Regional, rural and remote education

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As well as financial and performance audits, the Auditor-General carries out special reviews, compliance engagements and audits requested under section 27B(3) of the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983*, and section 421E of the *Local Government Act 1993*.

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In accordance with section 38EC of the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983,* I present a report titled **'Regional, rural and remote education'.**

Margaret Crawford PSM
Auditor-General for New South Wales
10 August 2023

RECONCILIATION COMMITMENT STATEMENT

The Audit Office of New South Wales pay our respect and recognise Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the land in NSW.

We recognise that Aboriginal people, as custodians, have a spiritual, social and cultural connection with their lands and waters, and have made and continue to make a rich, unique and lasting contribution to the State. We are committed to continue learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' history and culture.

We honour and thank the traditional owners of the land on which our office is located, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and the traditional owners of the lands on which our staff live and work. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and to the next generation of leaders.

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Regional, rural and remote education

Section one

Regional, rural and remote education

Executive summary

In February 2021, the department of Education (the department) released the 'Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–2024)'. The strategy sets a vision that 'every child in regional New South Wales has access to the same quality of education as their metropolitan peers'. It recognises that students in rural and remote areas of New South Wales face greater challenges compared to students in metropolitan locations. These challenges contribute to regional, rural and remote students underperforming on major educational indicators compared to their metropolitan peers.

In recent years, regional, rural and remote communities experienced a series of natural disasters as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic and subsequent school closures, the department introduced new initiatives aimed at minimising the disruption to children including online learning and small group tuition.

The department established a regional, rural and remote education policy unit in 2021 to support delivery of the strategy and its vision.

The objective of this audit was to assess the effectiveness of the department's activities to ensure that regional, rural and remote students have access to the same quality of early childhood, school education, and skills pathways as their metropolitan peers.

In making this assessment, the audit examined whether:

- The department developed and implemented a strategy that enables regional, rural and remote students to access the same quality of early childhood education, school education, and skills pathways as students in metropolitan New South Wales.
- The department has been addressing the complexities and needs of regional, rural and remote early childhood education, school education, and skills pathways.

Conclusion

The department's rural and remote education strategy is unlikely to achieve its vision that every child in regional New South Wales has access to the same quality of education as their metropolitan peers. Shortcomings in the design and implementation of the strategy have meant there is little to report on its impact after more than two years since its release.

The department did not take on board lessons learned from the previous strategy. The department did not provide additional resources to meet the strategy aims, establish strong central coordination, set timeframes, set measures of success, or identify new programs to address gaps in regional and remote access and outcomes. Instead, the department relied on matching existing programs and activities across its business areas to meet the stated actions and goals of the strategy.

There was not enough work put in to plan for successful implementation. A changeover in staff responsible for coordinating implementation of the strategy and lack of fit-for-purpose governance arrangements slowed its momentum. The department took one year to recruit a central team and almost two years to set up governance that gives relevant department executives oversight of the strategy. This was not fast enough to support a four-year strategy with an ambitious vision.

The department did not establish a program logic model, set baseline measures or develop an evaluation plan to assess the impact of the strategy. Consequently, it has not adequately monitored changes in access or outcomes for regional, rural and remote students. Two years after its release, there has not been any public reporting against the actions or outcomes of the strategy.

The department is not addressing the complexities of delivering regional, rural and remote early childhood, school education and skills pathways. There are a range of programs targeted to overcoming challenges of remoteness, but the department does not monitor data to determine whether these programs are sufficient to close the persistent gaps in access and outcomes for regional, rural and remote students.

A decade after the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint was launched in 2013, there remain considerable gaps in access and outcomes between metropolitan and regional, rural and remote areas. The department identifies 'equity' as a key value in its strategic plan but does not monitor or report on performance against key indicators according to geographic location. Data produced in response to our requests for this report demonstrate that previously identified gaps in access and outcomes remain.

Different areas of the department recognise the challenges of delivering services in regional, rural and remote locations and have developed specific programs or approaches aimed at addressing these challenges. The department does not know whether these interventions are sufficient to close the gaps in access or outcomes. Schools we spoke with as part of the audit reported significant ongoing challenges with attracting and retaining staff, providing a full curriculum and accessing support services when needed.

1.   Key findings

Regional, rural and remote disadvantage is a longstanding and well-known issue

In 2013, the department released 'Rural and Remote Education: A blueprint for action'. The blueprint identified that disadvantage experienced by students in rural and remote areas begins in early childhood and flows through to school and employment outcomes. These issues have long been identified in multiple government and non-government reports, for example, the Commonwealth Schools Commission released a report on 'Schooling in rural Australia' in 1988. In introducing the 2013 blueprint, the then Minister for Education committed to implementing actions to close the remoteness gap.

The department published an evaluation of the blueprint in 2020, which found that it had achieved limited success against its aims of reducing the gaps between metropolitan and rural and remote students. It noted the persistence of the gaps required an ongoing focus and offered recommendations for how future efforts may be better targeted for greater impact.

The 2021 strategy proposed a whole systems approach to addressing disadvantage

In response to the evaluation report, the department began to develop a new strategy to support regional, rural and remote education. It consulted with relevant stakeholder groups and held online surveys to get feedback on priority areas. It had proposed to update a literature review from 2013 and commission a new research project but these were not completed in time to inform the 2021 strategy.

The Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–24) was released in February 2021. The strategy included four focus areas with supporting goals, aims, and actions. While the overall focus areas of the strategy were similar to those of the blueprint, the strategy proposed a 'whole systems' approach for implementation. This approach aimed to make all areas of the department responsible for improving student learning and wellbeing outcomes in rural and remote schools.

Key enabling factors were not in place to support effective implementation

The department's evaluation of the blueprint recommended several things be put in place to support the development and implementation of a new strategy. These included an evidence base, a program logic methodology, clear and robust measures of success, coherence across activities, and strong, central coordination to enable continual monitoring and adjustment of initiatives as required.

There were gaps across all of these recommended enabling factors:

- the proposed evidence base was not completed on time to inform the new strategy
- there was no program logic model
- measures of success were not defined
- there was no clear understanding of initiatives that would contribute to the strategy
- the team responsible for coordination was not in place at commencement of the strategy
- governance arrangements were not fit-for-purpose for the 'whole systems' approach.

There have been delays in implementing the strategy

The change in responsibility once the strategy was announced, and gaps in enabling factors, led to delays in implementing the strategy. The Rural and Remote Education Policy Unit was announced in February 2021 as having the key role in coordinating implementation but was not fully staffed until mid-2022. The role of the policy unit was unclear, and it spent the second half of 2021 considering and consulting on how it would approach its role.

The strategy did not identify initiatives that would contribute to its goals and aims. The new policy unit spent time consulting with different areas of the department and cataloguing over 100 initiatives that it considered aligned to the aims of the strategy. It viewed this as the first step of setting an implementation plan and approach to monitor the performance of the strategy.

Governance arrangements from the previous blueprint and development of the new strategy were carried over for early implementation. These arrangements were not fit-for-purpose, which meant there was limited action and insufficient influence to ensure priority was given to regional, rural and remote issues. The policy unit proposed two governance models during 2022 before a new steering committee was formed in December 2022. At this stage, it is unclear whether the new steering committee will be effective in taking a strategic approach to holistically address gaps in regional, rural and remote education delivery.

The new strategy included programs that already existed in other areas of the department

The new strategy incorporated several programs that different areas of the department had already developed to address the challenges of delivering quality education to regional, rural and remote areas. These programs ranged from early childhood education, through to school education (K-12), and transitions from school into employment or tertiary education. The department provides additional funding to recognise the greater costs of delivery or develop innovative delivery models where traditional models are not viable.

In early childhood education, the department provides additional funding for mobile preschool services to improve access in regional, rural and remote locations where standalone services are not viable. It also subsidises travel costs for families in remote areas and has developed a program to support a distance model of early childhood education. Schools we spoke with reported difficulty accessing quality early childhood education.

Difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers to regional, rural and remote areas is an ongoing challenge. The department has a range of incentives to encourage teachers to areas which are hard to staff. Its data shows that despite the incentives, there are significant numbers of vacancies across these areas. Schools we spoke with reported difficulty keeping a full complement of staff with the relevant subject area expertise.

Shortages of qualified staff and smaller student cohorts mean that secondary school students in regional, rural and remote areas are less likely to have access to a full set of curriculum choices. The department provides distance education options for students but there can be practical barriers for students accessing these options and the learning style may not suit all students.

Secondary students in regional, rural and remote areas face challenges with post-school transitions. The Educational Pathways Program includes a range of initiatives aimed at supporting secondary students in their transition from school to work. There are regionally focused initiatives that aim to overcome these barriers, but the program is still being rolled out across the state.

There are significant gaps in regional, rural and remote education and wellbeing outcomes

Despite the department's programs, it does not know the extent to which these programs have closed gaps in educational outcomes between major cities and the rest of the state across early childhood, school education, and transitions from school. The department does not regularly monitor gaps in outcomes but was able to produce this data for us to include in this report (see sections 4 and 5).

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measures children's development, as they enter the first year of full-time school. Children in regional and remote areas are less likely to be developmentally on track across five key domains compared to children in major cities.

The National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) measures student literacy and numeracy skills as they progress through schooling. Students who are below the national minimum standard are at risk of being unable to progress satisfactorily at school without targeted intervention. Students in regional and remote areas are less likely to perform above the minimum standards compared to students in major cities.

One of the main indicators of educational achievement is completing high school to Year 12. Young people who do not successfully complete Year 12 have a narrower range of post-school options than those who do. Students in regional and remote areas are less likely to continue their schooling to Year 12 compared to students in major cities.

There is not enough public reporting on the department's actions and their outcomes

The department set 'equity' as a key value in its strategic plan for 2018–22. It set performance indicators in its annual business plans to measure progress towards its strategic plan goals. These indicators, however, did not include an assessment of performance by remoteness.

The department's Annual Reports for 2021 and 2022 stated that it 'monitor(s) performance data for our key targets, focusing on our cohorts and students in most need: Aboriginal students, students from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds, rural and remote students, and students with disability'. Despite this, the department was not able to demonstrate it regularly produced, monitored, or reported on this data for rural and remote students. It only produced this data when required by this audit.

This has meant that the size of gaps between major cities and other areas of the state have not been adequately monitored or reported. Monitoring and reporting on differences in outcomes across geographical areas is important to target programs and interventions where needed.

Similarly, the Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–24) set an overarching vision to provide equitable access to quality education. It stated that regular updates on strategy actions would be made available but, as at June 2023, there had been no public reporting. Communicating publicly on the progress of strategy actions and the outcomes they have achieved is important for transparency and public accountability.

2. Recommendations

By August 2024, the Department of Education should:

1. renew its commitment to meeting the principles of the *Education Act 1990* that 'every child receives an education of the highest quality' through development of a long-term strategy that addresses regional, rural and remote education

2. commence preparations for a new strategy by:

    •   finalising an evaluation of the 2021–24 strategy

    •   publicly reporting on actions and impact of the 2021–24 strategy

    •   undertaking research to inform directions, including a literature review

    •   embedding stakeholder engagement arrangements to inform the development and execution of a new strategy

3. put in place quality key performance indicators for regional, rural and remote students aligned to the department's strategic plan success measures and routinely report publicly on the regional, rural and remote indicators

4. routinely and consistently collect data in a manner that enables a standard remoteness classification to be applied across different functional areas of the department, which will support the department to:

    •   monitor trends and issues with access across the state

    •   analyse factors driving differences in outcomes across the state

    •   enable public reporting on key performance indicators

5. implement governance arrangements for regional, rural and remote education that:

    •   enable the central coordinating unit for regional, rural and remote education to effectively undertake its assigned functions

    •   enable ongoing quantitative and qualitative analysis to identify issues in program delivery to regional, rural and remote areas

    •   prioritise efforts based on identified opportunities and areas of the greatest need

    •   provide authority for the central coordinating unit to make decisions to direct the work of relevant business units accountable for delivering on those responsibilities

    •   clearly allocate responsibilities and hold business units accountable for delivering on those responsibilities

6. review the financial resources provided for regional, rural and remote areas to recognise the additional costs for regional, rural and remote locations

7. review the different modes of hybrid learning across the department and use this to develop an approach that ensures all students can access best practice modes of delivery.
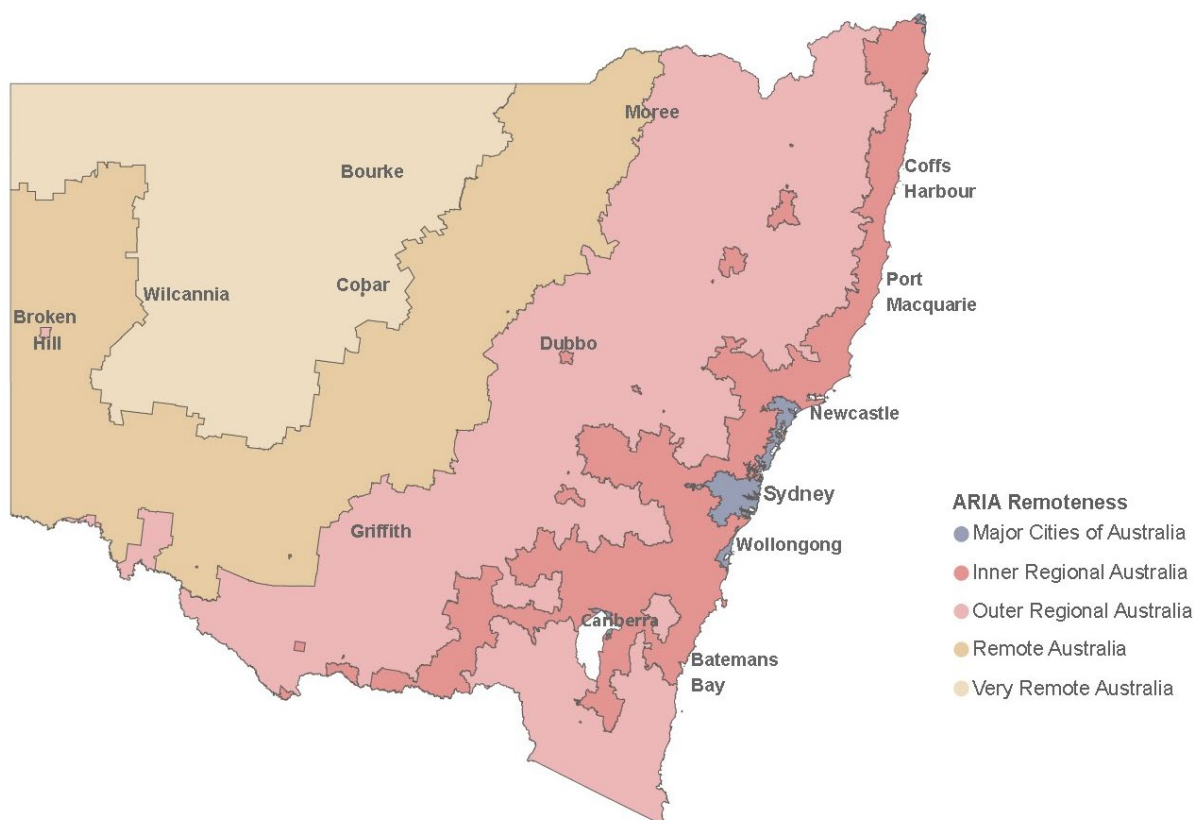
1. Introduction

1.1   Regional, rural and remote areas of New South Wales

Geographic coverage

Exhibit 1 is a map of New South Wales based on 'areas of remoteness'. There are five classes of remoteness which are characterised by a measure of relative geographic access to services.

Exhibit 1: Map of remoteness areas in New South Wales

Source: ARIA Remoteness Areas, Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Edition 3.

Around three-quarters of the population of New South Wales live in major cities, whilst one quarter live in regional areas and less than 0.4% live in remote or very remote areas (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2: Estimated New South Wales population by remoteness area (as at 30 June 2022)

Remoteness area	Total population	%*
Major cities	6,158,533	75.5
Inner regional	1,584,921	19.4
Outer regional	379,597	4.7
Remote	26,498	0.3
Very remote	6,837	0.1
Total	**8,156,386**	**100.0**

*   Percentages have been rounded.

Source: Regional Population (2023), Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Number of schools and students

In terms of access to education in New South Wales, over half of government schools are located in major cities and these schools make up 75% of enrolled full-time equivalent students. In contrast, only 50 out of 2,215 schools are located in remote or very remote areas and these schools make up around 3,500 of the nearly 791,000 students in New South Wales (Exhibit 3 and Exhibit 4).

**Exhibit 3: New South Wales government schools by remoteness area (2022)**

Remoteness area	Number of schools	%*
Major cities	1,235	55.8
Inner regional	584	26.4
Outer regional	345	15.6
Remote	39	1.8
Very remote	12	0.5
Total	**2,215**	**100.0**

*   Percentages have been rounded.

Note: Number of schools as at January 2022. Multi-campus colleges are reported individually.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Exhibit 4: Proportion of full-time equivalent enrolled students by remoteness area, 2022, %
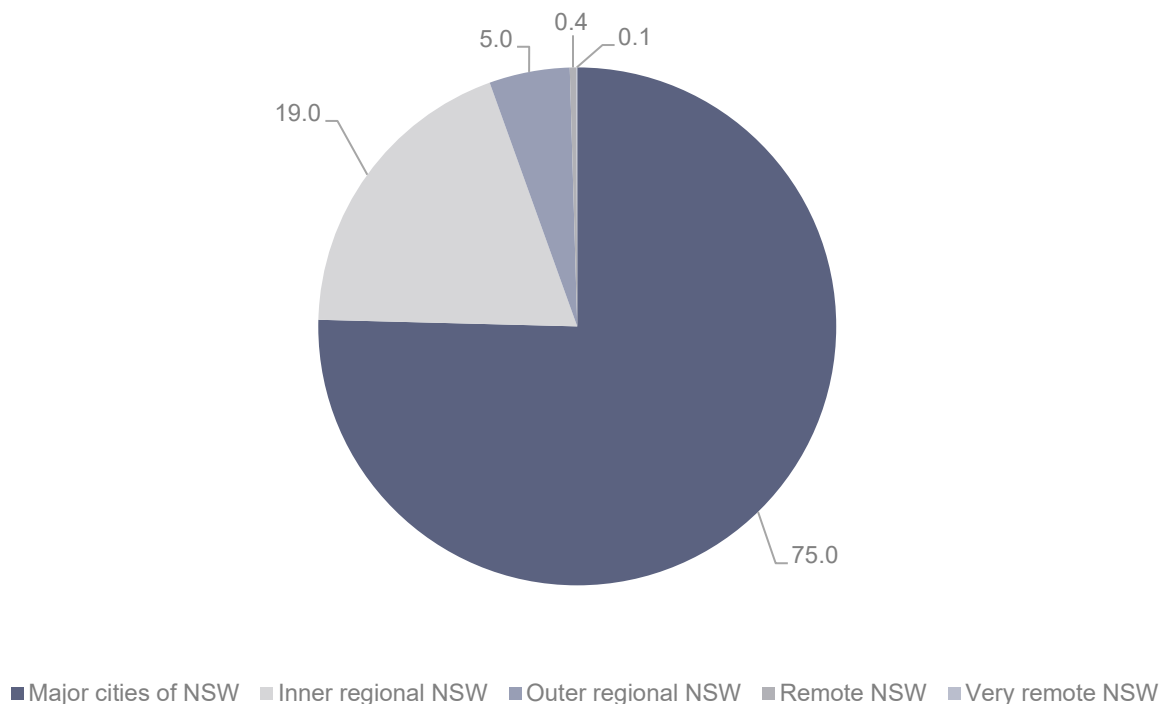
■ Major cities of NSW ■ Inner regional NSW ■ Outer regional NSW ■ Remote NSW ■ Very remote NSW

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

1.2 Bushfires, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic

In recent years, schools in regional, rural and remote areas have been impacted by a series of natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic which disrupted students' regular schooling.

Between July 2019 and March 2020, bushfires burnt approximately 5.5 million hectares across coastal regions of New South Wales. The bushfires were described as unprecedented in scale, duration, and intensity. More than 250 schools were affected by the bushfires, with some damaged and others destroyed.

During the 2019–2020 bushfires, the first case of COVID-19 in Australia was recorded in January 2020. Social distancing measures were introduced in schools in New South Wales in March 2020, and, by the end of the month, the Premier of New South Wales had encouraged parents to keep children at home where possible. Students could access a blended learning model, either on-line or face-to-face in a classroom setting. Students returned to full-time, face-to-face learning at the end of May 2020. As of June 2023, the COVID-19 pandemic declaration was still active.

In February, March, and July 2022, coastal regions of eastern New South Wales, and the central west region of New South Wales, experienced major flooding. Evacuation centres were set up in various locations, including at schools. In 2022, 573 schools were closed due to severe floods and storms.

1.3 Legislation and policy

Education Act 1990

The *Education Act 1990* is the legislative framework for the education and training of school children in New South Wales. An overarching principle in the *Education Act 1990* (NSW) is that 'it is the duty of the State to ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality'. The objects for administration of the Act (as far as is practicable or appropriate) make reference to:

- mitigating educational disadvantages arising from the child's gender or from geographic, economic, social, cultural, lingual or other causes
- recognition of the special problems of rural communities, particularly small and isolated communities.

Department of Education Strategic Plan (2018–2022)

The Vision as set out in the department's Strategic Plan for 2018–2022 is 'to be Australia's best education system and one of the finest in the world'. The department outlines six values in its strategic plan which guide how it operates and makes decisions. The overarching goal is to 'ensure every student is engaged and challenged to continue to learn, and every student, every teacher, every leader and every school improves every year'.

One of the values outlined in the strategic plan is 'equity' with a commitment to deliver on the outcome 'our education system reduces the impact of disadvantage'.

To support the strategic plan, the department also developed the Outcome and Business Plan 2022–23 which outlines how it will achieve its vision, goals, and performance indicators. The business plan includes details of various actions that support regional, rural and remote education but there are no performance indicators specifically targeted to remoteness.

Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–2024)

The department's Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–2024) was launched in February 2021 by the then New South Wales Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning. The vision outlined in the strategy is 'every child in regional New South Wales has access to the same quality of education as their metropolitan peers'. The department aims to achieve this vision by:

- improving staff recruitment, retention and planned professional learning to ensure high quality curriculum delivery
- providing regional students with more curriculum choices and learning opportunities
- supplying state-of-the-art technology to support flexible curriculum implementation
- enabling stronger partnerships with higher education providers, vocational education suppliers and local industry.

1.4 Research and reviews

New South Wales Rural and remote education literature review (2013)

The department's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) released a literature review on rural and remote education in 2013.

The first part of the report explored differences in educational outcomes for students in rural and remote and metropolitan areas of New South Wales. The report found that most differences in outcomes can be explained by factors which are already known to have an impact upon student outcomes, for example, socio-economic status, and the proportion of Aboriginal students.

The second part of the report examined the national and international literature available on regional and rural education, identifying major issues and responses to those issues.

Australian Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (2018)

In 2017, the then Deputy Prime Minister and Australian Government Minister for Education and Training announced a national independent review into regional, rural and remote education. This review aimed to identify ways to improve the education of students in non-metropolitan areas to enable them to reach their full potential. The review was commissioned to:

- consider the key issues, challenges, and barriers that impact the learning outcomes of regional, rural and remote students
- identify innovative approaches to support improved access and achievement of students both in school and in their transition to further study, training, and employment.

The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE), was released in 2018 and based its findings on 340 public submissions and a broad literature review. The report made eleven recommendations with 53 supporting actions for the recommendations.

Evaluation of the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint (2020)

In November 2013, the department released 'Rural and Remote Education: A Blueprint for Action' ('the Blueprint'). The Blueprint committed funding to implement a set of actions to address the disparity of educational outcomes between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students.

In 2020, CESE completed an evaluation of the Blueprint. The evaluation examined the implementation and impact of actions in the Blueprint. It examined education performance indicators to assess any changes in the gaps between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students. Overall, the evaluation found that:

- the 50% rental subsidy had little impact on teacher retention
- the gaps between rural and remote and metropolitan students have generally not reduced on key indicators related to student achievement
- education networks and networked specialist centres have had little impact
- virtual school Aurora College provides an important opportunity for gifted and talented students in rural and remote areas
- enrolments of 4 and 5-year-old Aboriginal children in community preschools in rural and remote areas have increased.

A Review of Rural and Remote Incentives in New South Wales Public Schools (2021)

In late 2020, due to the ongoing challenge of attracting and retaining staff in rural and remote schools, the then Minister for Education and Early Learning requested a review of rural and remote incentives offered in New South Wales. The review examined the current operation of the incentives offered and their role in attracting and retaining teachers to work in rural and remote locations.

A report of this review was released in September 2021. The report found that:

- financial and non-financial incentives provide useful levers which contribute to the attraction and retention of staff in rural and remote schools but are only part of teachers' motivation
- a number of changes could be made to current incentives to increase their impact
- other critical system features are fundamental enablers of the incentive scheme (for example, intake mechanisms, experience and training opportunities, and whole-of-government responses)
- incentives should be designed and administered as part of a broader strategy which takes account of the range of rural and remote factors, including incentives.

The report made a number of recommendations including to:

- provide a distinct, supported, and long-term pathway for rural and remote teaching
- update the 'transfer points' system to account for a wider range of factors (see section 1.5)
- simplify the incentives scheme with wider eligibility criteria and better targeting for retention
- provide wraparound supports to ensure sufficient preparation prior to every entry point
- take a whole-of-government approach to address systemic challenges such as housing
- improve transparency, monitoring, and reporting against specific measures.

1.5 Additional funding to address disadvantage

School funding

In December 2011, a report on the 'Review of Funding for Schooling' was released by the Australian Government Department of Education. The report made 41 recommendations and led to a greater focus on needs-based funding for schools. This is reflected in the principles of the *Australian Education Act 2013.* The Act details the School Resourcing Standard (SRS), which provides an estimate of how much funding a school needs to meet its students' educational needs. The SRS has formulae to calculate a base amount and up to six needs-based loadings.

In terms of needs-based funding in New South Wales, the department uses the Resource Allocation Model to allocate funds to New South Wales public schools. This model makes specific provision for location funding as part of its base school allocations. This funding is in recognition of the disadvantage experienced by students in remote and isolated areas. As part of this model, remoteness is measured using the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+).

Staffing incentives

The department offers a range of benefits and incentives to attract and retain permanent, temporary teachers and executives working at certain rural and remote public schools.

Each school is allocated one, two, four, six or eight 'transfer points'. The more remote the location, the higher the number of transfer points, with eight-point schools mostly being those in far-western areas. Permanent teachers accrue transfer points per year of service and can use these points to have a priority transfer to their preferred school following a period of service in a rural and remote location.

The level of financial and professional (non-financial) benefits are generally aligned with the number of transfer points assigned to the school. These include:

Financial incentives**:**

- recruitment bonus of $20,000 (where applicable)
- relocation payment of up to $8,000
- rural teacher incentive of up to $30,000 (less the value of rental subsidies)
- rental subsidy varying between 50–90% (deducted from rural teacher incentive)
- stamp duty relief payment up to $10,000
- retention benefit of $5,000 per annum for up to ten years (applies to selected schools only)
- experienced teacher benefit of $10,000 per annum for up to five years.

Professional (non-financial) incentives**:**

- ten-week trial placement prior to permanent appointment
- additional personal leave of between two to five days
- additional four professional development days
- priority transfer after a set number of years (period varies based on points accrued).

1.6   About the audit

The objective of this audit was to assess the effectiveness of the Department of Education's activities to ensure that regional, rural and remote students have access to the same quality of early childhood, school education and skills pathways as their metropolitan peers.

In making this assessment, the audit examined whether:

- The department developed and implemented a strategy that enables regional, rural and remote students to access the same quality of early childhood education, school education, and skills pathways as students in metropolitan New South Wales.
- The department has been addressing the complexities and needs of regional, rural and remote early childhood education, school education, and skills pathways.

The audit focused on organisational activities undertaken between 2018 and mid-2023.

The audit interviewed 12 schools as case studies, including a mix of school types and locations across regional New South Wales (South Coast, South West, North West).

This audit also examined four program initiatives aligned with key focus areas in the strategy:

- Curriculum reform program – Assistant Principals, Curriculum and Instruction
- Early childhood education – Start strong preschool funding program
- Educational pathways program
- Teacher supply strategy.

2. Strategy development

This chapter examines the process to develop the Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–2024). It considers whether there was a comprehensive program of stakeholder consultation, whether relevant research and evidence was incorporated and whether an effective performance monitoring system was established.

The department made genuine efforts to consult with stakeholders on the new strategy

The department had a clear process to engage and obtain feedback from key stakeholders during the development of the new strategy. It developed a range of documents to support the consultation process including a stakeholder engagement plan, communications plan, and presentation. The department used the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation principles to help ensure that relevant stakeholders were included in the planning and decision-making process.

In late 2019, the department began its first phase of consultations with internal and external stakeholders to get their views on rural and remote education. It consulted internally with department directors, advisory groups, and learning communities, and externally with government agencies, service providers, non-government schools, and universities.

In March 2020, the department developed a stakeholder engagement paper to test the key issues from stakeholder consultations. Four focus areas were identified and included in a consultation paper that went out to key stakeholders for the second round of consultations in May 2020.

In the third consultation phase, the department conducted a workshop with stakeholders to review the earlier feedback, prioritise issues, identify gaps, and provide further input.

This consultation process enabled the department to identify issues and challenges to inform the new strategy. However, it was already aware that the blueprint was having limited success, and had already identified potential focus areas, following the evaluation of the blueprint in 2019.

The department did not consider recent research when developing the new strategy

The department's guidance materials promote the importance of considering research during policymaking. The guidelines describe the need to understand a topic, consult with stakeholders, identify gaps in existing knowledge, and ensure future work is informed by current literature.

In 2013, the department published a literature review on rural and remote education to inform the blueprint. The literature review found that students in rural and remote schools were not performing as well as their metropolitan peers, and that this performance gap was widening. The review attributed this to the higher number of children from low socio-economic backgrounds attending rural and remote schools. The review also identified several other factors that could negatively impact performance outcomes for rural and remote students. The department used the findings of the literature review to develop the key focus areas in the 2013 blueprint.

When the department began developing the new rural and remote education strategy in 2019, it recognised the need to review the literature on recent international initiatives. However, it has not yet released this review. This means that the department could have missed important new developments since it last examined the literature in 2013. Incorporating up-to-date research is important where past strategies have not met all their intended outcomes.

A national review into rural and remote education in 2018 examined Australian and international literature to inform its findings. The review made 11 recommendations to the Australian and state governments. While the NSW Government was not required to formally respond to the review, it could have considered the work done by that review when developing the new strategy. Several review recommendations are addressed in the strategy, while several others are only partly addressed. Gaps between review recommendations and specific strategy actions include improving the availability of quality accommodation, substantially reducing the waiting times for specialist assessments of students with learning difficulties and disabilities and increasing access to high quality distance education.

In 2019, the department commissioned a rural and remote project to contribute a research and evidence base to the new strategy. The main aim of the project was to help the department understand how it could better support rural and remote schools to increase educational outcomes. There was not enough time for this review to be completed prior to the release of the strategy. As of June 2023, the research project had not yet been released.

The strategy did not address all findings and recommendations from a recent evaluation

In 2020, the department's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) published an evaluation of the blueprint. The evaluation examined how the actions in the blueprint were implemented. It recommended that a new strategy be developed, and made recommendations for things that should be incorporated into the strategy.

The blueprint aimed to ensure students in rural and remote areas could access the same quality of education as their metropolitan peers. The blueprint identified four focus areas to meet that aim:

- quality early childhood education
- great teachers and school leaders
- curriculum access for all
- effective partnerships and connections.

The department developed several initiatives to help meet the objectives of each of the four focus areas. These initiatives are described in Exhibit 5 below.

Exhibit 5: Key initiatives in the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint (2013)

Key focus area	Initiative
Quality early childhood education	• Funding model to help vulnerable and disadvantaged children access preschool.
Great teachers and school leaders	• Rental subsidy to help attract and retain teachers.
Curriculum access for all	• Virtual school to provide a varied curriculum for high potential and gifted students.
Effective partnerships and connections	• Education networks for teachers and school leaders to access expert advice to support student learning. • Networked specialist centres to bring together services to support student health and wellbeing.

Source: Department of Education, Rural and remote education: A blueprint for action 2013.

The evaluation found that initiatives in two of the four focus areas – Quality early childhood education and Curriculum access for all – had performed well. However, the evaluation found that initiatives in the other two focus areas – Great teachers and school leaders and Effective partnerships and connections – did not achieve intended outcomes.

On the whole, the evaluation found that the 'remoteness gap' between rural and remote students and metropolitan students had not reduced since the blueprint was introduced. It recommended that the department continue its focus on rural and remote education by developing a new evidence-based strategy that focused on student outcomes and clear measures of success.

Objectives and actions in the new strategy were similar to those in the blueprint

The 2021 strategy sets an overall vision that 'every child in regional New South Wales has access to the same quality of education as their metropolitan peers'. It also states that the department 'is committed to ensuring all rural and remote students have equitable access to educational opportunities'.

Exhibit 6: Comparison of objectives in the blueprint and the new strategy

Rural and Remote Education Blueprint (2013)	Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–24)
Provide more children with access to quality early child education in the year before school.	Ensure all students have access to quality preschool in the year before school.
Ensure rural and remote schools have greater capacity to attract and retain quality teachers and leaders.	Increase supply of high-quality educators in rural and remote communities.
Build the capacity of teachers and leaders in rural and remote schools.	Better develop rural and remote teachers to deliver quality learning opportunities.
Address wellbeing needs through effective partnerships and connections.	Address wellbeing needs through connections with local communities.
Develop partnerships so that rural and remote students have access to quality pathways into further education, training, or employment.	Build partnerships to increase student access to post-school opportunities.

Source: Audit Office summary of Department of Education information.

Four areas in the blueprint remained a focus in the new strategy – early childhood education, teacher recruitment and retention, curriculum, and student wellbeing support services. Each focus area identifies a goal, as well as the aims and actions that contribute to those goals.

While this shows the department identified that these areas required continued attention, most actions were to 'increase', 'expand' or 'improve' existing programs and resources. The new strategy did not propose any new ideas or solutions, despite the blueprint achieving limited success in improving outcomes for rural and remote students.

There were no baseline or target measures set to monitor progress of the new strategy

The blueprint evaluation recommended that the department develop a new evidence-based strategy which focused on improving student outcomes. It also recommended the department use a program logic methodology to ensure there was a clear definition of success, adequate measures of success, and continual monitoring to ensure success.

Program logic models are a visual representation of the various components of a program. They can be used to illustrate program priorities, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and assumptions. Logic models are used to explain how a proposed solution will address a specific problem. They are important because they can help test assumptions, build business cases, and identify potential enablers or barriers that could impact the project.

The department did not complete a program logic model during development of the new strategy, nor did it define measures to monitor whether the strategy's overall vision for quality education or the commitment to equitable access was on track to be achieved.

The department has not comprehensively monitored changes in educational outcomes in regional, rural and remote areas since the evaluation of the blueprint in 2020. This evaluation had seven indicators of educational outcomes by remoteness. The measures used in the evaluation could have provided a starting point given the similarity in focus areas between the blueprint and the new strategy. Not addressing past review recommendations increases risks that issues will be repeated.

The policy unit advised it has plans to set up a dashboard to monitor performance across the department's business plan measures by remoteness. This is intended to identify areas where system-wide improvements are required. This is not a comprehensive account of the strategy outcomes because the business plan measures don't capture all the goals of the strategy.

There were no timeframes or resources identified for implementing new strategy actions

The strategy has an overall timeframe of 2021–2024 but does not clarify when it expects the vision, goals, or aims to be achieved, or actions to be implemented.

The department's guidance on policymaking sets out how projects should be transitioned between the policy and implementation teams. This guidance is intended to help ensure the policy intent and scope of the project are not lost during the delivery of the project. The guidance highlights that the policy team should establish clear project implementation timeframes. It is important to have clear timeframes because it enables teams to measure progress, manage resources, and prioritise actions to ensure project outcomes are achieved.

The strategy states that there is a further $1 billion of investment planned over the next three years for rural and remote education but does not identify how this is allocated across its focus areas. It is important to identify the resources required to support the implementation of a program so that program objectives are met in a timely and cost-effective manner. The previous blueprint identified much lower funding of $80 million but more clearly showed how it would be allocated for identified actions across the four focus areas.

In response to our requests, the department separately identified $1.286 billion in expenditure for regional, rural and remote schools referenced in the strategy. Most of this expenditure related to existing department programs and activities rather than new initiatives. The total amount included:

- $576.9 million for new and upgraded schools
- $365.8 million for upgraded information technology equipment and resources
- $120 million for school facility upgrades to be co-funded by schools
- $60 million to replace school roofs
- $60 million for the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program
- $32 million for the Early Action for Success program
- $29.7 million for staffing incentives
- $21.7 million for literacy and numeracy interventions
- $18.8 million in school location allowances
- $1.45 million for the Rural Learning Exchange Pilot
- $0.4 million for Rural and Remote Network initiatives.

3. Strategy implementation

This chapter examines the arrangements in place to implement the strategy. It considers whether effective governance arrangements are in place and how progress is monitored and reported.

3.1 Governance arrangements

The role of the policy unit in driving implementation was not initially clear

There was initial confusion about what role the policy unit would play in implementing the strategy. Prior to the strategy release, the department had proposed implementing the strategy using a system-wide approach across relevant functional areas. Once the strategy was released, the then Minister announced a new policy unit that would be tasked with implementing the strategy. This meant responsibilities during the first stages of 2021 were unclear.

On 3 February 2021, the then Minister for Education and Early Learning released the strategy and announced the creation of a Regional, Rural and Remote Policy Unit. The then Minister said 'the new unit would be devoted to raising regional, rural and remote students' educational outcomes, and implementing the government's ambitious reform agenda in regional, rural and remote schools'. The then Minister also said 'kids in the regions need a team that can drive reforms and implement programs to eliminate the equity gap that exists between the bush and the city'. On 17 February 2021, at a speech following the strategy launch, the then Minister stated the 'new unit will implement reform under the newly introduced Rural and Remote Education Strategy'.

During strategy development, there was not enough consideration given to arrangements to support successful implementation. The project management plan for development of the Rural and Remote Education Strategy kept arrangements for implementation out of scope.

The department's policymaking guidance encourages teams to plan for implementation when developing policy. It directs teams to establish project management fundamentals including processes, timeframes, sequencing, interdependencies, accountabilities and risks.

There was no dedicated team in place at the commencement of the strategy, which slowed its momentum. After the announcement in February 2021, an Executive Director commenced in August and most of the team had started by mid-2022.

During the second half of 2021, the new policy unit worked out how it intended to implement the 'systems approach'. Under this approach, it has defined a role as working with different areas of the department and outside agencies to improve regional, rural and remote outcomes. It aims to do this by providing an evidence-base and structures to inform change to existing policies and programs, and to guide development of new initiatives where needed.

Key risks to implementation were raised multiple times are yet to be fully addressed

At several points during strategy development and implementation, the policy team raised risks relating to the level of commitment across the department to the strategy. The lack of a well-resourced team, lack of separate strategy funding and lack of strong governance arrangements at the commencement of the strategy increased these risks. Initial actions to mitigate the risks were not effective as the risks continued to be raised throughout 2021 and 2022.

In March 2020, the department developed a project management plan for the strategy, which raised risks that different areas of the department would not understand they would be responsible for funding identified initiatives. The plan proposed discussions with relevant areas, providing clear information on expectations and tracking deliverables as actions to mitigate those risks.

In December 2020, the Rural and Distance Education team raised risks to the department executive relating to the lack of additional funding to target objectives and initiatives of the strategy, and that directorates may not embed the strategy's goals and actions in their work streams. The team did not clearly outline how it proposed to mitigate these risks.

In May 2021, the Rural and Distance Education team again raised risks to the department executive relating to the timely development of a strategy implementation plan. This was due to inadequate team resourcing and poor engagement from different areas of the department. It proposed hiring additional internal and external staff to meet its needs.

In July 2022, the Rural and Remote Education policy unit raised risks to the department executive relating to engagement from different areas of the department. These included competing priorities and misalignment of expectations. The actions to mitigate those risks were finalising the governance approach and developing a stakeholder engagement plan.

As at March 2023, the Rural and Remote Education policy unit risk register identified risks across five areas:

- gaps in student outcomes are not reduced in line with targets
- governance arrangements are ineffective
- stakeholder relationship management is sub-optimal
- communication and media engagement is sub-optimal
- operational resilience is sub-optimal.

The main controls to mitigate these risks rely on oversight by the Rural Assurance Steering Committee. The role of the steering committee is limited by a lack of monitoring and reporting on the gaps in student access and outcomes across different educational and wellbeing areas. At this stage, the steering committee has only met three times so it is too early to tell how effective it will be at mitigating the remaining identified risks.

The risk previously raised on multiple occasions, that different areas of the department are not sufficiently committed to delivering initiatives in the strategy, is not included in the risk register.

Initial governance arrangements were not fit-for-purpose for strategy implementation

The blueprint evaluation in 2020 had recommended 'strong, central coordination enabling continual monitoring and adjustment of initiatives as required'. It was important for the department to have in place governance arrangements that supported central coordination and decision-making.

In early 2020, the department established the Rural and Remote Education Project Control Group. This group aimed to provide executive direction and visibility of rural and remote initiatives, with the Director, Rural and Pathways coordinating the secretariat. The group had frequent turnover in leadership (six different Chairs across its eight meetings) and mostly served as a forum to provide information updates and seek feedback rather than to make decisions.

The project control group met four times before the launch of the strategy (April, July, September, and December 2020). The group provided updates and took feedback from members on development of the strategy and key programs affecting regional, rural and remote areas. There were three different Chairs across the four meetings in 2020 and few decisions made.

After the launch of the strategy, the project control group met another four times (April, July, September, and December 2021). The group operated in much the same manner as it had prior to the strategy being announced. It continued to provide updates and take feedback from members on progress with the strategy and key programs affecting regional, rural and remote areas. There were three different Chairs across the four meetings in 2021 and few decisions made.

The group did not meet its stated terms of reference to provide:

- a whole of department/system approach to regional, rural and remote issues
- advice on actions, indicators and achievable outcomes for the strategy
- advice on recommendations to overcome barriers to student learning outcomes
- advice on emerging risks and strategies to prevent or mitigate these.

Terms of reference for the group were endorsed on 11 March 2020 and updated on 17 June 2021. There were no significant changes made to the functions of the group between development and implementation of the strategy (Exhibit 7). We expected to see greater explanation of how governance arrangements would support implementation of the whole of systems approach (identified as central to the strategy) and monitor the progress of identified actions across different areas of the department.

Exhibit 7: Functions of the project control group, 2020 and 2021

| 11 March 2020 Terms of reference	17 June 2021 Terms of reference
• Support and advise on issues concerning the formulation of the Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2020–2025.	• Support and advise on issues concerning rural and remote education and the ongoing direction of the Rural and Remote Strategy 2021–2024.
• Provide an opportunity for a whole of department approach to regional New South Wales.	• Provide the opportunity for the enactment of the whole of systems approach, central to the Rural and Remote Education Strategy.
• Develop partnerships with other agencies, associations, and non-government organisations.	• Identify partnerships with other agencies, associations and non-government organisations with the capacity and ability to facilitate strategic programs and actions in regional New South Wales.
• Provide advice and suggest topics to engage and seek feedback from the membership of stakeholder groups.	• Provide advice and suggest topics to engage and elicit feedback from the membership's stakeholder groups.
• Provide advice and expertise on actions, indicators and achievable outcomes for the Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2020–2025.	• Providing advice and expertise on actions, indicators and achievable outcomes for the Rural and Remote Education Strategy 2021–2024.
• Provide advice on recognised barriers and enablers to improve student learning outcomes and assist in developing recommendations to address these.	• Provide advice on recognised barriers and enablers to improve student learning outcomes and assist in developing recommendations to address these.
• Monitor identified or emerging risks and advise on their prevention, mitigation and management.	• Monitor identified or emerging risks and advise on their prevention, mitigation and management.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

There was a gap in governance during 2022 as new arrangements were developed

In December 2021, the newly formed policy unit identified its next steps as working with a central team on enterprise-wide governance arrangements. Under enterprise-wide arrangements, the Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–24) is identified as a horizontal program (Exhibit 8). The policy unit made two proposals in March and July 2022, which took until December 2022 to commence. This meant there was a gap in formal cross-department governance for the strategy from December 2021 to December 2022.

Exhibit 8: Department governance structure and key groups

Overview of the department's governance structure and key groups
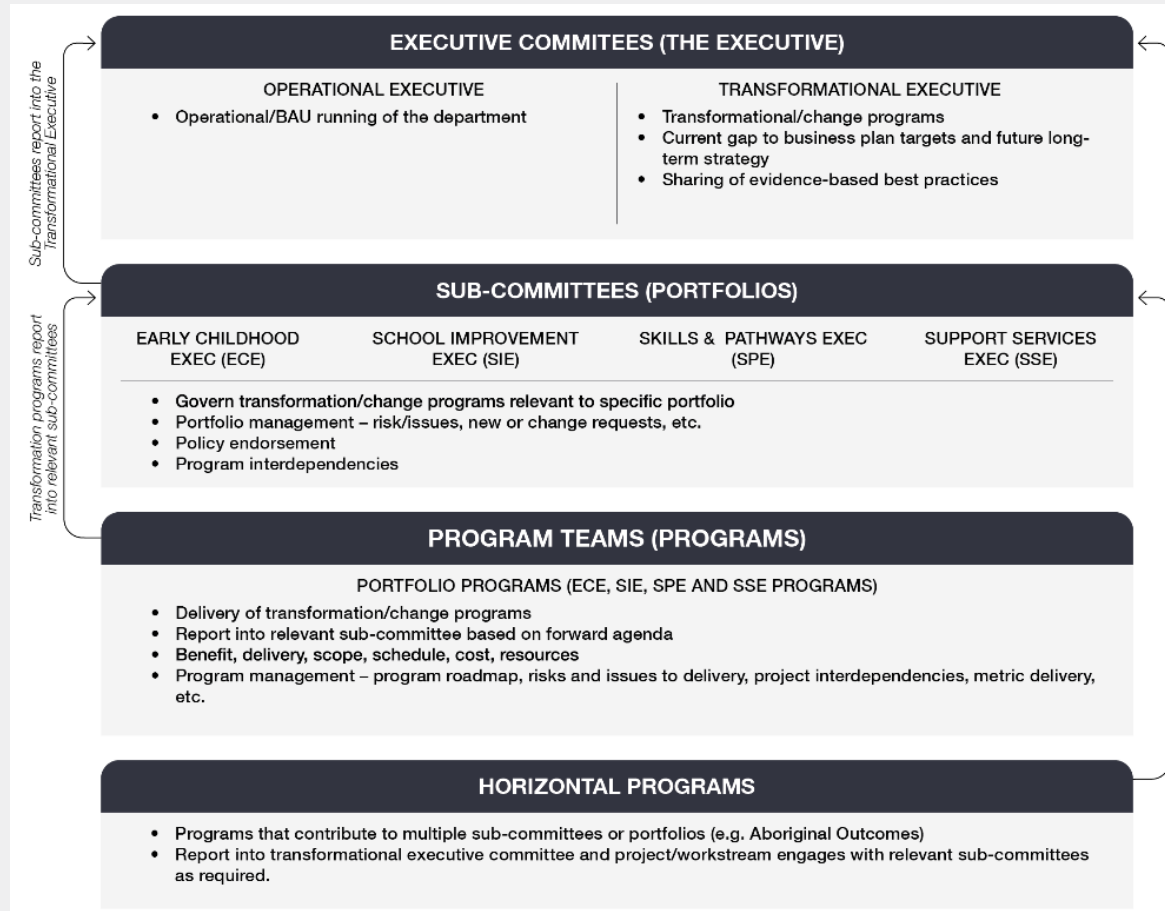
Executive Committee

The highest level of department governance. Attended by the Secretary, deputy secretaries, and other key staff. Considers business in two forums:

1. Operational Executive – governs the operational health of the department. It governs risk, audit, compliance, financial performance, people performance, and service performance.

2. Transformational Executive – governs the key change and reform programs that impact the entire department. It ensures these programs are delivering on strategic priorities and ensures that sub-committees are effective.

Sub-Committees

Sub-committees are attended by deputy secretaries and key executive directors who govern and ensure delivery of specific components of the department's strategy. There are four sub-committees across the department.

Program teams

The sub-committees oversee a wide range of programs. These programs bring business to relevant sub-committees, escalating issues or risks, and seeking endorsement for key decisions. Individual programs may have their own governance approaches that inform the day-to-day delivery of their work before it comes to a sub-committee.
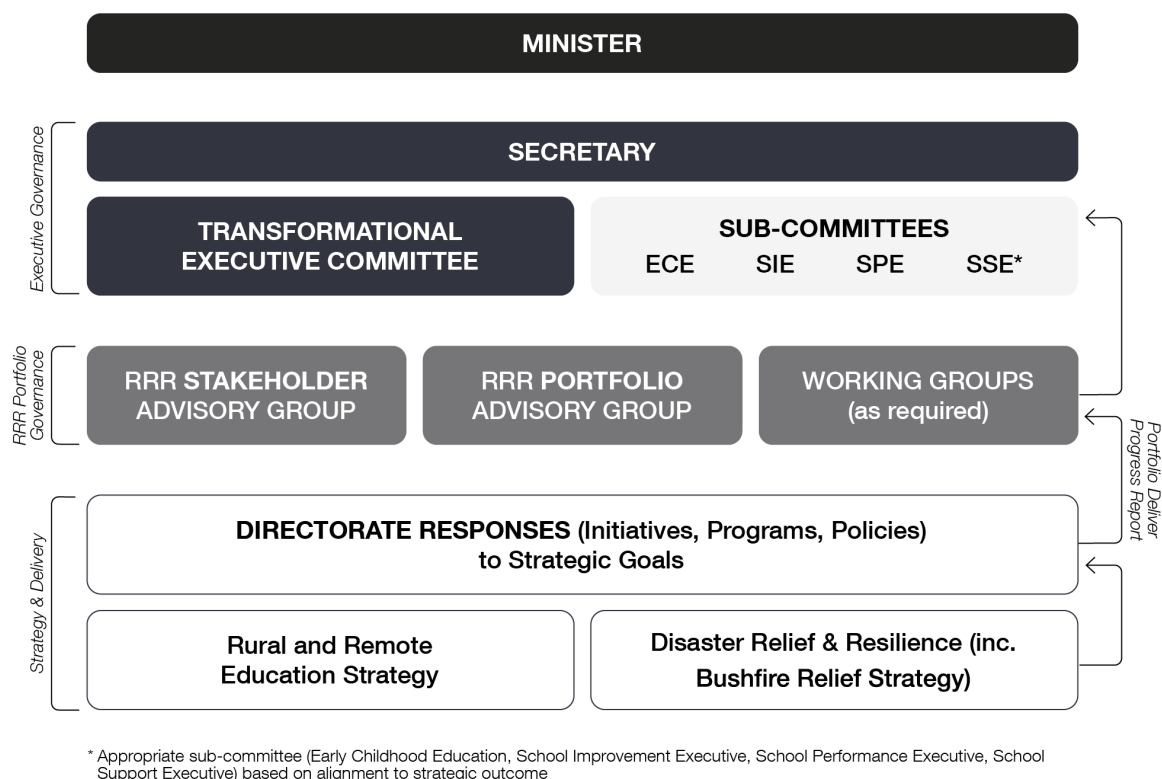
Horizontal programs

Some programs are relevant to multiple sub-committees and therefore do not sit within one sub-committee alone. These 'horizontal programs' report directly into the executive committee. Horizontal programs engage with relevant sub-committees where there are identified risks or issues affecting the delivery of a horizontal project or workstream or there is a decision required.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

In March 2022, the policy unit briefed the department's executive on a proposed governance structure. This was revised in July 2022 (Exhibit 9). Under this approach, the advisory group reports to the Transformational Executive Committee as well as Sub-Committees where relevant.

Exhibit 9: July 2022 proposed governance structure

* Appropriate sub-committee (Early Childhood Education, School Improvement Executive, School Performance Executive, School Support Executive) based on alignment to strategic outcome

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

The renamed Rural Assurance Steering Committee first met in December 2022. In this meeting, it set an expectation that 'members assigned responsibility for actions are to make sure they are visible to their relevant sub-committee executive'. The relevant sub-committee, rather than the steering committee, has the main authority to ensure actions are completed.

Because the Rural Assurance Steering Committee has only met three times so far, it is not yet clear how it will choose to escalate issues to the relevant sub-committee or the Executive Committee. If issues must first be raised with a sub-committee, this will slow their resolution. Sub-committees and the Executive Committee must consider a wide range of business and there is a risk that regional, rural and remote issues will not be a high priority.

3.2   Monitoring and reporting on progress

There is no clear performance information to monitor initiatives linked to the strategy

The strategy set out high level goals against four themes. Under each theme there were a series of 'what we will do' statements. These represented program initiatives in general terms. These initiatives were not specifically defined at the time the strategy was put together but were intended to be identified once the strategy was released.

A department update to the Minister in July 2021 noted that a 'mapping process' was in progress to identify initiatives that will address the strategy aims and that the mapping process would then inform an implementation plan for the strategy. By December 2021, the policy unit had collated an inventory of over 100 programs that it identified aligned with actions in the strategy.

During 2022, the policy unit developed Program Assurance Guidelines (Exhibit 10) to guide it in working with partner directorates to establish clear performance measures for initiatives relevant to regional, rural and remote learning communities, engage with problems affecting the delivery of initiatives, and developing recommendations for program improvements.

Exhibit 10: Rural and Remote Education Policy Unit Program Assurance Guidelines

Phase 1 – Key performance indicators

This phase aims to:

- establish clear performance measures to understand the severity of issues related to learning programs and services to regional, rural and remote learning communities
- track improvements or declines in outcomes and identify whether specific sub-groups are either benefiting or not benefiting from initiatives
- supplement performance measures with qualitative data for on-the-ground insights.

Phase 2 – Understanding problems

This phase aims to:

- understand problems and issues related to the delivery of initiatives in regional, rural and remote learning communities
- engage with on-the-ground learning communities and stakeholders to determine the causes of underperformance against established targets or benchmarks.

Phase 3 – Cause identification

This phase aims to:

- support changes to existing initiatives or development of new initiatives to address problems identified in the previous phases
- assess the urgency to address changes or develop new initiatives to address problems
- support recommendations for change by describing the likely consequences if action is not taken.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

The policy unit collates data from program leads to monitor progress of initiatives aligned to actions in the strategy, determine their reach and track performance. From March 2023, it has presented this information to the steering committee quarterly through a dashboard. The dashboard aims to identify initiatives that are not meeting assurance requirements or targets and need intervention.

As of May 2023, 13 of 42 initiatives met all performance targets. One initiative had partially met performance targets, 16 were below targets, and 18 had not finalised a target. Most initiative performance measures are of activities. This means it is difficult to link initiatives to changes in student outcomes and whether initiatives are sufficient to meet the overall goals of the strategy.

It is important for program owners to provide clear metrics on the impact of their work in regional, rural and remote areas. This information is needed for the policy unit to implement its assurance approach, provide clear updates to external stakeholders, and evaluate the impact of programs.

There were no timeframes established to monitor overall progress of the strategy

There was no implementation plan in place when the strategy was released to guide it through its first years. This made it difficult for executives to monitor whether the strategy was on track. The policy unit gave periodic updates to senior executives on its activities but did not have defined timeframes for completing actions.

A draft implementation plan was created in mid-2021 but only had high-level timeframes. It planned for quarterly updates, a mid-point interim report, and a final evaluation report in early 2025.

In December 2021, the policy unit advised the project control group it aimed to develop an implementation plan in the first half of 2022, once program mapping was completed. As at June 2023, there was no finalised implementation plan or timeline.

More comprehensive public communication on strategy progress is required

The strategy document stated that 'regular updates on the successes of the strategy would be made available on our website'. There were no updates as of June 2023. There were plans for a mid-point strategy update to be publicly released at the end of 2022. The policy unit prepared a draft in February 2023, but it was not released.

The department had conducted and publicly released an interim monitoring and evaluation report on the previous blueprint in 2016. This reported on the implementation of specific actions in the blueprint as well as educational performance indicators. This level of public reporting showed better accountability for progress on the blueprint.

The 2013 blueprint created a Rural and Remote Education Advisory Group. This group included relevant stakeholders and aimed to provide a rural perspective on blueprint actions. The advisory group continued to give program updates to stakeholders up to September 2021.

Several stakeholder groups we spoke with reported a mixed understanding of the role of the policy unit in supporting the strategy and also wanted to see more reporting on strategy progress.

The policy unit has developed a stakeholder engagement strategy and communications plan to support its communications. The stakeholder engagement strategy clarifies the purpose of engagement and how stakeholder views will be used to inform the design and delivery of programs and policies. The communications plan defines objectives, key messages, and methods.

As part of this strategy, the policy unit sends out a quarterly newsletter on new initiatives and resources targeted to regional, rural and remote school communities. It has also set up 'Principal Connection Days' in regional, rural and remote locations. These days support school leaders by delivering face-to-face professional learning on resilience and wellbeing. School leaders we spoke with told us about the importance of networking at face-to-face professional learning events and how this was more difficult outside of major cities.

4. Access to quality education

This chapter considers the effectiveness of arrangements to ensure regional, rural and remote students have access to quality early childhood education, school education, and post-school transitions.

4.1 Early childhood education

Within the department, the Early Childhood Outcomes division is responsible for program funding, policy change, reform and sector transformation. It leads the delivery of early learning and child development initiatives to support children, families and the early childhood education and care sector to improve quality and access to services.

Families in regional, rural and remote areas face unique challenges accessing preschool

Students in rural and remote communities do not always have access to quality preschool education in the year before school. One of the barriers is limited availability of preschools and preschool places, which means that families may have to travel long distances to access services. Public transport in regional, rural and remote areas can be poor or non-existent which can make it more difficult for families to access preschools.

The department currently provides school-based preschool to around 4,000 children in 98 public preschools. Most preschool education is delivered by private not-for-profit and for-profit providers. The department provides additional loadings for community and mobile preschool providers in regional and remote areas to recognise greater costs of delivery.

Five of the seven primary and central schools we visited as part of the audit reported difficulty accessing quality early childhood education in their local area (the other two schools offered a preschool service directly). Some of the reported difficulties included no local preschools, no available places in local preschools, and lack of public transport for families to get to preschools. Schools reported this can affect the readiness of children to begin school and can increase the need for specialist supports.

In 2022 and 2023, the department co-delivered a Preschool Drive Subsidy program with Transport for New South Wales to subsidise the costs families in remote and very remote areas incur in transporting their children to and from preschool.

The department has initiatives to help regional, rural and remote families access early childhood education

Regional, rural and remote areas have higher representation of children who are Aboriginal, from diverse language backgrounds, and/or are from low socio-economic backgrounds. Children in each of these cohorts are less likely to be developmentally 'on track' by the time they start school. Identifying children's developmental needs early is important because regional, rural and remote areas can have significant wait times to have children assessed, formally diagnosed, and access specialist services.

The department has new early childhood education initiatives to address the unique challenges in providing access to early childhood education in regional, rural and remote areas (Exhibit 11). The department advised that it is setting up teams across the state to support local partnerships with early childhood services and will support access to department programs, projects and funding to lift quality, participation, inclusion and affordability.

Exhibit 11: Department initiatives to support early childhood education

Start Strong preschool funding program

The Start Strong preschool funding program was developed to increase the proportion of children in preschool in the two years before school. The program provides fee relief to families with children in a community, mobile, or public preschool.

The department used a program logic methodology for the Start Strong preschool funding program to determine the need, activities, and outcomes of the program.

Families and children in regional, rural and remote areas can face barriers in accessing preschool services, including the cost and availability of centre-based preschools. The department's research indicates that:

•   44% of children in New South Wales are not developmentally on track when they start school

•   priority cohorts are most at risk and experience a widened gap

•   developmentally vulnerable children can experience significant long-term consequences.

Children who attend preschool are more likely to have the social, cognitive, and emotional skills they need to learn, and good transitions to kindergarten help improve educational and social outcomes.

Universal preschool access

The department is aiming for universal preschool access, with work currently underway, including on the delivery of 100 new preschools on public school sites and a further 50 on non-government school sites.

The department advised consultation is planned for term 3, 2023 with 36 department preschools and 36 early childhood education services to inform further policy work. Consultation is also planned for determining potential sites for new preschools on public school sites and non-government school sites.

Community Safety Net

This program was piloted in 2017 and aims to establish a unique preschool program in very remote communities with less than ten preschool-aged children that do not have any early childhood service options. It currently supports seven very remote communities.

The program uses a flexible approach to support children and families who have difficulty engaging in traditional distance learning. Preschool children are enrolled in the distance education program and supported by early childhood teachers. Instead of at-home delivery, enrolled children attend a space in the school where they are supervised by a School Learning Support Officer and access the program virtually.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

The blueprint evaluation found that the number of 'equity children' enrolled in preschool increased between 2013 and 2017. The number of Aboriginal children increased by 45%, and the number of children from low socio-economic backgrounds increased by eight per cent. However, the number of 'non-equity' children enrolled in preschool declined. This indicates that department incentives were only partially effective in getting more children into preschool in the two years before school.

School staff we spoke with said that mobile preschools were important for regional, rural and remote communities. They bring early childhood education to areas where it is geographically or financially difficult for families to access centre-based preschool services. However, we also heard that in some cases families were only able to access a mobile preschool a few days a week. In other cases, families could not get their children into a mobile preschool at all.

The department set a target that 95% of children who are enrolled in an early childhood education program, are enrolled for at least 600 hours in the year before school by 2023. The department has not been regularly producing, monitoring, or reporting on this performance indicator by remoteness but supplied us with data on this measure in response to our requests.

Exhibit 12 shows an increase in the proportion of children who are enrolled in an early childhood program for at least 600 hours in the year before school across all areas of New South Wales between 2018 and 2021. Despite the increase, children in major cities are more likely to be enrolled for at least 600 hours than children in inner regional or outer regional areas.

Exhibit 12: Proportion of children who are enrolled in an early childhood education program, are enrolled for at least 600 hours in the year before school, 2018 to 2021
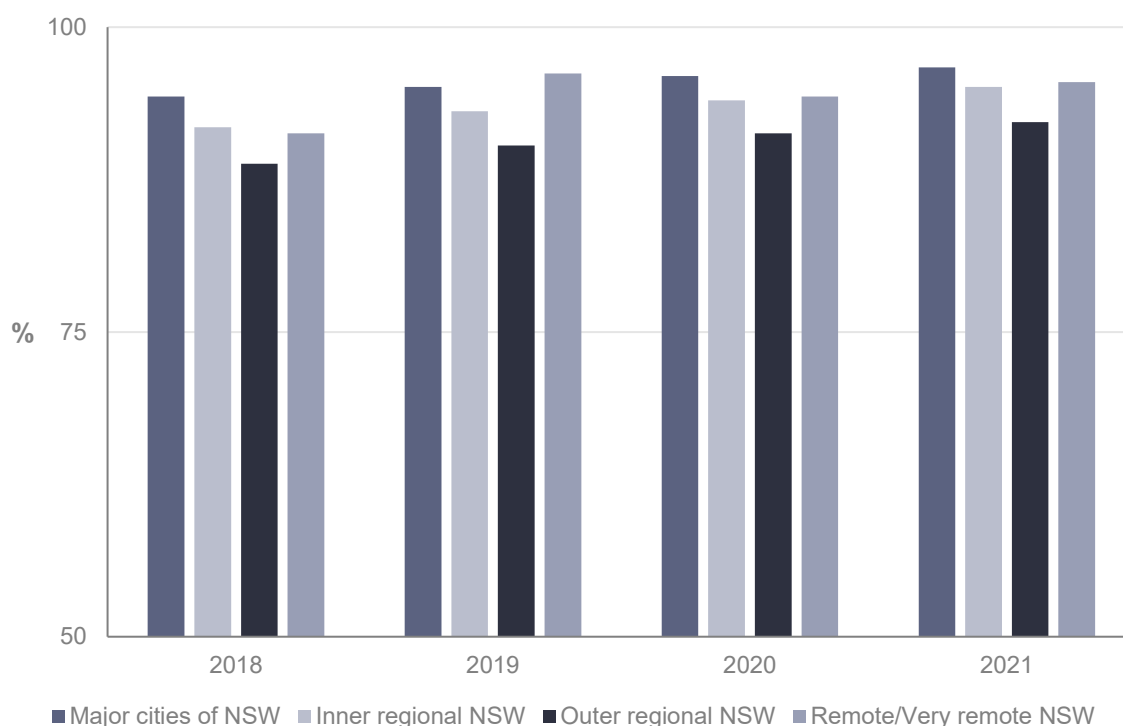
Notes: Numerator: Number of children aged 4 and 5 years who are enrolled in a preschool program in the year before formal schooling for 600 hours or more. Denominator: Number of children aged 4 and 5 years who are enrolled in a preschool program in the year before formal schooling.
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

4.2 Teaching workforce

The School Workforce unit in the department is responsible for many of the initiatives in the Teacher Supply Strategy (2021–31), including upskilling, retaining, and attracting teachers in regional and remote areas.

Teacher vacancies in rural and remote areas affects the ability of the department to provide quality education

Schools in rural and remote communities do not always have a full complement of staff with the right skills to deliver all areas of the school curriculum. The department is responsible for ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education under the *Education Act 1990*.

One of the biggest challenges facing schools in regional, rural and remote areas is attracting and retaining experienced and curriculum-qualified teachers. School staff we spoke with reported difficulties recruiting teachers and finding casual teachers to cover absences. This can mean that teachers are unable to attend professional development or training courses to enhance their skills and stay up to date with current teaching methods.

Teacher shortages can also affect the quality of education provided to students. Staff in one school reported having to combine a sizeable portion of its classes in term one of 2023 due to teacher shortages. Schools also reported relying on local retired teachers to cover staff absences, who were not always trained in the subjects they were required to cover. This can mean students have fewer subject choices, inconsistent learning experiences, and lower educational outcomes.

The Teacher Supply Strategy (Exhibit 13) was developed to help ensure there are enough qualified teachers to meet current and future demand across the state. The strategy has three priorities:

- grow overall supply of teachers
- encourage more teachers to train in high-need and specialist subject areas
- provide targeted teaching support for students in the places it is needed.

Exhibit 13: Department initiatives to increase teacher supply

Teacher Supply Strategy

The Teacher Supply Strategy was designed to address the shortage of teachers in New South Wales. The strategy has three priorities – to grow overall teacher supply, encourage teachers to train in specialist subject areas, and provide targeted teaching support for students. All three priorities include actions to attract, support, and retain teachers in regional, rural and remote areas.

The department understands that schools in regional, rural and remote locations face unique challenges in attracting and recruiting teachers. Disincentives for teachers considering moving to rural and remote areas can include social isolation, limited accommodation options, and a perceived lack of support and/or development opportunities. To address these challenges, the department designed several initiatives:

- **Rural experience program** – provides experienced permanent, temporary and casual teachers with the opportunity to take up a short-term placement in a rural or remote school. Teachers receive financial incentives, and support to help them build connections within the community.
- **Support for rural beginners program** – aims to help early career teachers who have recently moved to a regional, rural, or remote area feel less isolated. Participating teachers receive a financial incentive and other supports such as an orientation person, peer support, and community information. The aim is to help new teachers build local social and professional connections.
- **Teach rural program** – aims to increase the number of teachers in regional, rural and remote locations. Participants receive financial incentives and benefits while completing an initial teacher education qualification, and agree to work in a regional, rural or remote location following the successful completion of their studies.

The department used the recommendations of the Rural and remote incentives review (2021) to inform teacher supply initiatives. It also used a program logic methodology to determine how these initiatives would increase the number of teachers in regional, rural and remote schools.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

Exhibit 14 shows the number of permanent teacher vacancies, by areas of remoteness, between January 2018 and 2023. For comparison, in 2022 there were 583 schools in inner regional areas, 341 in outer regional areas, 38 in remote areas, and 12 in very remote areas.

Exhibit 14: Number of permanent teacher vacancies (January 2018–23)

Remoteness area	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Major cities	1,132	952	916	855	1,280	1,246
Inner regional	410	431	256	269	587	523
Outer regional	155	159	108	148	324	314
Remote	25	23	19	32	55	63
Very remote	1	7	6	10	22	22
Total	**1,723**	**1,572**	**1,305**	**1,314**	**2,268**	**2,168**

Note: A new position was introduced in January 2022 for all schools which affects comparability of 2022 with previous years.
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

The department advised that a new position introduced in 2022 (Assistant Principal, Curriculum and Instruction) had the effect of increasing the number of vacancies in all schools (Exhibit 15).

Exhibit 15: Department initiatives to support literacy and numeracy

Assistant Principal, Curriculum and Instruction Program (APC&I)

In July 2022, the department created new executive-level leadership Assistant Principal (Curriculum and Instruction) positions to support improvements to student literacy and numeracy outcomes.

The department found that schools in regional, rural and remote areas face unique challenges recruiting APC&Is. These challenges include a lack of available staff to fill the positions, and a lack of staff that are professionally ready to take up a leadership position.

In 2021, the department established a Small Schools Working Party and a Small Schools Advisory Group to understand how to best support schools unable to find an APC&I. It then developed two specific initiatives designed to help ensure rural and remote schools and distance education schools were not disadvantaged.

The Virtual APC&I Program is an interim model of support for schools unable to recruit a permanent APC&I. The virtual program has the same aims as the broader APC&I Program, which are to strengthen literacy and numeracy outcomes in schools. However, the virtual program is delivered online.

In addition, the department combined the Rural Experience Program with the APC&I Program to fill APC&I positions in rural and remote schools. The joint initiative provides financial incentives for temporary and permanent teachers to take up a placement in a rural or remote school as an APC&I. The position is shared across several schools on a part-time basis. Schools may jointly advertise for a shared APC&I position to increase the number of applications.

While the joint program has several benefits, there are also disincentives for potential candidates. These include the distances APC&I staff are required to travel when working across a network of schools, and the limited availability of housing in rural and remote areas.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

Schools we spoke with as part of this audit provided mixed feedback on the APC&I position. Staff in one school reported a smooth transition to the APC&I model. The school recruited two APC&I positions – one full-time and one part-time. The APC&Is identified which children needed additional literacy and numeracy support and established a team to provide professional learning support.

Staff in another school said they received funding for a three-year APC&I position, which was to be shared with another school approximately 180 km away. Staff said, however, that it was difficult to recruit for the position due to the travel distance required to work across both schools.

We heard that the APC&I position was sometimes used to cover teacher shortages, particularly due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 absences. We also heard that staff selected for the APC&I position did always have the right expertise to successfully perform the role.

Many teachers are often required to teach outside of their subject specialisation

Data provided by the department shows that many teachers are often required to teach outside of their key learning area or field (Exhibit 16).

Exhibit 16: Percentage of teachers teaching outside their key learning area
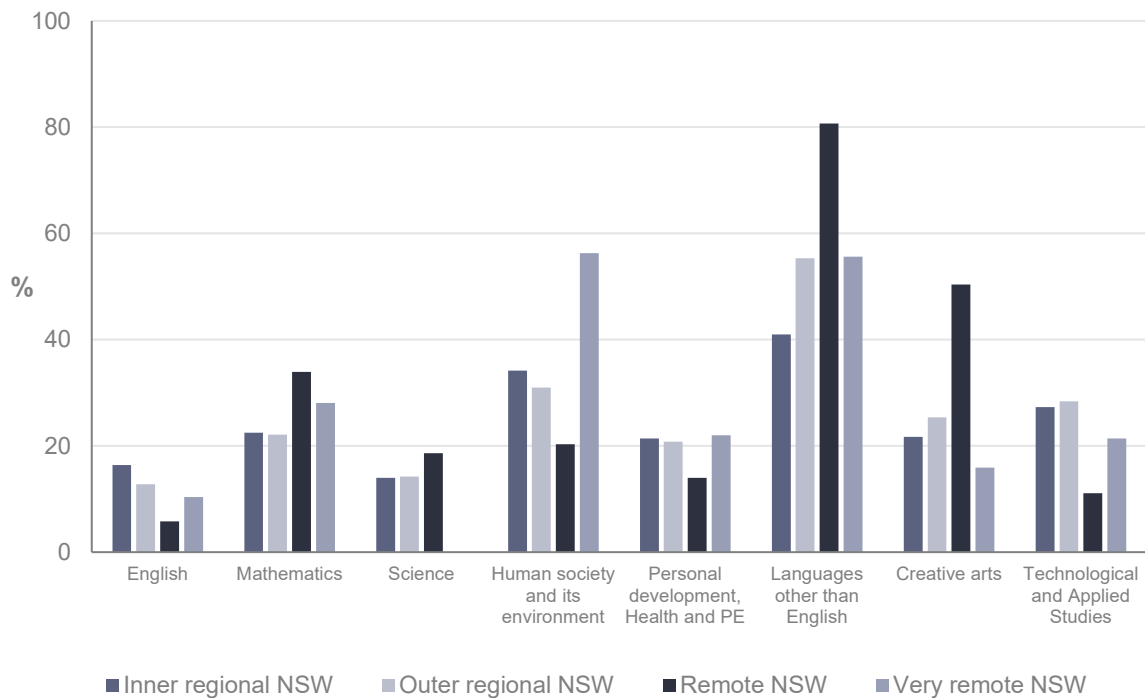
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Teaching out of a key learning area or field occurs when teachers teach a subject or topic that is not in their area of expertise or academic specialisation (university major or minor). For example, when a physical education teacher is required to teach geography. Teachers who teach outside of their key learning area or field may not have the level of subject knowledge to be able to teach the material effectively and this may impact student outcomes.

In our 2019 audit report: 'Supply of secondary teachers in STEM-related disciplines', we recommended that the department improve its workforce planning model to better understand and communicate supply and demand for teachers by geographic area. We also recommended that the department increase the proportion of scholarship recipients and practicum placements in priority locations. The department accepted these recommendations, stating it would incorporate new data sources to improve its workforce planning model and work with universities to improve the process for professional experience placements.

4.3 School curriculum

Students in regional, rural and remote schools do not always have access to face-to-face schooling or the same range of curriculum choices as students in metropolitan schools. Children and young people in rural and remote areas can sometimes find it difficult to get to a local school. Also, senior secondary students in regional, rural and remote areas may not be able to access some subjects at their local school due to smaller cohorts or access to subject specialist teachers.

The department has developed several approaches to mitigate disadvantage faced by regional, rural and remote students. These include Distance education schools, Aurora College, the Rural Learning Exchange Program, the Access Program, and the Specialist Teacher Stream Program.

The blueprint evaluation recommended the use of 'innovative approaches', such as technology, to help overcome some of the challenges faced by regional, rural and remote students. Technology can help provide students with access to the same subjects as their metropolitan peers, particularly in schools that are unable to access curriculum-qualified teachers.

Distance education schools enable students to access a broader curriculum, but it is a challenging medium with less teacher-student engagement than face-to-face delivery

Distance education helps meet the needs of students from preschool to Year 12 whose circumstances make it difficult for them to regularly attend school. Distance education schools also provide individual subject enrolment, widening study opportunities for secondary students and helping them meet the mandatory requirements of senior secondary study.

At mid-2021, there were 839 primary and 1,747 secondary students enrolled in distance education (full-time equivalent). The number of enrolments increased from 2,769 in 2018 to 2,540 in 2022.

Students can enrol full-time in a distance education school for several reasons, including:

- geographic isolation
- students travelling within Australia
- students temporarily resident or travelling overseas
- students with a medical condition
- pregnant students/young parents
- vocationally talented students
- students with additional learning and support needs
- students in extraordinary circumstances
- students affiliated with the national school for travelling show children.

Enrolments in distance education are jointly managed by a student's home school and the distance education school. For a student to be accepted into a distance education school, the principal of the distance education school must be satisfied that the student's needs cannot be met within their home (regular) school or setting, or by accessing other local resources.

Schools we spoke with gave mixed feedback about the distance education model. Some staff reported that distance education gave greater curriculum choices to their students and helped retain them to Years 11 and 12. Other staff said that distance education can be a challenging medium for some students due to limited teacher-student engagement. This requires students to be self-motivated in progressing their studies and can result in students dropping out of courses. Stakeholders also reported the quality of distance education differs depending on the school.

Distance education must cater for students across a range of categories with specific needs. Geographically isolated students made up only 11.7% of distance education enrolments in 2022 (Preschool to Year 12) compared with 46.9% of students enrolled due to additional or significant support needs. This increases the complexity of delivering a service that meets the specific circumstances of all students. For example, students travelling within Australia or overseas are less likely to want scheduled face-to-face online lessons.

Aurora College offers more subject choices for gifted students, but timetabling can be a challenge for some schools

In addition to the distance education schools, the department operates Aurora College. Established in 2015, Aurora College is a virtual school that delivers specialist and advanced subjects online to gifted and talented students living in rural and remote parts of the state.

We received mixed feedback from stakeholders we spoke with about Aurora College. Some external stakeholders said that Aurora College can offer great opportunities to students. Some school staff said that Aurora offers an engaging and responsive model that is appealing to young people. We also heard that Aurora provides good face-to-face teacher-student engagement, with students being required to go online for every class. However, some stakeholders reported challenges managing the Aurora timetable, and others said the quality of teaching varied.

Stakeholders we spoke with reported perceived competition between distance education schools and Aurora College. Aurora College was originally a selective school for Year 9 and 10 Mathematics and English. However, that provision has been extended to Years 11 and 12. We heard that some schools encourage their more talented students to attend Aurora College, while the less capable students are encouraged to choose distance education.

Several other programs support rural and remote students to access the curriculum

In addition to Distance Education and Aurora College, the department has several other programs to support curriculum access for regional, rural and remote students. These include the Access Program, Teachers in the Field – Specialist Teachers Pilot, Covid Intensive Learning Support Program online option, and the Rural Learning Exchange Program.

The Access Program enables Year 11 and 12 students in rural areas to access the curriculum at their local school. The program commenced in 1990 and currently delivers 73 Year 11 courses and 83 Year 12 courses across approximately 21 small rural schools, which are arranged in five clusters. Students interact via videoconferencing and other technologies. Because subjects are taught by different schools, students have a wider choice of courses and course levels.

The Teachers in the Field – Specialist Teachers Program aims to deliver specialist subjects, including additional Higher School Certificate (HSC) subjects, to students in small rural schools. Specialist teachers will be based at a 'hub' school and travel to other schools within a cluster of schools. Teachers will be employed on a full-time temporary basis for up to two years. Under the program, students will receive face-to-face learning from in-field specialist teachers to complement other options, such as distance education. The department expects the program to be delivered to approximately 30 regional, rural and remote schools in Term 1, 2024.

The Covid Intensive Learning Support Program provided small group tuition, aiming to help address students who were disadvantaged by the impact of COVID-19 and natural disasters. The department developed an option for the program to provide small group learning through an online platform to schools to find teachers to deliver the program face-to-face. As part of our 2021 'COVID intensive learning support program' audit report, we found the online tuition program had the potential to provide ongoing support to schools in regional, rural and remote areas.

The Rural Learning Exchange Program supports small schools in rural areas by facilitating online collaboration between teachers and students studying for the Higher School Certificate. This program also aims to improve the curriculum skills of rural and remote teachers through peer interactions and access to specialist resources. Eighty-three schools took part in a pilot of the program between 2020 and 2023.

Despite the department's range of programs, students in regional, rural and remote areas are less likely to enrol in higher level HSC English and Mathematics courses compared to students in other areas (Exhibit 17 and Exhibit 18).

Exhibit 17: Proportion of HSC English enrolments in different level courses, 2018 to 2022, %
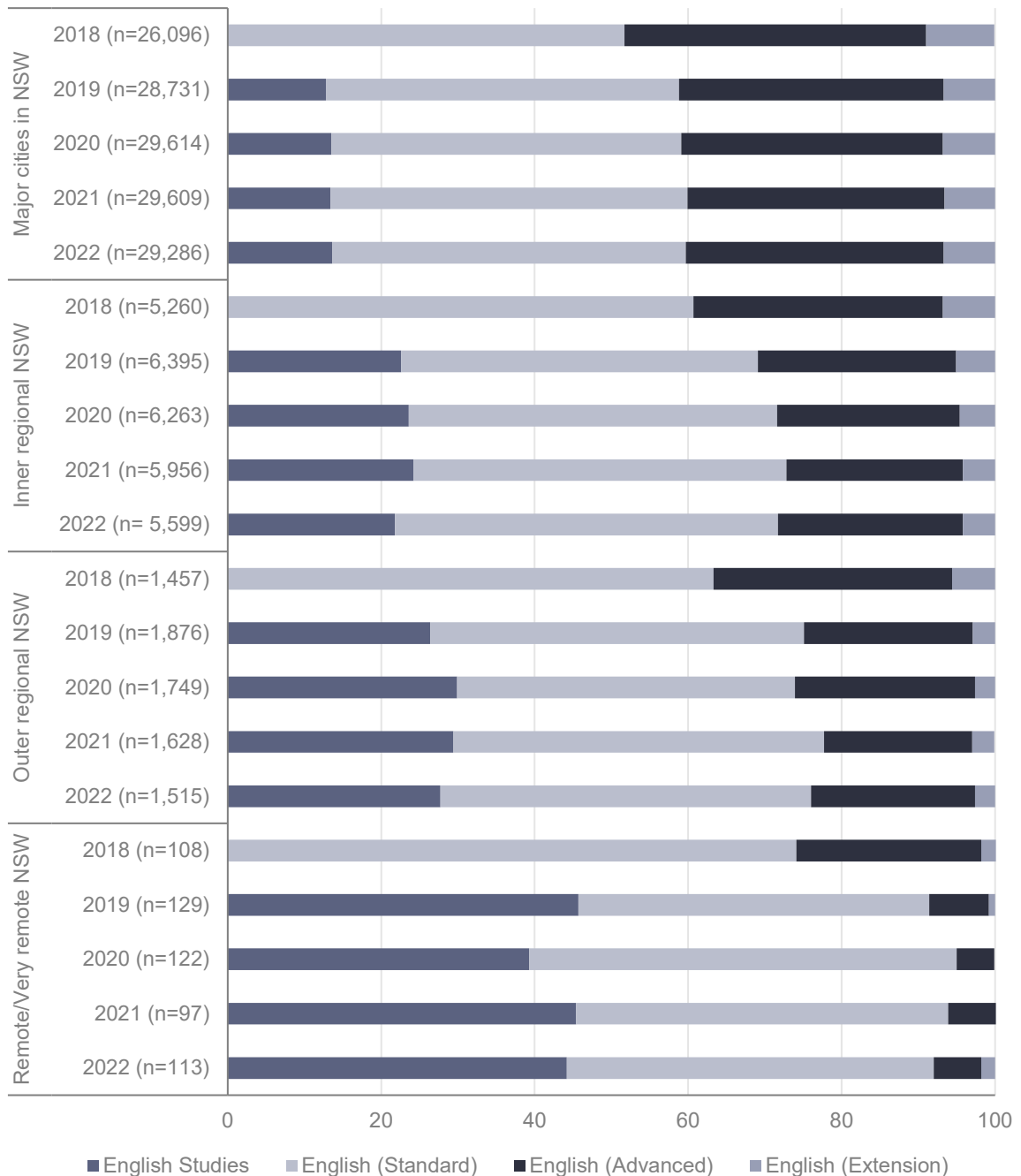
Note: English (Extension) includes HCS Courses English Extension 1 and English Extension 2.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Exhibit 18: Proportion of HSC Mathematics enrolments in different level courses, 2018 to 2022, %
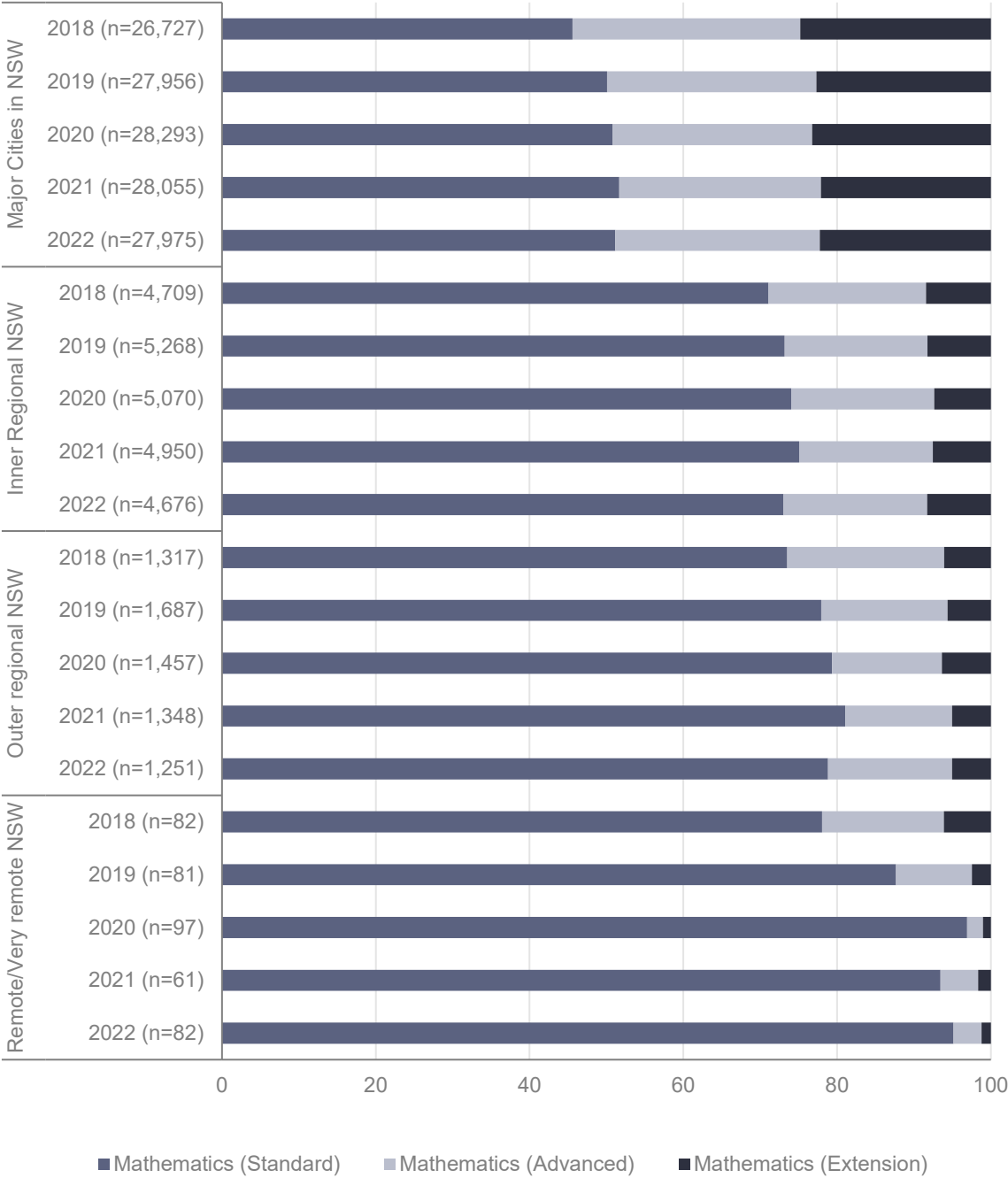
Note: Mathematics (Standard) includes HCS Courses Mathematics Standard 1 and Mathematics General 2/Standard 2; Mathematics (Extension) includes HSC Courses Mathematics Extension 1 and Mathematics Extension 2.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

4.4 Wellbeing support

The Learning and Wellbeing arm of School Services is the area of the department that has lead responsibility for supporting wellbeing in schools.

Regional, rural and remote schools reported difficulty accessing wellbeing support services

Wellbeing is defined in departmental policy and strategy documents broadly, and as directly linked to learning and positive learning outcomes. Wellbeing can be described as the quality of a person's life. It is more than the absence of physical or psychological illness. Wellbeing, or the lack of it, can affect a student's engagement and success in learning.

The School Counselling and Telepsychology Rural and Remote Schools program provides mental health and wellbeing services to students in rural and remote areas through face-to-face and video conferencing. It also provides professional learning for staff and school communities to support student wellbeing. Between Term 1 2021 and Term 2 2023, 2,826 students in 138 schools were supported by the program. The department is currently finalising an evaluation of the program.

Schools we spoke with as part of this audit reported mixed feedback with online wellbeing services. School staff said it is helpful to have online support, particularly where there are no local services, but students with additional learning needs can find it difficult to engage online. School staff also said that online support worked to an extent, but only if in-person support is provided as well.

In 2022, the department introduced the 'Team Around a School' model. The model aims to ensure 'readily available access to specialists and experienced staff to provide timely and accurate support and advice on wellbeing matters'. The specialist support provided by the team includes linking to external agencies and third-party providers.

There are 28 'Team Around a School' units set up around the state. Each unit in regional, rural and remote areas supports between three and five principal networks (between 60 and 100 schools). Having a large number of schools to service, combined with long travel distances, can make it difficult to provide face-to-face services to schools in need of support. For example, a team based in Dubbo supports around 90 schools across Western New South Wales (Exhibit 19).

Exhibit 19: Geographical coverage of schools supported by one Team Around a School
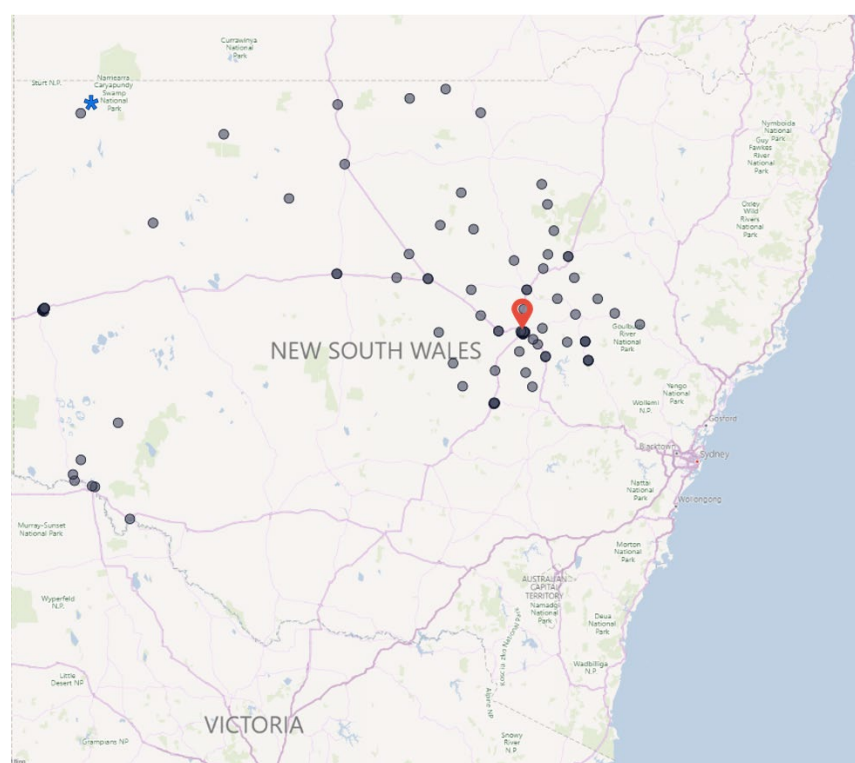
Note: Each dot represents one school. Red marker represents Dubbo head office location. Blue star is the location of school furthest from head office.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Program staff we spoke with told us of difficulties attracting and retaining specialist support staff to some regional, rural and remote areas. They also reported difficulties with travel distances for face-to-face assessment and support. Both these factors affect the capacity to deliver early access to wellbeing support services. Ten of the 12 schools we visited as part of the audit reported difficulties accessing internal and external support services.

Our 2019 audit report, 'Wellbeing of secondary school students', recommended the department develop a service model and commensurate resourcing for wellbeing activities. The department's response indicated that it was improving its systems to monitor engagement with schools and the impact of these activities. The department advised it monitors service patterns, response times and areas of high demand across geographical areas of the state. This is important to ensure that students in regional, rural and remote areas have early access to services when required.

The department's data shows that as of May 2023, there were around 15,000 active Team Around a School support cases. Of these, around 8,500 were in regional, rural and remote areas. The most common category of support in regional, rural and remote areas was for 'behaviour' issues. In metropolitan areas, the most common category was for 'access' to services. Monitoring activity levels is not sufficient to determine whether there are gaps in access to services as it does not show the underlying level of demand for services or waiting times.

Small and isolated schools play a dual role as the community point for external services, but do not receive additional supports

The physical health and wellbeing of a child has important long-term educational, health, and social outcomes. Health services are critical to ensuring that families and children stay healthy.

Communities in regional, rural and remote areas, however, tend to have fewer or no local health services and a higher number of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be less 'on track' in terms of their physical and mental wellbeing by the time they start school.

While the majority of schools we spoke with reported difficulties accessing external services, these challenges can be especially acute for small and isolated schools, and teaching principal schools (Exhibit 20). Staff at one teaching principal school reported long wait times of up to six months for children to see a paediatrician, and three months to see the local GP. School staff said they work with parents to make appointments, and often a teacher and an aide will drive children to appointments. This can have a significant impact on the operation of the school and the educational outcomes of students. This is because it can be especially difficult for these schools to find casual teachers to provide temporary cover.

Some small teaching principal schools in isolated areas play a dual role as the community point for allied health services to fill the gap. While these sorts of arrangements support student and community access to essential services, they are generally facilitated by the teaching principal in addition to their normal workload.

While isolated schools receive additional funding to address disadvantage experienced due to location, they report it is often not enough to meet the additional needs of their students.

Exhibit 20: Teaching Principal Schools

Teaching Principal Schools are unique educational settings where one person is responsible for both the management responsibilities of a principal and the teaching responsibilities of a classroom teacher. These schools have fewer enrolments, and are typically located in regional, rural and remote areas of New South Wales.

There are approximately 450 Teaching Principal schools across New South Wales with around 400 of these in regional, rural and remote areas. Teaching Principal schools make up about 20% of all government primary schools. The red dots in the image below show the location of the smallest teaching principal schools (TP1) and blue dots show larger teaching principal schools (TP2).
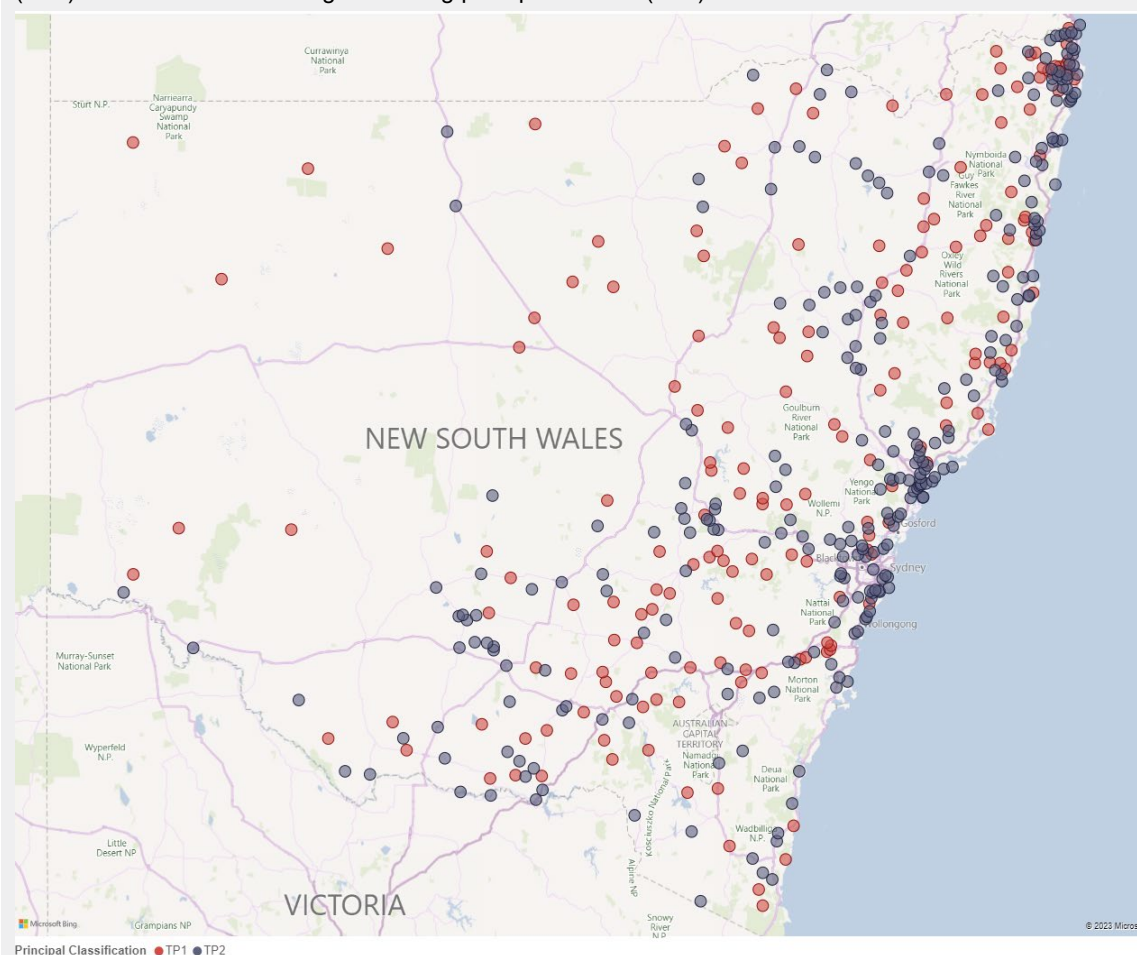
Teaching Principal schools face unique challenges that can affect the educational outcomes of students, including limited access to essential government services and supports, such as health and social supports.

Case study 1

One teaching principal school in western New South Wales has 11 students. The local community has a low socio-economic status and a high unemployment rate, which can contribute to educational disadvantage. The community is geographically isolated and has limited access to essential government services. A converted room in the principal's residence is being used by government service providers to deliver important health services to the local community.

Case study 2

One teaching principal school in north-west New South Wales has six students. The local community has a low socio-economic status, which means that its students have a higher level of educational disadvantage compared to other schools. The community has no access to allied health services. The Royal Flying Doctor Service provides GP and dental services, and an Aboriginal medical service travels 100 km to provide health checks and vaccinations. The region is prone to flooding, and the school becomes the local meeting and rescue point during emergencies.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

4.5   Facilities and assets

Regional, rural and remote schools face longer wait times and higher costs to purchase, maintain, and repair some assets

The department describes school infrastructure as a key enabler for 'building the foundations for learning in early childhood, through teaching and learning in schools and into lifelong learning for a highly skilled and adaptive workforce'. This includes satisfaction and suitability, disability access, and maintenance of school infrastructure.

School Infrastructure NSW is the area of the department responsible for maintaining school assets. Non-urgent repairs, to keep an asset safe and operational, are scheduled by School Infrastructure NSW depending on the asset. If schools need an essential or urgent repair, for a broken window, roof leak, or electrical fault for example, they can log a maintenance request.

Up to mid-2023, the department used a whole-of-government maintenance contract for school infrastructure. Some assets, which are more likely to be located in regional, rural and remote areas, were not covered under the contract. These included: demountable air-conditioning, antennas and satellite dishes, irrigation systems, water tanks, and shade cloth shelters. The maintenance of these assets, and the cost of maintenance, was the responsibility of the school. From 1 July 2023, the department moved to a new maintenance contract that will centrally cover maintenance of more items that schools had previously been required to fund.

The department provides additional 'location' funding to schools in outer regional, remote, and very remote areas based on their distance from population centres and other schools. This funding aims to recognise the additional costs of goods and services outside of metropolitan areas. Schools we spoke with reported the location funding did not fully meet the additional costs they faced due to their remoteness. They reported using their location allowance to pay for the additional costs relating to a range of areas including school excursions and learning events, staff professional development, technology, and repairs and maintenance.

Six of the 12 schools we spoke with reported high maintenance and repair costs. They reported this is due to the additional costs associated with remoteness, including labour, materials, travel, and accommodation. Higher costs can impact small schools with modest budgets. Staff in one school told us that they hired a grant writer to help apply for additional funding to cover the cost of repairs. It can also impact schools that need to make reasonable adjustments for students. Three schools reported the high cost of installing structures to provide protection for students from the sun and rain, including ramp cover for students with disability.

In addition, ten of the 12 schools we spoke with said they were not able to get repairs done in a timely manner. Two schools reported waiting four months for broken classroom windows to be repaired. While schools are able to employ local tradespeople, we heard that many schools were unable to source labour locally and had to rely on out-of-area contractors which can take time.

Further, schools in regional, rural and remote areas face additional costs when procuring some equipment types. They pay more for delivery and have longer wait times, by up to an additional ten business days, for products such as seats, desks, workstations, storage, and first aid furniture.

4.6   Skills pathways

The Skills and Pathways team is responsible for improving education and career outcomes for secondary students by introducing them to a range of vocational training and employment pathways.

The Department has initiatives to improve student career outcomes, but there are challenges accessing these due to distance and limited local opportunities

Students in regional, rural and remote areas do not have access to a breadth of training opportunities at training providers aligned with their aspirations.

Three of the six central and secondary schools we visited as part of the audit reported difficulty accessing vocational education and training. Schools reported strong interest from senior students in vocational education and training but practical difficulties with timetabling, transportation and work experience placements. School staff told us that some of their students were not experienced using public transport, which can make it difficult for them to get to training or work experience placements. We also heard that it can be difficult for schools to find local work experience places for students relevant to their training programs.

The Educational Pathways Program aims to help improve student career outcomes (Exhibit 21). Program staff reported they had used insights from the evaluation to improve the pilot program to better support rural and remote students. School staff we spoke with reported receiving strong support from the program's on-site careers advisors, school learning support officers, and program coordinators. These staff provide careers advice, make local connections with the community, businesses, and educational providers, and help arrange courses and work placements. Outside of the program, staff reported receiving limited support from the department with those things.

Exhibit 21: Department initiatives to support post-school pathways

Educational Pathways Program

The Educational Pathways Program is designed to help prepare secondary students for the transition between school and tertiary education and/or employment. The program aims to improve career outcomes for secondary students by ensuring they have access to career guidance, vocational training pathways, and opportunities to undertake apprenticeships, traineeships, and work experience.

In 2020, the department began a pilot of the Educational Pathways Program in 24 schools across south-west Sydney and the north coast. In 2022, the pilot program was expanded to 145 schools in nine regions, including several regional, rural and remote areas.

The pilot program was evaluated in June 2021. The evaluation found that rural and remote students face additional barriers when accessing educational pathways compared to metropolitan students. These barriers included the availability of public transport and local business or industry partners in regional, rural and remote areas. This can mean that students may turn down vocational training or employment opportunities due to a lack of suitable transport options, or students may not have access to opportunities.

The department expanded on the findings of the evaluation by conducting a series of focus groups to understand whether the pilot program was meeting the needs of students, and identify where the program could be improved. It also collected information about the specific challenges facing rural and remote students in accessing a quality range of vocational education opportunities. The department found that students in rural and remote locations have limited or no transport options, higher transport costs, a lack of face-to-face vocational training options, and a lack of qualified vocational teachers.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education.

The number of students in regional and remote areas commencing a vocational course or apprenticeship has decreased since 2018

Vocational education and training (VET) courses delivered to school students in New South Wales are delivered by either a school based registered training organisation (RTO), or another RTO approved by the department to deliver VET courses to secondary school students.

In March 2021, the New South Wales Government released the report 'In the same sentence: Bringing higher and vocational education together'. The report provided advice on how the state's VET system could address ongoing and emerging skills shortages, paying regard to its quality, efficiency and complexity. The review cited data on the reasons employers were dissatisfied with training. Nationally, the proportion of surveyed employers reporting the reason for dissatisfaction as 'poor access to training in regional or rural areas' increased from 12.2% in 2019 to 19.2% in 2021. In relation to school students, the report suggested that greater collaboration was needed in the development of innovative delivery models (including through remote learning).

The department's 'Pathways for Secondary Students Strategy' aims to address the challenges students face in pursuing vocational pathways including vocational education for secondary students and school-based apprenticeships or traineeships.

Exhibit 22 below shows an increase in the proportion of students in major cities enrolled in a VET in Schools course between 2018 and 2021. The proportion of students in regional and remote areas enrolled in a VET in Schools course over the same timeframe was relatively constant.

Exhibit 22: Proportion of Year 11–12 students enrolled in a VET in Schools course, 2018 to 2021

Notes: VET enrolment is based on Stage 6 enrolment (Year 11–12). It is possible for a Stage 5 student (Year 9–10) to commence a Stage 6 course early and these students are counted in total Stage 6 enrolments.

Notes: Students engaged are unique students with a Stage 6 NESA VET Course enrolment in that calendar year.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

School based apprenticeships and traineeships provide students with the opportunity to attain a Vocational Education and Training qualification and their Higher School Certificate while gaining work skills and experience through paid employment.

Exhibit 23 below shows an increase in the number of students commencing a school-based apprenticeship or traineeship between 2018 and 2022 for most areas. There was an increase in commencements in major cities, inner regional and remote areas but a decrease in commencements in outer regional and very remote areas over this timeframe.

Exhibit 23: Number of school-based apprenticeship or traineeship commencements, 2018 to 2022

Remoteness area	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Major cities	710	803	825	859	887
Inner regional	383	422	363	453	472
Outer regional	265	252	253	231	220
Remote	7	21	28	25	27
Very remote	9	9	12	8	2

Notes: Commencement data is based on when the school-based apprenticeship or traineeship is signed up for training. Generally, these go over a two-year cycle.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

5. Educational and wellbeing outcomes

This chapter considers the department's arrangements to monitor educational and wellbeing outcomes of students by remoteness. It reports on differences in outcomes between students in metropolitan areas and those in regional, rural and remote areas.

Those living in regional, rural and remote areas can have greater difficulty in accessing government services, often needing to travel long distances, or facing lower service levels than provided in major cities. This context is important when considering educational and wellbeing outcomes, given the disruptive effects of waiting or missing out on important services.

The rest of this chapter details key measures in the department's outcome and business plan.

5.1   Student educational outcomes

Equity is a stated priority, but the department is not doing enough to report performance

The department's strategic plan (2018–23) identified 'equity' as a value, aiming to 'ensure all New South Wales students have access to a quality education, regardless of who they are or where they live'. It set six outcomes and 16 indicators to measure progress against those outcomes. It allocated three indicators to the 'equity' outcome but there were none specific to regional, rural and remote areas:

- increased proportion of Aboriginal students attaining the HSC, while maintaining their cultural identity
- reduced gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy and numeracy, as well as sense of belonging, expectations for success and advocacy at school
- reduced socio-economic gap in literacy and numeracy, as well as sense of belonging, expectations for success and advocacy at school.

The Outcome and Business Plan (2022–23) outlines the department's outcomes and how it intends to achieve them, including performance indicators. It set seven corresponding targets for improving outcomes for Aboriginal students and students with low socio-economic status backgrounds but no targets for students from regional, rural and remote areas.

The department's annual reports for 2021 and 2022 state that it 'monitor(s) performance data for our key targets, focusing on our cohorts and students in most need: Aboriginal students, students from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds, rural and remote students, and students with disability'.

Despite this statement, we did not see any evidence that the department was regularly producing, monitoring, or reporting data on the business plan indicators split by remoteness. We expected the department to produce and monitor this data as part of its normal operations as it is a defined equity category in the strategic plan. This data is also critical to understanding how it is meeting the needs of regional, rural and remote students and, if it is not, whether changes are required.

In response to our requests, the department produced data for key business plan indicators disaggregated by remoteness. This data is outlined in the following sections.
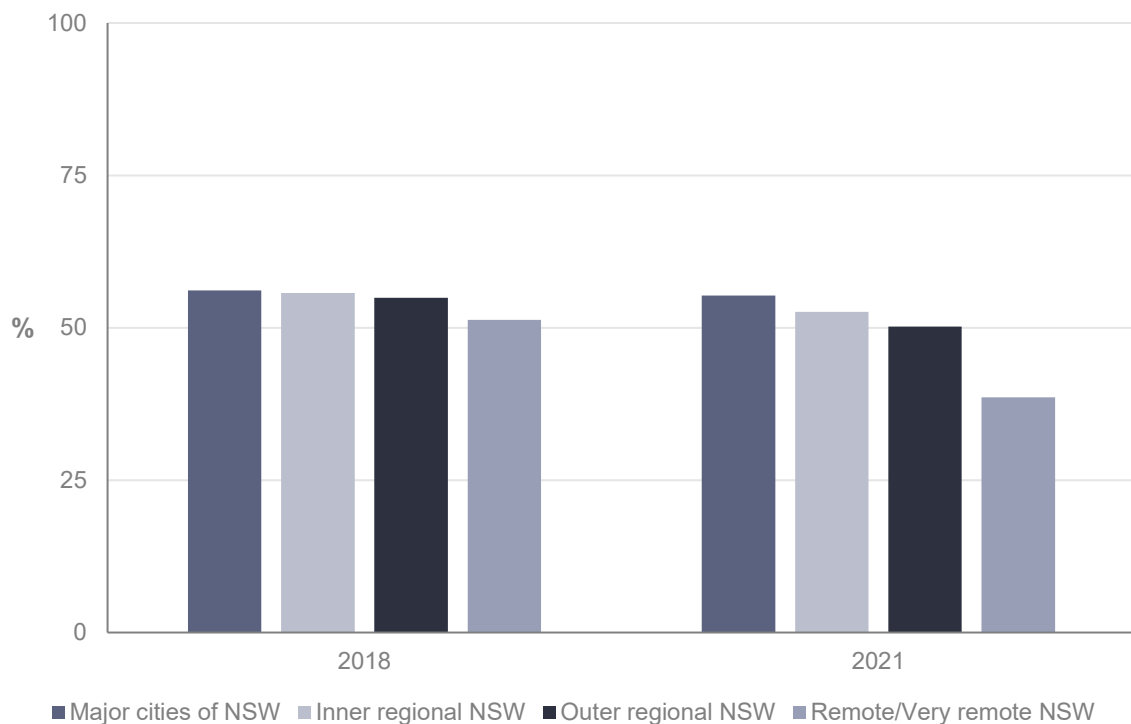
Children outside of major cities are less likely to be on track as they enter school

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national measure of children's development, as they enter their first year of full-time school. Conducted every three years, the AEDC assesses children against five domains of early childhood development:

- language and cognitive skills (early literacy and numeracy skills)
- communication skills and general knowledge
- emotional maturity
- social competence
- physical health and wellbeing.

Exhibit 24 shows that in government schools in 2021, 55.3% of children in major cities were on track on all five AEDC domains compared with 51.9% of children outside major cities. The proportion of children on track on all five domains declines with the level of remoteness.

Exhibit 24: Proportion of New South Wales children on track in all five AEDC domains, 2018 and 2021

Source: AEDC data by Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) classifications (unaudited).

Children outside of major cities are less likely to meet reading and numeracy standards

The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a national measure of literacy and numeracy of school children at Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. The national minimum standards describe some of the skills students can generally demonstrate at their particular year of schooling, in a specific subject area. Students who are below the national minimum standard have not achieved the learning outcomes expected for their year level and are at risk of being unable to progress satisfactorily at school without targeted intervention.

There is a clear pattern of a higher proportion of children in major cities above minimum standards compared to students in inner regional, outer regional or remote/very remote areas of New South Wales. Averaged across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, the proportion of children above minimum standards in 2022 was highest in major cities (81.8% for reading and 81.3% for numeracy) and lowest in remote/very remote areas (54.4% for reading and 52.3% for numeracy).

Exhibits 25 and 26 present data on the proportion of students above the minimum standards for reading and numeracy by remoteness areas.

Exhibit 25: Proportion of New South Wales government students above national minimum standards for reading, 2022, Years 3, 5, 7, and 9
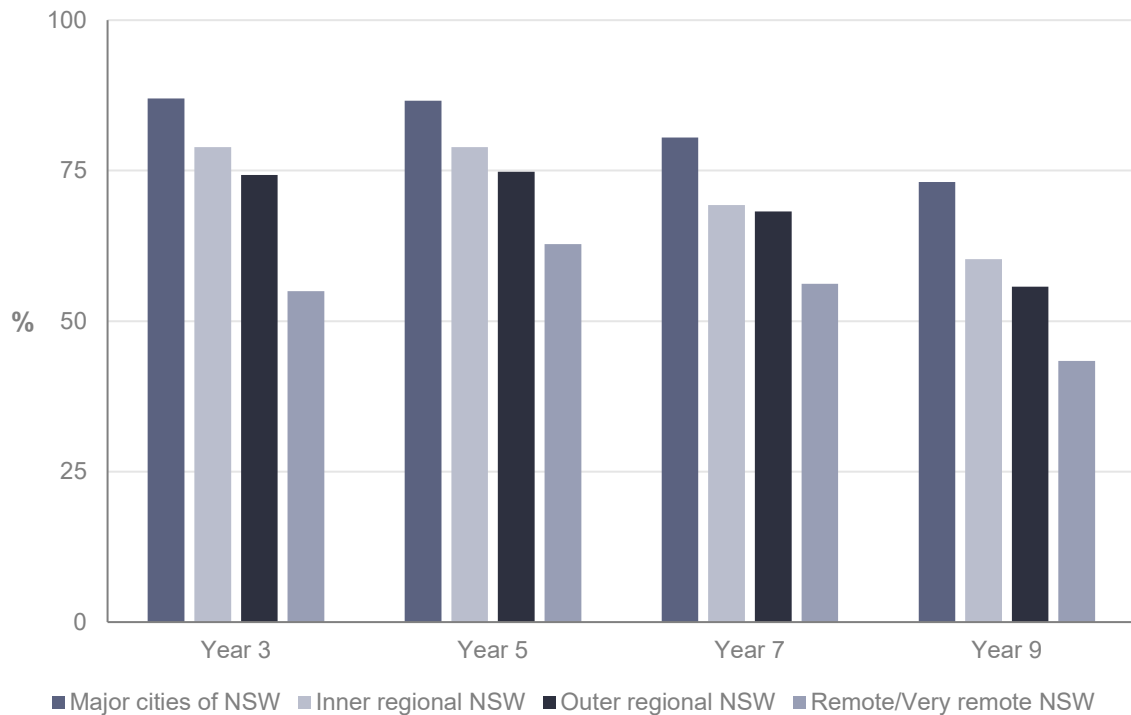
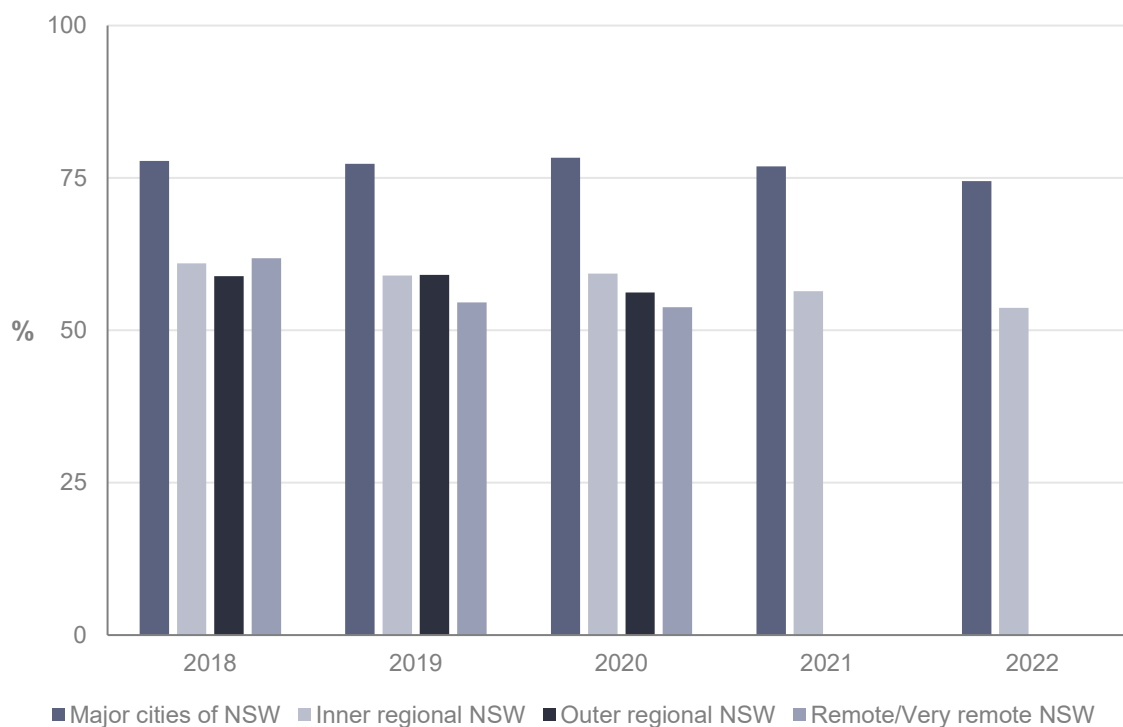Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Exhibit 26: Proportion of New South Wales government students above national minimum standards for numeracy, 2022, Years 3, 5, 7, and 9
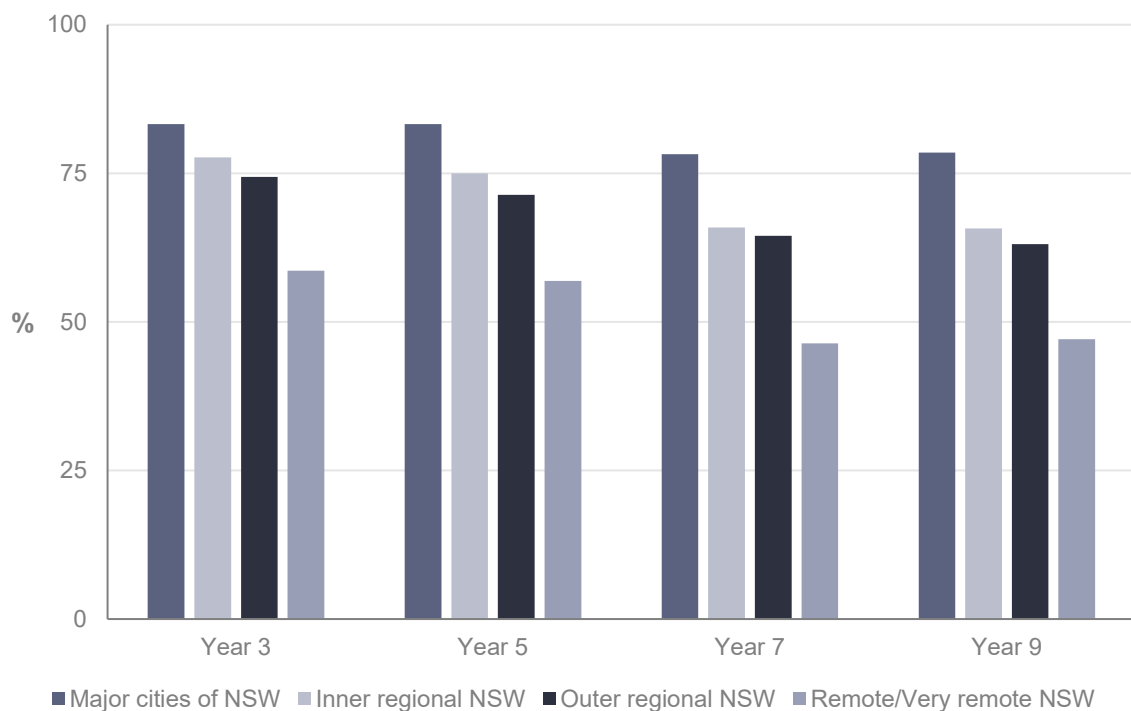
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Students in regional and remote areas are less likely to continue schooling to Year 12

Young people who have successfully completed Year 12 have a broader range of post-school options and a greater likelihood of engaging in further education, training, and employment.

Exhibit 27 shows the New South Wales public school students in major cities are more likely to continue to Year 12 compared to students in inner regional, outer regional or remote/very remote areas. Data are not available for 2021 and 2022 for outer regional and remote/very remote areas due to small numbers of students.

Exhibit 27: Proportion of New South Wales public school students continuing to Year 12, 2018 to 2022

Note: The 'Proportion of New South Wales public school students continuing to Year 12' is calculated by dividing the total number of full-time school students in a designated year (for example Year 12 in 2020) by the total number of full-time students in a previous year (for example Year 10 in 2018.

Note: Data are suppressed if the numerator or denominator are 150 or fewer.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

The Higher School Certificate (HSC) is a significant credential, which provides a foundation for students wishing to pursue higher education, training or employment. Student performance in each HSC course is divided into six bands. Each band is aligned to what a student at that level of performance typically knows, understands and can do. Student results in the top two bands (band 5 and band 6) for a standard course indicates an above average level of performance.

Exhibit 28 shows that the proportion of public school students' HSC results in the top two bands declines by remoteness.

Exhibit 28: Proportion of public school students' HSC results in the top two achievement bands, 2018 to 2022
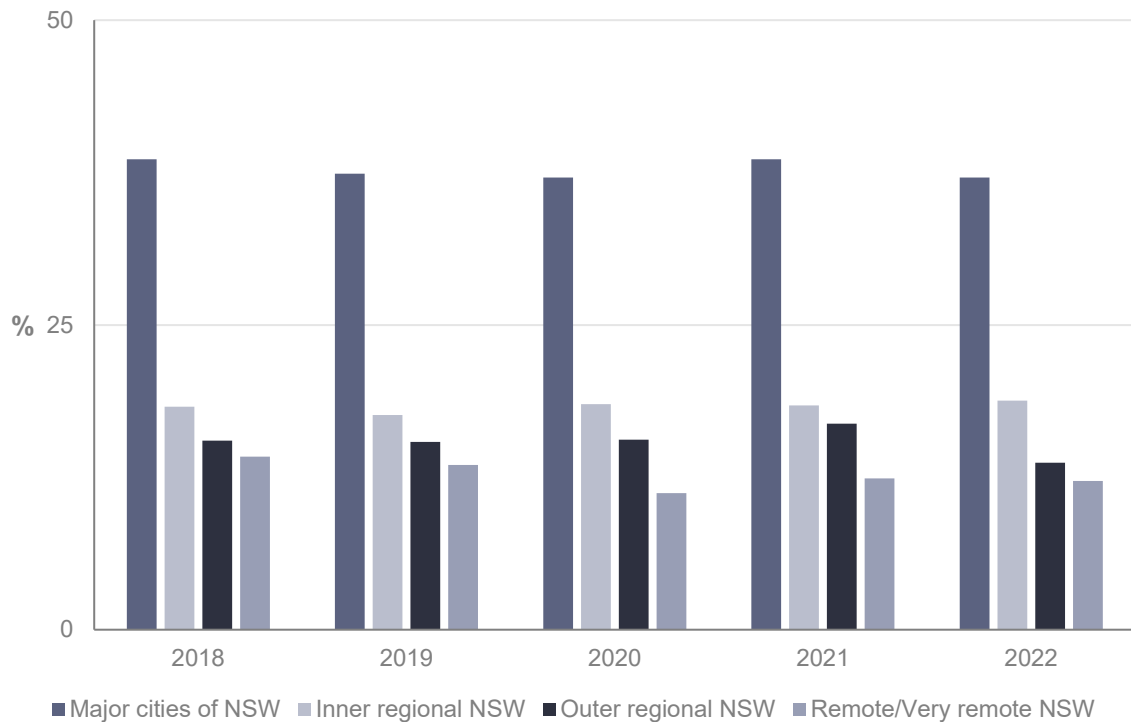
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Students in regional and remote areas are less likely to go on to further education, training or employment after leaving school than students in major cities

An indicator of successful transitions out of school is the proportion of recent school leavers (who left school the previous year) participating in further education, training, or work.

The New South Wales Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey collects information about students' main destination in the year after completing Year 12 or leaving school early. The survey provides information on education pathways, attainments, and destinations of young people in New South Wales.

Exhibit 29 shows that the recent school leavers in regional and remote areas are less likely to be in further education, training, or employment than their counterparts in major cities.

Exhibit 29: Proportion of government school leavers in further education, training, or employment six to 12 months after they finish or leave school, 2018 to 2022
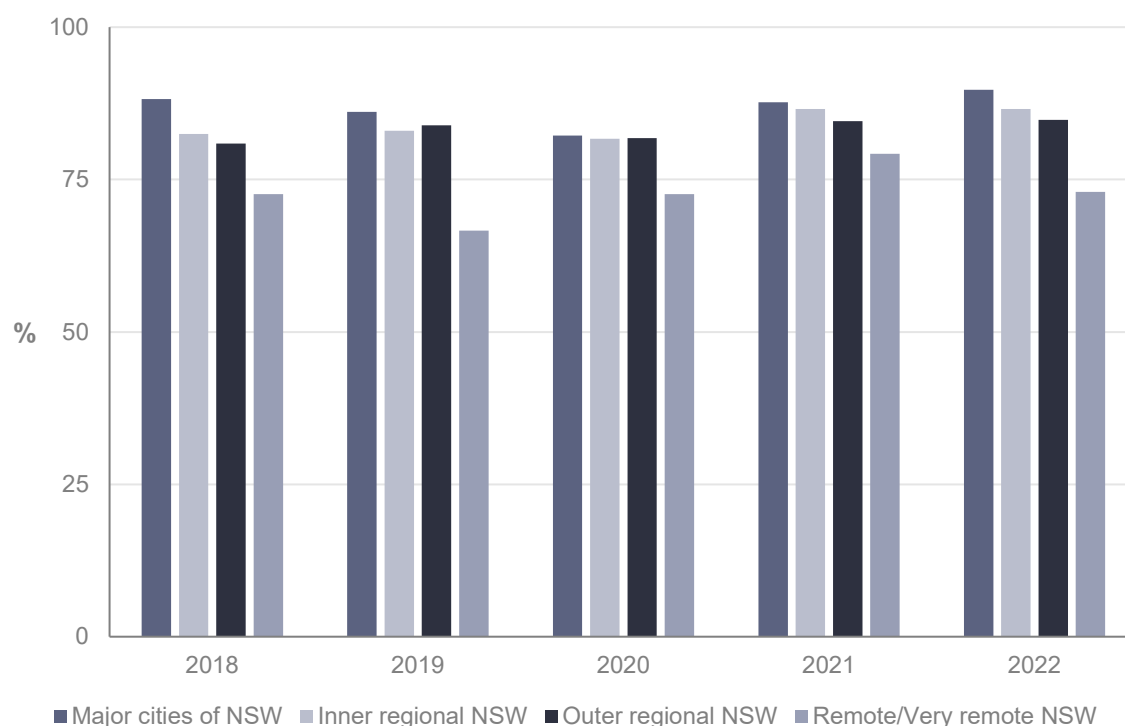
Notes: Recent school leavers are invited to take part in the post-school Destinations and Experiences Survey in the year after they complete Year 12 or leave school early. So, for 2022 survey respondents, 2021 was their final year at school.
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

5.2   Student wellbeing outcomes

Students in regional and remote areas are less likely to report positive school experiences

Students who feel supported, safe, and connected are more likely to be active participants in their learning, achieve stronger academic results and experience better life outcomes.

The department uses 'Tell Them From Me' surveys to track students' experience of their school and set indicators for student engagement. Its strategic plan set a target to increase the proportion of students reporting a sense of belonging, expectations for success and advocacy at school.

Exhibits 30 and 31 present data on these measures by remoteness. Students in major cities are more likely to report positive school experiences than students in inner regional, outer regional or remote/very remote areas.

Exhibit 30: Proportion of primary students reporting a sense of belonging, expectations for success, and advocacy at school, 2018 to 2022
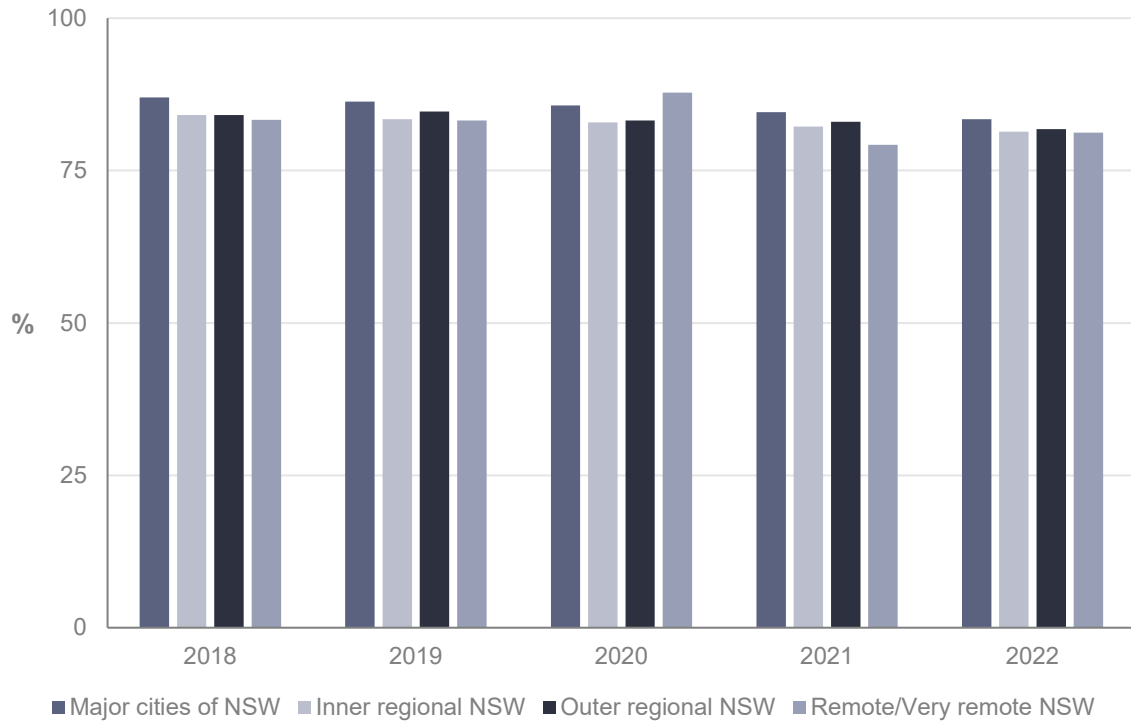
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Exhibit 31: Proportion of secondary students reporting a sense of belonging, expectations for success, and advocacy at school, 2018 to 2022
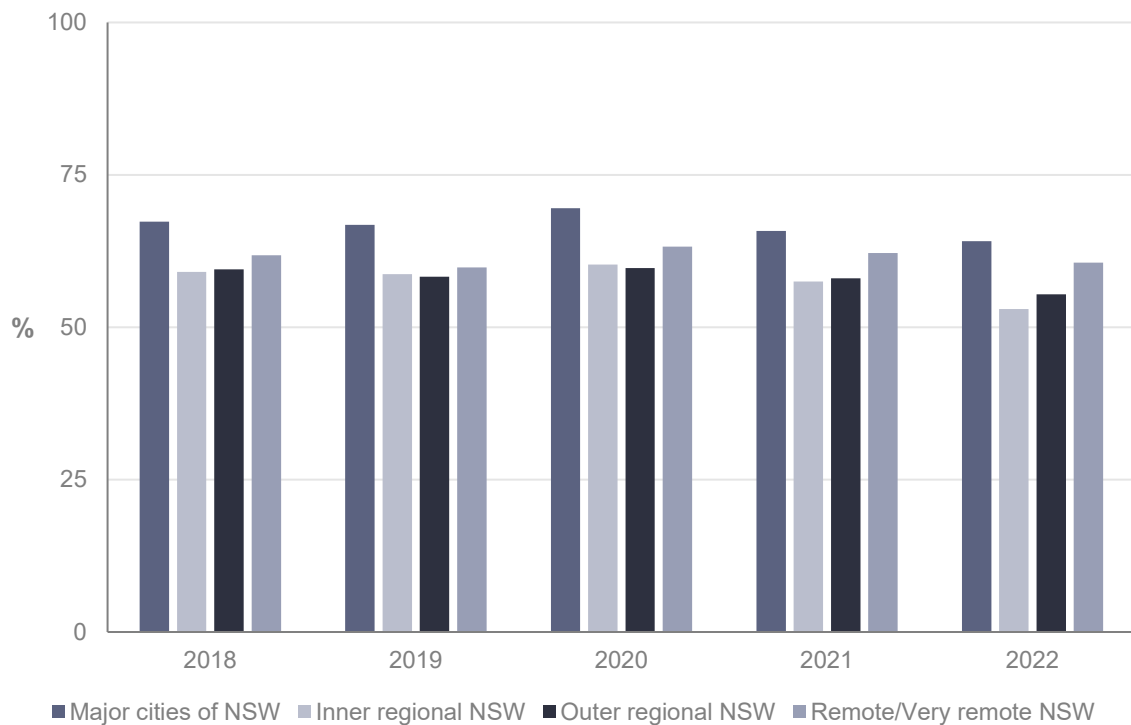
Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

The department's Child Wellbeing and Mental Health Services team facilitates access to a mental health and suicide prevention program for young people aged between 14 and 16. Regional, rural and remote schools have access to this program for students in Years 9 and 10.

Students outside of major cities are less likely to be attending school 90% of the time or more

Regular attendance at school is important for academic and other long-term outcomes. Students who do not attend regularly are less likely to complete school and more likely to experience poorer long-term health and social outcomes.

A measure of 'regular' school attendance is the proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time. This equates to missing one day of school per fortnight or one week per term.

Exhibits 32 and 33 show the proportion of students attending school regularly is higher in major cities than in inner regional, outer regional and remote/very remote areas. Regular school attendance rates in 2021 and 2022 were lower due to greater prevalence of COVID-19. In 2022, school attendance was also affected by floods and high incidence of influenza in the community.

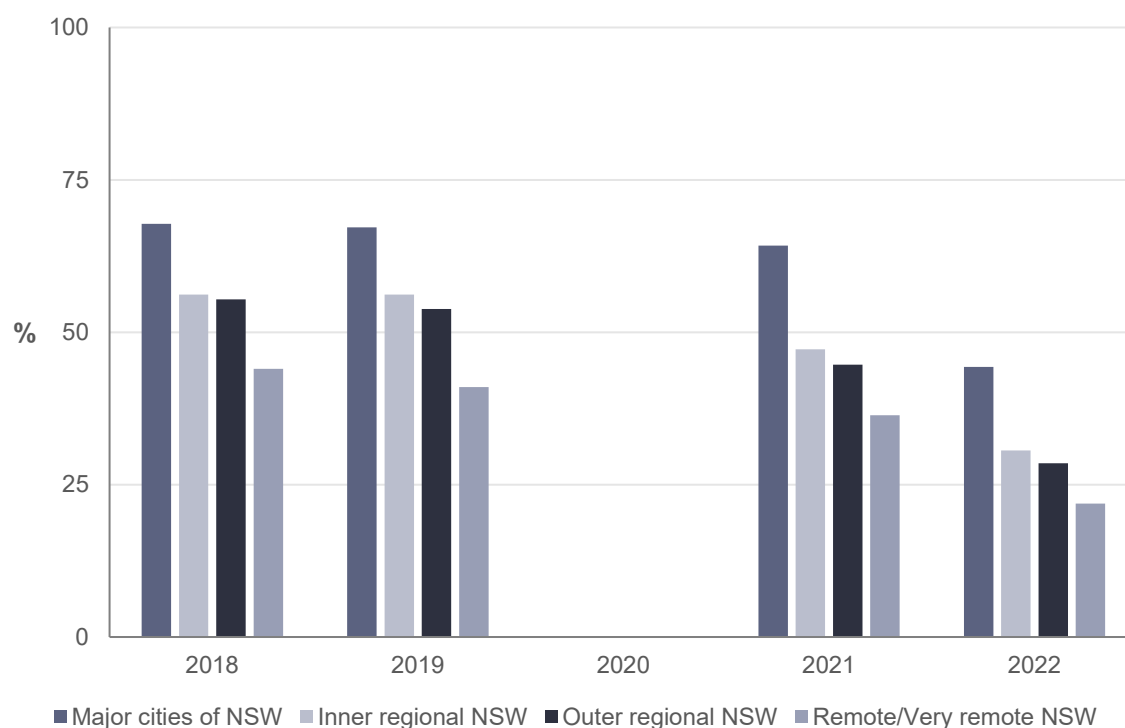**Exhibit 32: Proportion of primary students attending 90% of the time or more, 2018 to 2022**
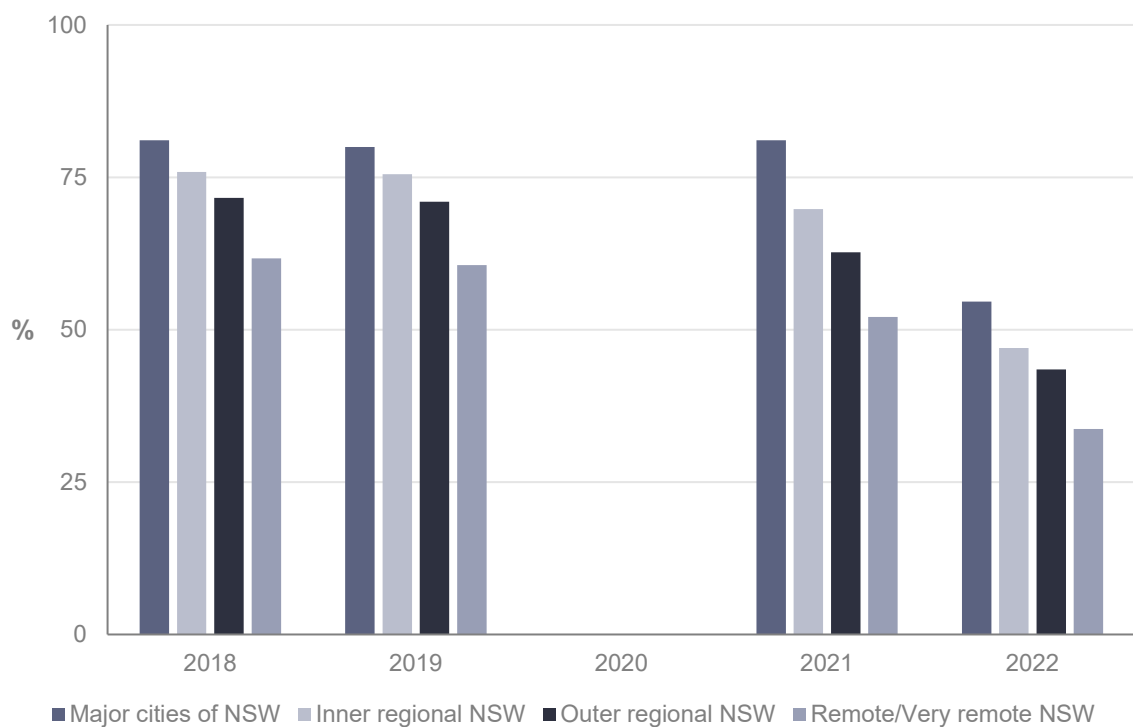
Notes: 2020 attendance data is not provided because students were encouraged to learn from home for several weeks, which lead to inconsistencies in the way attendance was being recorded by schools.

Note: Data are for Year 1 to Year 6 students in Semester one of each year shown.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Exhibit 33: Proportion of secondary students attending 90% of the time or more, 2018 to 2022

Note: 2020 attendance data is not provided because students were encouraged to learn from home for several weeks, which lead to inconsistencies in the way attendance was being recorded by schools.

Note: Data are for Year 7 to Year 10 students in Semester one of each year shown.

Source: Audit Office summary of information provided by Department of Education (unaudited).

Our 2022 audit into student attendance raised concerns that targeted support programs for schools with low attendance rates were not available for small schools, which are more likely to be outside of metropolitan Sydney. Where schools in outer regional and remote areas are targeted for additional support, this can place an additional burden for department staff to provide face-to-face support as long travel distances can be required.

Section two

Appendices

Appendix one – Response from agency

NSW GOVERNMENT | Education

Ms Margaret Crawford PSM
Auditor-General of New South Wales
GPO Box 12
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Email: c/-

DGL23/386

Dear Ms Crawford

Thank you for your correspondence of 12 July 2023, seeking the Department of Education's response to the final performance audit report on regional, rural and remote education.

The department has carefully considered the audit report and I am pleased to accept six recommendations in full and one recommendation in part. Please find enclosed the department's detailed response to each recommendation.

I would like to thank the Audit Office of NSW for their professionalism during the conduct of this performance audit, and for their collaborative approach to working with officers from the department. The audit process has been beneficial, and the report provides constructive feedback on the department's practices.

The report will help us to better ensure that regional, rural and remote students have access to the same quality of education as their metropolitan peers. The department has already begun considering the opportunities presented, and is committed to making significant progress on each of the recommendations in the nominated timeframes.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact Mr Ben Ballard, Executive Director in the Regional, Rural and Remote Education Policy unit, by email at

Yours sincerely

Murat Dizdar
SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
3 August 2023

NSW GOVERNMENT | **Education**

NSW Department of Education response to Audit recommendations

By February 2025, the Department of Education will:

Audit recommendation	Department response	Comment
1. renew its commitment to meeting the principles of the Education Act (1990) that 'every child receives an education of the highest quality' through development of a long-term strategy that addresses regional, rural and remote education	Accepted	The department remains committed to improving outcomes for regional, rural and remote learning communities. As part of this commitment, regional, rural and remote will form a key part of future long term strategies to deliver equity commitments. The Regional, Rural and Remote Education Policy team will also develop an implementation plan with a set of deliverables to support the implementation of the current strategy.
2. commence preparations for a new strategy by: • *finalising an evaluation of the 2021-24 strategy* • *publicly reporting on actions and impact of the 2021-24 strategy* • *undertaking research to inform directions, including a literature review* • *embedding stakeholder engagement arrangements to inform the development and execution of a new strategy.*	Partially accepted	The department will conduct an internal review of the Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021-2024) to inform future strategic directions for regional, rural and remote education. The department will also publish updates on its website on progress made towards the current Strategy commitments. An internal review of the existing Strategy will ensure regional, rural and remote priorities are aligned and inform directions established by the department in its strategic plan. The future direction of regional, rural and remote education in the department will be informed by data, research, and through regular engagement with key stakeholders.
3. put in place quality key performance indicators for regional, rural and remote students aligned to the department's strategic plan success measures and routinely report publicly on the regional, rural and remote indicators	Accepted	The department has prioritised equity within its new strategic plan to commence from 2024. The plan specifies outcomes for early childhood, school and post-school learners, with one or more performance targets currently under development for each outcome. Equity performance targets will mirror these headline performance targets for the majority outcomes across a range of equity groups, including rural, regional and remote students and staff. The

		department is consulting on the headline measures widely with external stakeholders. Following the development of mainstream targets, equity targets will also be set, with a focus on meaningful reduction the equity gap to the whole student or staff population group featured. Equity target performance will be available for public reporting via Budget Papers, and the department's annual reports.
4. routinely and consistently collect data in a manner that enables a standard remoteness classification to be applied across different functional areas of the department, which will support the department to: • *monitor trends and issues with access across the state* • *analyse factors driving differences in outcomes across the state* • *enable public reporting on key performance indicators.*	Accepted	The department will enable the application of a standard remoteness classification after data collection.
5. implement governance arrangements for regional, rural, and remote education that: • *enable the central coordinating unit for regional, rural and remote education to effectively undertake its assigned functions* • *enable ongoing quantitative and qualitative analysis to identify issues in program delivery to regional, rural and remote areas* • *prioritise efforts based on identified opportunities and areas of the greatest need* • *provide authority for the central coordinating unit to make decisions to direct the work of relevant business units accountable for delivering on those responsibilities*	Accepted	The department will implement the governance arrangements for regional, rural and remote education by aligning resources for the central coordination unit. The department will also undertake further quantitative and qualitative analysis on issues in program delivery to regional, rural and remote areas. An executive level governance body will make decisions on prioritisation efforts to consider areas of greatest opportunities and hold directorates to account for delivering on the assigned responsibilities.

• *clearly allocate responsibilities and hold business units accountable for delivering on those responsibilities.*		
6. *review the financial resources provided for regional, rural and remote areas to recognise the additional costs for regional, rural and remote locations*	Accepted	Funding support for the additional costs of delivery for regional, rural, and remote schools is currently provided via the Location loading. The department will review the Location loading and other resourcing to ensure that they meet the additional costs for regional, rural, and remote schools and is provided in a consistent, efficient and transparent manner.
7. *review the different modes of hybrid learning across the department and use this to develop an approach that ensures all students can access best practice modes of delivery.*	Accepted	The department will scope and develop a whole of system approach to hybrid learning. This will include reviewing global best practice approaches to hybrid/flexible learning in the context of NSW Department of Education schools. This approach will be collaboratively developed with stakeholders in order to establish a future state for hybrid/flexible learning in the context of curriculum reform and the new strategic plan.

Appendix two – About the audit

Audit objective

This audit assessed the effectiveness of the Department of Education's activities to ensure that regional, rural and remote students have access to the same quality of early childhood, school education and skills pathways as their metropolitan peers.

Audit criteria

We addressed the audit objective by assessing whether:

1. The department developed and implemented a strategy that enables regional, rural and remote students to access the same quality of early childhood education, school education, and skills pathways as students in metropolitan New South Wales.
2. The department has been addressing the complexities and needs of regional, rural and remote early childhood education, school education, and skills pathways.

Audit scope and focus

The audit focused on a range of organisational activities undertaken between 2018 and 2023. This included reviewing of the transition between the 2013 strategy 'Rural and Remote Education: A blueprint for action' and the current 'Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021–2024)'.

Audit exclusions

The audit did not assess:

- non-government schools
- disaster recovery arrangements
- activities and effectiveness of external service providers
- the merits of government policy objectives.

Audit approach

Our procedures included:

1. interviewing relevant staff at the Department of Education
2. consulting with other relevant stakeholders
3. field visits to a selection of schools in three regional, rural and remote locations
4. examining relevant departmental documents
5. examining documents from other stakeholders
6. analysing relevant data on access, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

The audit approach was complemented by quality assurance processes within the Audit Office to ensure compliance with professional standards.

Audit methodology

Our performance audit methodology is designed to satisfy Australian Audit Standard ASAE 3500 Performance Engagements and other professional standards. The standards require the audit team to comply with relevant ethical requirements and plan and perform the audit to obtain reasonable assurance and draw a conclusion on the audit objective. Our processes have also been designed to comply with requirements specified in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983*.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance provided by the Department of Education. We would particularly like to thank our liaison officers and staff who participated in interviews and provided evidence for the audit. In addition, we would like to thank the schools who participated in interviews as part of our field work.

Audit cost

The estimated cost of this audit is $465,000.

Appendix three – Performance auditing

What are performance audits?

Performance audits assess whether the activities of State or local government entities are being carried out effectively, economically, efficiently and in compliance with relevant laws.

The activities examined by a performance audit may include a government program, all or part of an audited entity, or more than one entity. They can also consider particular issues which affect the whole public sector and/or the whole local government sector. They cannot question the merits of government policy objectives.

The Auditor General's mandate to undertake audits is set out in the *Government Sector Audit Act 1983* for state government entities, and in the *Local Government Act 1993* for local government entities. This mandate includes audit of non-government sector entities where these entities have received money or other resources, (whether directly or indirectly) from or on behalf of a government entity for a particular purpose (follow-the-dollar).

Why do we conduct performance audits?

Performance audits provide independent assurance to the NSW Parliament and the public.

Through their recommendations, performance audits seek to improve the value for money the community receives from government services.

Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General who seeks input from parliamentarians, State and local government entities, other interested stakeholders and Audit Office research.

How are performance audits selected?

When selecting and scoping topics, we aim to choose topics that reflect the interests of parliament in holding the government to account. Performance audits are selected at the discretion of the Auditor-General based on our own research, suggestions from the public, and consultation with parliamentarians, agency heads and key government stakeholders. Our three-year performance audit program is published on the website and is reviewed annually to ensure it continues to address significant issues of interest to parliament, aligns with government priorities, and reflects contemporary thinking on public sector management. Our program is sufficiently flexible to allow us to respond readily to any emerging issues.

What happens during the phases of a performance audit?

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing.

During the planning phase, the audit team develops an understanding of the audit topic and responsible entities and defines the objective and scope of the audit.

The planning phase also identifies the audit criteria. These are standards of performance against which the audited entity, program or activities are assessed. Criteria may be based on relevant legislation, internal policies and procedures, industry standards, best practice, government targets, benchmarks or published guidelines.

During the fieldwork phase, audit teams will require access to books, records, or any documentation that are deemed necessary in the conduct of the audit, including confidential information which is either Cabinet information within the meaning of the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*, or information that could be subject to a claim of privilege by the State or a public official in a court of law. Confidential information will not be disclosed, unless authorised by the Auditor-General.

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At the completion of fieldwork, the audit team meets with management representatives to discuss all significant matters arising out of the audit. Following this, a draft performance audit report is prepared.

The audit team then meets with management representatives to check that facts presented in the draft report are accurate and to seek input in developing practical recommendations on areas of improvement.

A final report is then provided to the accountable authority of the audited entity(ies) who will be invited to formally respond to the report. If the audit includes a follow-the-dollar component, the final report will also be provided to the governing body of the relevant entity. The report presented to the NSW Parliament includes any response from the accountable authority of the audited entity. The relevant Minister and the Treasurer are also provided with a copy of the final report for State Government entities. For local government entities, the Secretary of the Department of Planning and Environment, the Minister for Local Government and other responsible Ministers will also be provided with a copy of the report. In performance audits that involve multiple entities, there may be responses from more than one audited entity or from a nominated coordinating entity.

Who checks to see if recommendations have been implemented?

After the report is presented to the NSW Parliament, it is usual for the entity's Audit and Risk Committee / Audit Risk and Improvement Committee to monitor progress with the implementation of recommendations.

In addition, it is the practice of NSW Parliament's Public Accounts Committee to conduct reviews or hold inquiries into matters raised in performance audit reports. The reviews and inquiries are usually held 12 months after the report received by the NSW Parliament. These reports are available on the NSW Parliament website.

Who audits the auditors?

Our performance audits are subject to internal and external quality reviews against relevant Australian standards.

The Public Accounts Committee appoints an independent reviewer to report on compliance with auditing practices and standards every four years. The reviewer's report is presented to the NSW Parliament and available on its website.

Periodic peer reviews by other Audit Offices test our activities against relevant standards and better practice.

Each audit is subject to internal review prior to its release.

Who pays for performance audits?

No fee is charged to entities for performance audits. Our performance audit services are funded by the NSW Parliament.

Further information and copies of reports

For further information, including copies of performance audit reports and a list of audits currently in-progress, please see our website www.audit.nsw.gov.au or contact us on 9275 7100.

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OUR VISION

Our insights inform and challenge government to improve outcomes for citizens.

OUR PURPOSE

To help Parliament hold government accountable for its use of public resources.

OUR VALUES

Pride in purpose

Curious and open-minded

Valuing people

Contagious integrity

Courage (even when it's uncomfortable)

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