Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW

A scan of the evidence: 2025



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Purpose

In 2025, the Regional, Rural, Remote and Unique Settings Directorate released 2 reports that provided a high-level synthesis of research on regional, rural and remote education: the internal report *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A scan of the evidence* (staff only) and its external counterpart, *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A resource for researchers*.

These reports reviewed evidence from 2013 to 2024, summarising key themes and identifying research gaps specific to regional, rural and remote education. The reports noted that these themes have remained largely consistent over the past 30 years and confirmed an ongoing shortage of evidence on effective practices in regional, rural and remote education in NSW and across Australia more broadly.

This update includes a review of evidence released during 2025, including academic studies, government reports and statistical data, related to the key themes.

Key themes in regional, rural and remote education

The key themes identified through the 2025 reports were; early learning, student outcomes, post-school pathways, teacher workforce and system supports. These themes align closely with the priorities outlined in *Our Plan for NSW Public Education* and *Research for NSW Public Education*, underscoring persistent gaps and highlighting areas where further research and policy development are essential to better support regional, rural and remote learning communities.

Early learning – the importance of foundational education in regional, rural and remote areas and its impact on long-term student success.

Student outcomes – analysis of academic and social outcomes for students in regional, rural and remote areas, highlighting both challenges and successes.

Post-school pathways – a review of the opportunities and support systems available for students transitioning from school to further education and employment.

Teacher workforce – an exploration of the recruitment, retention and professional development of teachers in regional, rural and remote schools, focusing on the unique challenges they face.

System supports – analysis of the systemic supports that are in place, or lacking, to enhance the educational experiences of regional, rural and remote students.

The rural equity gap

A clear gap exists in the experiences and outcomes of students in regional, rural and remote schools compared to their metropolitan peers throughout the student lifecycle. While factors like lower socioeconomic status contribute to this gap, there remains a strong moral imperative to ensure equitable access to positive educational outcomes

regardless of where a student is geographically located. *Our Plan for NSW Public Education* focuses on creating an outstanding, equitable education system where every student can learn, grow, and belong.

To provide clarity and consistency in identifying and addressing these disparities, the department uses the *Australian Statistical Geography Standard* (ASGS) to define and describe regional, rural and remote areas. This standardised approach allows for consistent location classification, enabling reliable comparisons data analysis across reports and studies. Without it, there can be inconsistencies or differences that can make it harder to understand and address educational gaps.

The department's *Remoteness data standard* uses the ASGS to ensure consistent data analysis, supporting targeted efforts to close the rural equity gap and improve student outcomes. Applying the ASGS framework to regional, rural and remote education provides a reliable basis for informing program and policy improvements.

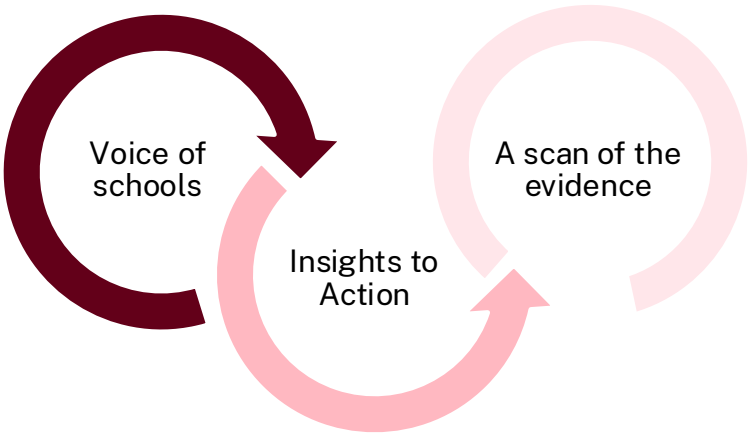
The ASGS classifies Australia into 5 remoteness categories based on access to services: Major cities, Inner regional, Outer regional, Remote, and Very remote. This document uses ASGS terminology when reported as such. If the original source uses general terms like 'regional' or 'remote', those terms are retained.

Next steps

In 2026, *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A scan of the evidence: 2025* has been published as a single document for both internal departmental support teams and external researchers. It provides valuable insights into key issues relevant to the department, aligned with *Our Plan for NSW Public Education*.

This scan is complemented by the department's *Regional, Rural, Remote and Unique Settings Insights to Action - 2025 Report* (staff only). The Insights to Action report analysed existing system data in conjunction with local engagements to capture the lived experience of regional, rural and remote staff and schools. The report highlights what is working well and identifies areas where further support is needed to drive improvements in regional, rural and remote education.

Future updates to this scan will explore the themes highlighted by the Insights to Action report. These updates will continue to expand the evidence base and help researchers stay informed about the department's key issues for regional, rural and remote education.



Early learning

Key themes 2013 - 2024

- Availability of services
- Quality of services
- Workforce attraction and retention
- Thin markets and underserved communities
- Inequitable administrative burden
- School readiness

To read more about these key themes, see pages 13-14 of *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A resource for researchers*.

Evidence scan 2025

What does the latest evidence say about early learning in regional, rural and remote contexts?

〉Availability of services

Families in regional, rural and remote areas continue to face barriers to accessing early learning services. The greatest challenge with childcare access occurs in regional areas and lower-income communities, where workforce shortages and limited childcare infrastructure are also prevalent (Tham et. al., 2025). The reporting discusses rurality using terms such as 'regional' and 'outer metropolitan' but does not use a standard approach, such the *Australian Statistical Geography Standard* (ASGS), which is used by the department to define and classify these areas, as described in the *Remoteness data standard*.

〉Workforce attraction and retention

Sustaining and growing the early education and care workforce in regional, rural and remote areas is a challenge due to limited access to casual relief staff, which makes it difficult to support release for mentoring and induction. Early learning staff in these areas also experience professional isolation due to limited opportunities for collegial learning, challenges in accessing backfill for professional development, and often a shortage of nearby degree-qualified colleagues (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2025; HumanAbility, 2025).

〉School readiness/developmental vulnerability

The 2025 evidence scan showed that children in regional, rural, remote and socio-economically disadvantaged areas are more likely to be at-risk of developmental vulnerability when starting school (NSW Department of Communities and Justice, 2025).

The 2025 *Australian Early Development Census* revealed significant developmental gaps between children in Major cities and those in Remote or Very remote areas. Children in Remote communities are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, with a 13.3 percentage point higher vulnerability rate overall and a 12.2 percentage point gap specifically in language and cognitive skills compared to children in Major cities (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025).

Children showing specific developmental vulnerabilities at school entry have a significantly higher likelihood of developing mental disorders later in childhood, with regional and socio-economic factors affecting these risks (Jakob et. al, 2025).

〉Early childhood experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

A 14-year longitudinal study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children shows that geographic location influences their early childhood development. The study identified several positive benefits associated with living in more remote areas:

- children in Remote and Very remote areas of Australia had higher cultural connection (80%), compared to those in Major cities (46%) over 70% of children in very remote areas spoke an Indigenous language, versus fewer than 10% in Major cities and Inner regional areas
- speaking an Indigenous language was linked to stronger and more consistent social and emotional wellbeing from middle childhood through adolescence (Rogers et.al., 2025).

Key questions for future research

- What works to effectively support children's learning and developmental outcomes during the transition into the early years of school in regional, rural and remote communities?
- What are the impacts of, and optimal designs for, alternate delivery models for increasing supply of high-quality, inclusive and culturally responsive early learning services in under-served regional, rural and remote communities?

Student outcomes

Key themes 2013 - 2024

- Student achievement
- Attendance
- Curriculum
- Intersectionality

To read more about these key themes, see pages 15-16 of *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A resource for researchers*.

Evidence scan 2025

What does the latest evidence say about student outcomes in regional, rural and remote contexts?

〉School satisfaction

Geographical location influences school satisfaction among students, with 17- to 18-year-olds living in capital cities more likely to report being very or quite satisfied with their school compared to those living in regional and rural areas. School satisfaction comes from positive experiences with teachers, peers, school facilities and a variety of school activities. These factors help create a caring and engaging environment where students feel a sense of belonging (Fu et al., 2025).

〉Participation and attainment in NAPLAN

Priority equity groups, including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students living in regional, rural and remote areas, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, continue to have lower participation rates in NAPLAN testing compared to their peers. Students from Very remote areas and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students participate at considerably lower rates than the national average (Groves, et al., 2025).

In 2025, students from Remote or Very remote areas scored lower on average than students from other parts of Australia across all NAPLAN domains and year levels assessed (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025).

〉Intersectionality

A new study tracking over 26,000 students across Australia highlights how different equity groups overlap. It found that 61% of all participating students belonged to at least one equity group. Among the 9% of students who reported living in a regional area:

- 73% identified with at least one other equity group
- 15% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 18% identified as a person with a disability (Doery & Edwards, 2024).

〉Student outcomes

A longitudinal study of 9,000 NSW students from Year 7 to 12 (2017-2022), reported in 2025, found that geographical location significantly influences factors related to school completion. The study defined 'rural students' as those from Outer regional, Remote and Very remote locations, and 'regional' students as those from Inner regional locations. It found that students from rural areas perceived lower teaching support and exhibited lower completion intentions compared to students in Major cities. Additionally, perceived teaching support in Year 7 had a stronger direct and indirect influence on completion and university intentions for rural and regional students, while academic skills were the strongest predictor of completion in Major cities (Collie, Martin & Flesken, 2025).

Key questions for future research

- Noting the unique challenges regional, rural and remote communities face, including limited resources and teacher shortages, how can schools drive better educational outcomes, opportunities and experiences for regional, rural and remote students, especially when there is overlapping equity and support needs.
- How can alternative educational models, such as flexible learning environments, community-based programs/resources and local interagency partnerships, be leveraged to support the attendance, engagement and wellbeing of students in regional, rural and remote communities?

Post-school pathways

Key themes 2013 - 2024

- Vocational vs. academic pathways
- Subject availability
- Location
- Teaching support and guidance

To read more about these key themes, see pages 17-18 of *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A resource for researchers*.

Evidence scan 2025

What does the latest evidence say about post-school pathways in regional, rural and remote contexts?

〉Educational aspirations

Regional and remote students are more likely than their metropolitan peers to change their aspirations away from attending university in later secondary school, often due to challenges such as the need to relocate, financial constraints and uncertainty about future plans (Arnup, Doery & Edwards, 2024).

Connection to community and networks can be a barrier to participating in higher education and vocational education. In regional and remote areas, even short distances and the complexity of travel can significantly limit post-school participation (Webb et. al, 2024).

While the findings of the Webb et. al. (2024) study were reported in 2024, they rely on data collected from 2013, which may limit their relevance. Changes in policies, demographics, and resources since then mean the results may not accurately reflect current conditions or challenges in regional, rural and remote education. Ongoing and more recent data collection is essential to ensure that analysis and decision-making are informed by current conditions.

〉Importance of career guidance

A study of Australian Year 12 students highlighted important insights about the availability and effectiveness of career advice. A key theme was students' desire for improved access to quality career support, especially through individual or group

sessions with career advisers. This is particularly relevant for regional students, where such resources are often limited (Doery, Arnup & Edwards, 2025).

Schools' confidence in meeting career guidance needs is linked to having a specific teacher with responsibility for providing career guidance, a role more commonly reported by metropolitan than non-metropolitan schools. While about 92% of schools felt at least somewhat confident in supporting students' careers and study plans, schools without a career adviser reported no complete confidence. Schools in Major cities showed higher complete confidence (22.1%) than non-metropolitan schools (16.1%), and rural schools were more likely to feel less confident (11.8%) compared to metropolitan schools (4.5%) (Hillman & Edwards, 2024). Rurality is mentioned in the report using the terms 'major cities' and 'non-metropolitan' but the report does not define these terms or clarify whether they align with the ASGS.

〉Post-school outcomes

The national *Graduate Outcomes Survey* of recent higher education graduates shows a positive trend for regional and remote students, who reported higher full-time and overall employment rates (80.6%) 4–6 months after completing their undergraduate studies, compared to 71.7% for metropolitan graduates (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2025).

Young people in regional, rural and remote areas, especially young men and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in remote regions, have higher rates of disengagement from work and study than those in major cities. From 2000 to 2024, disengagement among young men in these areas rose from 5% to 9%, while it fell for young women from 17% to 13%. In 2021, rates of 20- to 24-year-olds not in employment, education, or training (NEET) ranged from under 5% in major cities to 30% in remote regions, with the highest rates in communities with larger Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander populations (Akyol et. al, 2025).

Key questions for future research

- Within the context of regional, rural and remote settings, what school and community support systems and approaches best support positive post-school transitions for students in regional, rural and remote communities?
- What school and/or community-based strategies are most effective in expanding regional, rural and remote students' real-world access to diverse post-school pathways so they can make informed, achievable decisions about their futures?

Teacher workforce

Key themes 2013 - 2024

- Workforce shortages are more pronounced
- Societal factors
- School leadership
- Preparedness for the classroom
- Pre-service teaching placements
- Tailored induction and mentoring for early career teachers

To read more about these key themes, see pages 19-21 of *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A resource for researchers*.

Evidence Scan 2025

What does the latest evidence say about the teacher workforce in regional, rural and remote contexts?

〉Teacher recruitment and retention

A review of teacher attrition using linked administration tax data shows that overall teacher attrition is relatively low and not increasing (Buckley & Griselda, 2025). Encouragingly, attrition among early career teachers has nearly halved since 2009.

Currently, the annual attrition rate for teachers is lower than the turnover rate in all other occupation groups. However, attrition is concentrated in certain settings, with teachers working in very remote schools being more likely to leave the profession (7%, compared to 5.2% for those in major cities).

〉Out-of-field teaching challenges

Higher rates of out-of-field teaching occur in Remote, Very remote and Outer regional areas because schools in these locations have more difficulty hiring teachers with the right specialisations.

Data reported in 2025 showed that 54% of teachers in Remote and Very remote areas reported teaching 'some out-of-field' compared to 49% of teachers in Outer regional schools, 44% in Inner regional schools and 40% in Major cities (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2025).

〉Leader wellbeing

The *Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Survey* (Dicke, Kidson & Marsh, 2025) reported that in 2024 school leaders from Very remote schools are more likely than the average of all school leaders to report severe anxiety, exposure to threats of violence and intention to quit. School leaders from Remote and Very remote schools, rated teacher shortages as the third and fourth highest source of stress respectively.

Key questions for future research

- What strategies are most effective for attracting, retaining, and sustaining the teacher workforce in regional, rural and remote areas? How can the system, local community and school/early childhood environments support the successful delivery of these strategies to maintain the workforce in regional, rural and remote areas.
- How can best practice training and professional learning for regional, rural and remote staff be defined, delivered, measured and scaled for impact?

System supports

Key themes 2013 - 2024

- Inadequate evidence
- Contextualised support
- Resourcing and funding

To read more about these key themes, see pages 22-23 of *Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW: A resource for researchers*.

Evidence Scan 2025

What does the latest evidence say about system supports for regional, rural and remote education?

〉Education funding and quality

The OECD reported in 2025 that from 2015 to 2022, most OECD and partner countries increased spending per student in primary and lower secondary schools. However, the report points out that higher spending does not always mean better education quality. In the case of small schools in rural areas, the increase mainly reflects the higher costs of operating in these locations (OECD, 2025).

A report by Molina, Doecke & Hildebrandt (2025) highlights the complexity of funding the Australian school system to address the disproportionately higher barriers to learning faced by students in rural and remote communities, as well as the compounding effects of disadvantage, in order to overcome educational inequality.

〉Mental health and wellbeing in schools

The 2025 review of the *NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2022-2024* reported that many students view mental health as central to their wellbeing. However, students in rural communities feel unsupported due to long waits, unaffordable services and a lack of culturally responsive care (Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, 2025). The report mentions rurality using terms such as ‘regional’ and ‘rural’ but does not define these terms or clarify whether they align with the ASGS..

〉Access to specialist services

Students with disability living in regional, rural and remote communities often face challenges due to limited or no local access to support and professional services. The need to travel long distances and spend time away from home often causes significant delays in receiving necessary support (Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme, 2025).

The persistent and well-documented challenges in accessing health care services in regional, rural and remote areas, especially for primary and preventative care, have been emphasised in several recent reports (Beadon & Hu, 2025; Legislative Assembly Select Committee on Remote, Rural and Regional Health, 2025; National Rural Health Alliance, 2025; Rogers et. al., 2025; Woolcock, Gregg & Groth, 2025).

Key questions for future research

For all priority areas above, what key elements are needed to implement and scale effective practices and programs, and inform policy design and system change for regional, rural and remote education in NSW to improve outcomes and inclusive practice for students, schools and communities?

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