DISTANCE EDUCATION POSITION PAPER

Author: DE Reference Group and NSW State Executive
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Rationale

The NSW Secondary Principals' Council (NSWSPC) have an agreed position, set of principles and recommendations that support the delivery of curriculum, wellbeing and learning provisions of distance education schools in NSW public schools. The position paper has been written to support principals to lead effectively distance education schools by identifying areas requiring policy, procedures and action by the NSW Department of Education (The Department) to meet the needs of NSW Public School students who are enrolled in NSW Public Schools Distance Education Schools.

Background

Distance Education (DE) has been a cornerstone of NSW's public education system since the 1880s, providing equity of access to education for students who are geographically isolated or face unique circumstances that prevent them from attending traditional schools. DE schools deliver personalised learning, focusing on individual student aspirations and curriculum options, ensuring every student feels known, valued, and supported.

Currently, NSW has 11 Distance Education schools, six of which are secondary schools, including a specialist language high school and a school for specific purposes. Two schools also provide preschool services. DE provides full-time enrolment for students across a range of categories, such as geographic isolation, medical conditions, travellers, pregnant young parents, students with additional learning and support needs and vocationally talented. Single course enrolments are also offered to students whose local schools cannot meet their curricular needs.

The NSW DE system of schools is unique in how it collaborates with parents, carers and local communities to implement learning programs, ensuring a sense of belonging for students despite their physical absence from traditional school settings. This model enables students to engage in a supportive school community, promoting their academic, social, and emotional development through individualised education plans and a commitment to high academic standards.

Principles

The NSW SPC recognises the essential role DE schools play in the public education landscape. However, principals and staff are facing increasing challenges through the removal of key support structures to meet the needs of their students. These include the Rural and Distance Education (RDE) team's role in advocacy and support for curriculum and technology provision, creating gaps in service delivery and communication. Without this unique operational requirement, DE schools are experiencing significant challenges in the absence of fundamental support, leading to inconsistencies in communication and support, hindering the ability of DE schools to meet the needs of our most disadvantaged students.

As the curriculum reform evolves with NESA, DE schools must be equipped with the necessary resources to deliver high-quality education across diverse settings. However, the current inadequate centralised support leaves DE schools burdened with the responsibility of developing and sharing resources across networks without sufficient resources or departmental guidance. This includes, persistent staffing challenges retaining specialists and support staff to ensure the complex needs of DE students are met, including students with disabilities and individual support needs.

To maintain high standards of teaching and learning across DE schools, there is a critical need for targeted support, including specialist staffing, course development and curriculum resourcing, technology infrastructure, and a DE directorate to ensure the delivery of a quality DE education for all students.

Recommendations

The NSW SPC recommends that the Department understands and addresses the following recommendations for Distance Education under the 5 key areas outlined and reflected on by the DE Review Team (2024). These areas include – Equity, Teaching and learning, Student wellbeing, Staffing, and Technology and Policy.

That the NSW Department of Education:

1. Equity

- Provides resources, both human and financial, that reflect the complex enrolment profiles of distance education schools, including students with disabilities (more than 45% of students enrolled in distance education have registered disabilities- NCCD) and access to appropriate funding.
- Includes distance education in the same exemption processes as small schools, SSPs, hospital schools and other alternative settings to ensure fair treatment.

2. Teaching and learning

- Provides a well-supported collaborative curriculum team to meet the unique needs of remote learners and ensure high-quality, flexible learning resources tailored to DE students' unique needs.
- Provides opportunities for teachers to adapt and personalise curriculum content to meet individual student needs, ensuring relevant and authentic learning experiences.
- Ensures distance education provides a comprehensive curriculum for all NSW students to promote equity and inclusion.
- Appointment of Director, Educational Leadership (Rural, Remote and Distance Education) with a deep understanding of rural and remote challenges, who values the unique distance education context, ensuring effective leadership, quality teaching and learning.
- Supports ongoing professional development to upskill staff across all distance education contexts.

3. Student wellbeing

- Works to clarify the definition, roles and responsibilities for student enrolments within distance education and seeks to involve DE schools actively in the application process (panel selection) due to the complex enrolment applications and suitability needs of individual students.

4. Staffing

- Review staffing entitlements based on recognition of the complexities of student needs in DE schools, ensuring staffing ratios and positions reflect these demands (e.g. SSOs, TSOs, SLSOs and LSTs).
- Implements flexible staffing locations and provision to work-from-home when required to support service continuity across the state.

5. Technology and policy

- Essential technology infrastructure, including online platforms, and relevant hardware and software for teaching and learning, resource development, and system integration, that ensures quality learning for diverse students.
- Policy, processes and procedures that address student enrolment needs and attendance for distance education schools.

Supporting documents

Further information and enrolment procedures regarding Distance Education can be found at:
https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/curriculum/rural-and-distance-education/distance-education

Next date for review: August 2025, following DE Review Team recommendation report.