer additional local training, support

School Boards and P&Cs to collaborate and the appropriate mechanisms to engage and work with school leaders and staff.

CONCLUSION

Implementing the Regional Education Strategy will clearly require additional resources, including funding for public schools and the Department, equipment, and investment in people. Attracting and retaining a larger public school workforce is essential.

The strategy must be improved to include specific, timely, and measurable strategies. The strategy has the potential to significantly enhance educational outcomes and community sustainability in the North Eastern Wheatbelt region and we look forward to seeing a revised strategy when the consultation period closes.