Summary:
FRRR's submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal's (FRRR) believes that education is a fundamental right and that one's postcode should not disadvantage their access to opportunities and prosperous futures. In August 2017, FRRR had the opportunity to contribute to an independent review of rural, regional and remote education, with recommendations to be put forward to Government. This is a summary of FRRR's submission to the Review.

Background Information and General Comments on Education Issues for Rural, Regional & Remote Australia

Since 2000, FRRR has distributed over $70 million in grant funds to over 8,000 projects in rural, regional and remote communities nationally. Those projects have on average leveraged the grant with a further 3:1 in cash and in-kind contributions towards the project. Of this, 22.4% has been focussed on enhancing educational opportunities and outcomes in smaller rural, regional and remote communities, typically with populations under 10,000.

The Purpose of Education in Rural, Regional and Remote communities

The current education system is underpinned by an assumption that the desired trajectory for young people is to achieve tertiary level education qualifications and in rural, regional and remote contexts, to leave their communities to achieve this. Whilst this may be the case for a large portion of the Australian population, **FRRR would argue that the purpose of education in rural and remote settings is far more dynamic and interwoven with a region's economic and social prosperity.** There is potential to better understand the different trajectories available and sought - incorporating vocational, cultural, industry and environmental drivers. By removing the assumption of a single trajectory of education being to reach tertiary level qualification, there is great potential for anchoring education within the broader social, environmental and economic viability and sustainability of Australia's smaller and more remote communities.

This leads to the question of how success is defined and is a critical consideration from FRRR's perspective. The Rural Youth Ambassador Program is an initiative of the Country Education Project and is a solid example of youth being empowered to advocate for their priorities. They state that "Evidence suggests that the best way to raise student expectations and aspirations is to raise awareness of the opportunities they have - whether that be career options, future education opportunities or employment opportunities." This was evidenced by a Rural Youth Ambassador sharing that for her, success was not leaving her community to attend a metropolitan University; success was staying in her community and running the family multimillion dollar agricultural business. But in the education framework in which she was studying, her aspirations were not recognised as 'success'.

Rural, Regional and Remote Education: observations from grassroots philanthropy

Demand from rural and regional communities for support is increasing. Since 2000, FRRR has provided over $15million in grants focussed on improving educational outcomes in smaller rural, regional and remote communities.

Regional Australia is experiencing considerable proportional change in population levels, with many examples of both growth and decline, both creating needs. Many regional centres, particularly in resource-rich states, are growing rapidly leading to increased community demand, stemming from lack of sufficient physical and social infrastructure development. Conversely, many rural, regional and remote communities have been managing the **challenges of slow rural decline, exacerbated by long term drought and high impact natural disasters**. The social fabric is stretched as individuals struggle to repair their own homes, businesses and communities. Amidst all of this, technological and economic changes are influencing rural industries, resulting in large rural adjustment. This has a significant impact on students in rural, regional and remote areas, with many schools unable to adjust and keep up with the changing needs of students and the community.

An added challenge for smaller rural, regional and remote communities is that due to their very nature of being small and/or non-metropolitan, they have a lower capacity to raise funds and resources to undertake projects that will benefit them and address the issues they are facing. The level of socio-economic disadvantage of rural and regional families can also be higher than in major cities.

The negative impacts on youth and family development, levels of community connectedness and wellbeing, can become intergenerational if not proactively and locally addressed.

Initiatives that support the ideas of youth to be implemented and which engage children and families in early learning can have long-term educational benefits and help to retain youth in rural communities. Programs and activities that create opportunities for social connection, mental health and wellbeing, positive peer relationships, education and meaningful engagement in the future of a person's community can have a significant impact on increasing levels of engagement, sense of belonging and social inclusion.

Philanthropy has the ability to help rural, regional and remote schools respond to local needs, take advantage of local opportunities and be able to deliver the basics to support core learning and student aspiration. Funds provided through our granting programs help schools to provide quality service and equipment, filling the gaps left by government funding models and blanket focus areas. Analysis shows that philanthropic funds are often critical to a project's success. Grants are often leveraged, enabling communities to secure additional funds and resources to implement their projects and deliver home grown solutions to local issues.

Size of Community and its influence on Quality of Educational Opportunity

In March 2011, Professor John Halsey, Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities wrote the following in a review of School Funding:

"Rural, regional and remote schools, particularly those with small enrolments, multi-grade level classes and often significant numbers of relatively inexperienced staff, typically face many challenges when major changes in education have to be implemented."

The challenges facing these schools, as identified in The Educational Needs of Children and Young People in Rural and Remote Areas of Australia: MF Philanthropic Services June 2009 include isolation due to distance, limited access to quality educational opportunities and curriculum diversity (particularly art, music, maths and science) due to lack of qualified educational professionals and specialist resources, limited financial resources and subsidies that support participation in education and low levels of exposure to career opportunities and pathways.

Climatic factors, the restructuring of communities and global economic impacts have further compounded these barriers. Schools in rural, regional and remote areas have lower enrolment numbers and as such lower operating budgets – yet often complex needs and dynamic operating environments where communities are impacted by drought, natural disaster, agricultural innovations such as automation, industry closures, and, a hollowing out of working age population.

Case study

FRRR supported the Weilmoringle Public School to access an extension program for isolated schools, enabling them to participate in 'Back-to-Bourke Small School's Super Camp' in which 120 students from 10 small, isolated schools from across the western region of NSW came together for three full days of workshops, covering science, music and dance, team sports and art. Some students do not have anyone of the same gender or age in their school, it gave them a rare opportunity to interact with students their own age and learning ability, and participate in activities that they don't normally get to experience. While the focus was on the isolated students, the benefits were felt more broadly, with staff from the remote schools having the opportunity to engage in professional development, spending time with other teaching staff, and students from the Sydney schools choosing to return to the remote schools to do their Service Learning projects later in the year.

The critical role of Early Years Education

Whilst FRRR recognise the need for defined parameters to guide the Review, FRRR believes that the exclusion of early years' education from the Review presents a significant gap in the ability to fully explore the potential for expanding and improving aspirations, achievements and opportunities for regional, rural and remote students. School readiness is a key indicator of future success and in rural and remote settings there is strong evidence to suggest that more needs to be done to support smaller communities to provide quality early years education and school transition programs.

Recent research shows that early childhood education has positive impacts on all children and is a key strategy for overcoming the impact of early disadvantage on educational outcomes. Early years' education takes place in the community and is a key engagement period with families and broader community which carries into Primary School. Increasingly, early years' education is being delivered in a primary school setting, and is being taught alongside primary and early secondary years in home school rooms through distance education and e-kindy programs.

Rural Education Project 2016 – Philanthropic collaboration to understand role and impact

In 2016, FRRR, Schools Plus, Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF) and Sidney Myer Fund worked together to better understand challenges facing rural education and how funders can be more effective in targeting their philanthropic support to really have an impact.

Three years' worth of data from each of the organisations, was extracted and analysed by skilled volunteers from Origin. We looked at education projects funded and not funded and education projects from schools, Not for Profit organisations, and early childhood providers.

An overview of applications and grants awarded across the four philanthropic organisations, over three years, showed:

- 2,263 requests totalling almost $24M / 609 grants totalling over $7.6M
- Student engagement in learning, wellbeing, and early years are the highest areas of need and support
- Consulting and professional development fees and equipment account for the majority of use of funds
- Only 13% projects had a specific Indigenous focus
- There is a high level of unmet need – 74% of applications remain unfunded
- Not for Profit's play an important role in the education partnership, particularly in the community and family engagement, student engagement in learning, and student well-being. This is consistent with the areas that schools often struggle with through lack of time, skill or resources. This matched with highest request in the budget to cover fees.

The six major themes for funding requested were

Area	Description
Student Engagement in Learning	Improving ability to learn, involvement in activities, materials and conditions to generate better quality learning
Early Childhood Education	Ensuring children have early learning experiences for a better start to full-time school education
Student Wellbeing	Improving students' social, emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual wellbeing, and potential to flourish
Family and Community Engagement	Effective family and community engagement and connection to promote improved student learning
Effective Teaching and Leadership	Initiatives focussing on improving teaching and leadership practice, not funded by government, to create and sustain student-centred learning, achievement & provision
Innovation in STEM	Innovation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, not currently funded by government

The **highest numbers of applications to our education programs were from schools, followed by Not for Profits** who were either delivering programs within schools or were running education programs outside of the formal schools setting.

The area of Early Childhood Education is dominated by preschools/early learning centres, but the number of applications received also showed that Not for Profits are working in this area and increasingly schools are entering this space.

The theme of effective teaching and leadership, innovation in STEM, student engagement in learning and student wellbeing are the dominant areas of focus for schools, whereas Not for Profits are conspicuous in the Family and Community engagement segment, student engagement in learning and student wellbeing focus areas.

Student engagement was the highest, closely followed by early childhood education which we know has a completely different funding model to schools. Effective teaching accounted for 5% of requests for support but 10% of projects supported indicated that the four organisations considered this to be vitally important to education outcomes for rural, regional and remote students. Requests to support projects focused on STEM were consistent with the rise in government attention and shift in policy.

Initially it was surprising to see that the highest percentage of funds was to be used consulting fees and not on building and infrastructure, but there are a couple of considerations: Some of the larger grants ($10,000 and over) were to cover consultant fees or specialist fees. Moreover, a high number of applications request funds to cover the cost of bringing someone in to provide the expertise schools didn't have, therefore **building the skills and capacity of the staff.**

FRRR Program Specific data

FRRR has conducted a number of specific education programs as well as supporting education through general programming; with the most recent, **dedicated education program being REAPing Rewards**. This program, is funded through a collective model which supports a holistic approach to education, beginning in early childhood by ensuring children are school ready. The program supports primary and secondary education, VET and other programs, ensuring equal access to the resources and opportunities available to metropolitan students. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is used in the assessment process by FRRR as an indicator of disadvantage.

Through the first six rounds of the program, **1,056 applications requested more than $8.4 million in funding**. To date, $1,607,173 has been distributed to 249 education related projects in rural, regional and remote Australia.

Applicants to the REAPing Rewards program requested funds to support the delivery of locally initiated education projects in their communities. These requests followed the same themes / categories as the combined research of the four philanthropic organisations listed previously with the addition of one category - equipment and infrastructure, assets and facilities to support student learning and outcomes.

We've seen that community-led projects achieve lasting outcomes. Every dollar has an impact and draws additional community support, while every grant enables another community to achieve a locally-developed solution to a pressing educational-related issue for their community.

Analysis shows that philanthropic funds are often critical to a project's success. Grants are leveraged and enable communities to secure additional funds and resources – for every dollar granted, communities leveraged on average a further $3 of support.

Specific Responses to Consultation Questions

Curriculum and assessment

Implementation of Australian Curriculum has caused gaps for some schools for which they have requested funding assistance from philanthropy to help address.

In 2016, Mt Gambier High School (SA) indicated that as Year 7 is not part of secondary schooling in South Australia, it did not align with Australian Curriculum, therefore, Year 8 teachers were delivering Year 7 science concepts to their students, rather than focusing on the Australian Curriculum, while Year 7 students in the region did not have access to laboratories, which is a component of Year 7 curriculum. This meant that primary schools were not able to cover significant sections of the Year 7 curriculum, as they lacked the facilities to do so. Primary school teachers did not have the necessary knowledge or skills to teach these concepts.

FRRR provided funding through the REAPing Rewards to enable the High School and the Blue Lake Educational Partnership to implement local science teacher training, and deliver science specific activities and concepts to students, exposing Year 7's to science laboratory equipment and real-world application, and easing the transition into secondary school. In addition, they planned to establish Professional Learning Communities between Primary and Secondary teachers to support each other, support sustainability, quality of learning, task design and moderation and development of units of work linked to local industry, allowing students to apply learning and strengthen their understanding before commencing secondary school.

Teachers and Teaching

One of the main areas of requests for funding from Rural Education project data was to fund projects that supported effective Teaching and Leadership - Initiatives focussing on improving teaching and leadership practice, not funded by government, to create and sustain student-centred learning, achievement & provision.

The above project illustrates an example of a project through which teachers and school leaders have been empowered to trial locally based ideas to help address local issues.

Leaders and leadership

Some of the reasons critical to the success of schools in rural, regional and remote areas include being strongly lead by communities in which they are situated, having long term strong leadership, and a commitment and practice of working with others both within the education system and in their community.

Small Rural School Principals and lead teachers should have access to training around how to be a leader not just for the school but for the community. They need the skill to take advantage of economic opportunities presented when mining/tourism/corporates that come into the town so the long-term sustainability for the school and community not just a once off building scheme.

Parental and teacher attitude, and community expectation have a significant impact on student aspiration. Youth aspiration is based around exposure to opportunity. Schools that have policies that facilitate student engagement, through the provision of programs, extra-curricular programs and student support have greater levels of achievement. Provision and taking advantage of excursions/incursions support access to wide variety of experiences and help build and support student aspiration.

The curriculum needs to be based on contemporary thinking that "every child can/will succeed". Staff, students and community need to have a 'can do' attitude and ask 'why not?!'

Subject offering that is relevant to both student interest and future aspiration is critical for keeping students engaged at a senior level and keeping them within the community for as long as possible, without the need to move away to complete their schooling. Curriculum that is being driven by young people as co-design principles is successful in some areas as well as schools coming together to pool teaching and classroom resources to ensure that students get the subject selection they want/need to study, therefore they stay and the community thrives.

Groups of schools or communities can come together to change mindsets. The purpose and place of education, schools and educators in rural, regional remote areas is more than just curriculum delivery; it's not just getting a job but a culture of creating communities with vibrancy and diversity, providing quality services that help stimulate positive and sustainable economic outcomes. Providing an education that supports and enables entrepreneurship, teaches analytical, critical and lateral thinking skills together with personal skills such as resilience will support students to become members of community that create and support that culture.

One of the main areas of request for funding from Rural Education project data was for projects that support effective family and community engagement and connection to promote improved student learning. Schools need more support to engage communities; to create a School–Community interface that strengthen and diversifying the type of connections that become true school and community partnerships.

Some simple examples of this include:
- Schools as community spaces - holding community classes in the school buildings after school, I.e. computer classes, cooking classes, community book club in the library
- Creating opportunities for community and business to be involved in curriculum delivery. I.e. Mensheds delivering a woodwork/metalwork/hydroponic program at the school or parents providing 'recreation' classes one afternoon a week on rotation for a term

The REAPing Rewards project acquittal reports have shown that the program has improved access to educational resources and learning support for students through various projects including the provision of literacy and numeracy resources, enhancing outdoor learning spaces for young children, enabling flexible learning programs and supporting resilience, mentoring and local student leadership programs. The program enhanced access to educational opportunities by supporting student participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) extension programs, and facilitating opportunity for students to participate in cultural, arts and music programs both locally and in major centres.

For example, Tingoora Primary P & C Association, Queensland told us that, through their project, they aimed to implement a targeted, individualised, intensive, focused teaching program in literacy in small groups with teachers' aides. They found that students who participated in this project experienced a stronger sense of engagement, inclusion and participation. There were notable improvements in student's social and emotional wellbeing and higher grades were observed.

At Wellstead Primary School, Western Australia, we supported the implementation of a music program. They reported that student engagement and attendance increased over the year with a 15% rise in regular attendance. They attributed this to student desire to attend school and participate in the music activities provided by the school. Through the grant the school was able to trial and evaluate the program. They received such positive feedback that the school was working to continue the program beyond the period of funding and embed the program into the ongoing curriculum.

Information and Communication Technology

Across six rounds of the REAPing Rewards program, the most common request from Primary Schools was to support information, communication and technology equipment (ICT) and literacy/numeracy resources, often with those literacy/numeracy resources being software or application to be used on equipment requested.

Equipment such as smart boards, video conferencing/Skype, offer wonderful opportunities to broaden student learning and subject offering but applicants tell us it is important to balance these with face to face tuition and linking subject matter to the lived experience and aspirations of students. The provision of the technology is only a tool and needs to be integrated into lesson planning. Students themselves have also told us that teachers must be fully supported and trained in how to use ICT to enable them to use the full potential of technology.

Barriers to regional, rural and remote schools realising the full potential benefits of ICT include **reliable connectivity and access to equipment**, with the recent example of testing of online NAPLAN testing an example of schools not having the equipment, connectivity or sufficient bandwidth to successful participate. The cost of equipment and the licences for educational software, for schools and parents is also a barrier.

At the 2017 ABC Heywire Summit a group of young people came up with the idea of Tech Hub in the Scrub. They identified that access to technology for remote communities was a barrier to education. They developed the following idea to help remote communities create tech hubs so that students can access the technology they need to further their education.

"People in cities and regional centres take for granted that they have reliable access to technology and the internet. But for people living in remote communities, this vital infrastructure is often unavailable. This is a significant barrier to education for students living in these areas. Many banks and businesses update their computer hardware on a regular basis. The old hardware, which is often still functional, is stored, recycled or thrown away. What if instead it was donated to communities that desperately need it? By establishing tech hubs, people in the community would be able to access the internet, use email and internet banking and most importantly, further their education. We want to provide computer hardware and Wi-Fi to remote communities." FRRR has subsequently provided grants for remote communities to adopt this idea.

Entrepreneurship and schools

With the rapid changing face of the workforce in the next 5- 20 years, there is growing need to prepare students to be part of a flexible workforce, with changing roles and careers over a life time. They need to be digitally literate, have critical and analytical thinking skills, be creative, empathetic, with good presentation and speaking skills – need to be able to demonstrate the so called soft skills and have resilience and problem-solving skills to be able to deal with complex problems.

For older students, supporting aspiration by showing them what can be achieved, demystifying the process, supporting those who have done it to come back and share their experience, providing excursions to explore the potential avenues that are open to them, and supporting opportunities through programs such as ABC Heywire Summit, the Heywire Trailblazers and Foundation for Young Australian's Y-Lab.

Other ideas include supporting links with external organisations, such as Kids Thrive.
- Links to business/corporate to fund and/or provide space for experimenting, testing, prototype production, exploring various options
- Giving space to solve 'real problems in real time', ways to experiment and learn through failure.
- The development of micro networks, connections and communication.
- Partnerships between schools, government and philanthropy or business with significant investment of money over a long period of time

This is a key area of opportunity that can link schools and educational outcomes to regional prosperity and harness the different purposes and versions of success and one that we would endorse further development of.

Improving access—enrolments, clusters, distance education, boarding

Through our granting programs, we have seen many examples of projects that have been successful in delivering excellent educational outcomes for students when funding has enabled schools to support their work force and leadership to act on local linkages and joint programs or to work together with community to solve a problem for the long term and not just short-term solutions.

There would be great potential in supporting school alliances, or clusters, which consist of smaller schools, larger schools, primary and secondary, and early childhood education providers, as well as vocational schools.

Transitioning beyond school

One of the sub themes of requests for funding from Rural Education project data was transition to primary school, to high school, to post-secondary destinations. Each point of transition is a critical point at which students may become disengaged with the education process. Each student may require a different level of support to successfully transition. Schools should be supported to provide individual programs for students where needed to ensure that they do not become disengaged.

Closing Comment

FRRR is unique in that we focus our work to support communities who experience disadvantage due to geography and scale. A challenge for small and/or rural, regional and remote communities is that due to their very nature of being small and/or non-metropolitan, they have a lower capacity to raise funds and resources to undertake projects that will benefit them and address the issues they are facing.

Rural and remote students are a small population and although they have their champions, they have struggled to make their specific needs known to the rest of the country. **FRRR has an opportunity to use the insights gained from applications across our granting programs to provide support for those taking on an advocacy role on behalf of rural, regional and remote students, their families and educators**