



# SHIRE OF KOJONUP

## Strategy for Regional Education Submission

September 2024

## About Kojonup

Kojonup is located approximately 250 km south east of Perth on the Albany Highway. It is situated within the Great Southern Region, which includes Albany (150 km south), Katanning (40km east) and Mount Barker (100 km south), this is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

Kojonup is a junction town with a rich indigenous (Keneang Noongar), military and rural history. The naming of Kojonup comes from the traditional Noongar 'kobj', or stone axe that was used to hunt game in the area.

Attracted by the natural fresh water spring, Europeans settled in Kojonup in 1837 and became an English Military outpost. Over the next century, the town evolved into a contemporary farming community with many of the cultural and historical buildings still present. Kojonup has a District High School (includes primary upto to year 10) and a Private Catholic Primary School, St Bernards.

## Community Vision

*To be the Cultural Centre of the Great Southern*

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## Introduction

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This submission is provided on behalf of the Shire of Kojonup, and its community, in the interests of improving the education standards and addressing equality of opportunities for regional, and more importantly rural students and their families, particularly those students and families more disadvantaged by tyranny of distance, scarce resources and disadvantage.

It is the intent of the Shire of Kojonup to support the local submissions provided to the strategy review committee by the WALGA Great Southern Country Zone (GSCZ) but give its unique view on the strategy.

This submission is intended to provide a more local perspective on the impact of education strategies in the town of Kojonup giving a pragmatic perspective about the challenges in 'regional areas'.

The Shire of Kojonup has several key points it wishes to make to ensure regional and rural education attracts the resources it needs to achieve outcomes for the students that are based in town until they leave school for the workplace.

### Regional Education Strategy

It appears from the strategy document the Department of Education classifies regional Western Australia into education regions – Goldfields, Kimberley, Midwest, Pilbara, Southwest, Wheatbelt etc - each with their own widely diverse social needs, community demographics, geographic factors, economic drivers and education delivery challenges.

Kojonup is the most northern town in the Great Southern but is at the most southern area of the Wheatbelt Education Region, and being centrally located, distance and travel plays a significant part in the success or failure of certain groups of students. There appears to be some misalignment for the students and families of Kojonup as to where it sits in the strategy as we are more aligned to our southern neighbours than our Wheatbelt neighbours.

It is the Shires view that this regional strategy will continue to centralise education for the purposes of cost reduction or cost shifting, ignoring regional diversity both in geography, student needs and disadvantaging Kojonup even further. This strategy requires evidence based data on student needs in Kojonup to be built from the ground up, not the top down.

For the Strategy to be effective and improve quality and equality outcomes across the diversity of regional WA, this strategy will require initiatives, measured by clear targets and metrics that address the specific education gaps and future needs of the students.

Holistic metrics of the students are required, not just academic metrics. Wellbeing, Mental Physical, social, cultural and many other measures of a student may be required before any success is claimed.

Each education region includes smaller more remote rural education facilities. A regional education strategy needs to acknowledge and address the different experiences and barriers faced by students and communities in these smaller communities. This is where true diversity and equitable education will be measured as successful or not.

Centralising regional education support programs, for example basing services in Albany for this region, doesn't provide sufficient or effective service to remote schools and their communities, as often these are delivered by phone or email support is provided.

Services offered in Albany are unable to be reasonably accessed by students living in Kojonup, particularly where family challenges or dysfunction impact the child's ability to travel the distances required. One size does not fit all.

## ***Pillar 1: Build the capability of our regional workforce***

It is the Shires observations that educator support services for our town and school have diminished overtime due to centralisation of departments to either Perth or larger centres, where the smaller regional schools become 'invisible' and left to fend for themselves. It would appear that this also coincides with a progressively reduced funding model for our rural community public schools.

It is clear the dichotomy of access to funding between our local Kojonup District High School (KDHS) and St Bernards Private Catholic Primary School is diverse enough to perceive a difference of education opportunities at the two schools. Both schools requires equitable funding to be successful with students that remain in the town regardless of the number of students.

A more equitable funding model to improve services is required dependent on the needs of the students. This may mean additional funding is given to the smaller communities so they can develop programs for smaller numbers of disenfranchised students.

The centralised service model takes away the support from where it is required the greatest, at the frontline of regional schools in medium sized towns like Kojonup and other smaller towns in the Great Southern.

A centralised model does not bode well for families that do not have the means to support their children with travel or funding to attend schools or support programs further afield. The reduction in support for towns and schools like Kojonup are obvious when support is visibly absent for children that are struggling or have behavioural problems.

Kojonup finds it difficult enough to attract a Youth Counsellor to a town of approx. 2000 people.

We can only observe the frustrations of community members who cannot access services for their children through the education system. It is important that accessing face to face services and professional education development for the educators should be highly prioritised as an equitable solution.

Regardless of the number of students or size of school every single student should have access to the same level of resources within their local school. The Shire believes this is a key factor impacting the performance of students in the regional education system.

Our community in Kojonup specifically experiences the absence of on the ground support for behaviour management of students. It impacts the educators, affects the students involved, affects their families and then spills out into the community having long lasting lifetime effects.

Having the support at the coalface where it is needed at a younger age will determine whether those effects are wholly negative or whether they will return a positive outcome over time.

Local community focused programs, with sufficient capacity to support students experiencing challenging home environments, school refusal, truancy, learning difficulties, increasing mental health concerns and behaviour management issues is critical to local communities like Kojonup.

The shire notes it is a common misperception that regional areas attract teachers who are not as good as teachers in the larger centre areas, such as Perth.

The Shire observes that Kojonup attracts 'very good teachers' coming through Kojonup, at times. However attracting and retaining good teachers in the town is difficult and we see them come and then go due to frustrations of not being able to provide the services they need to support the children coming through the public system.

If more assets and resources are available they may not be in such a hurry to leave the town.

The Shire would like to acknowledge the teachers in town, and their personal commitment to the students that remain in town and receive their education via the public system.

It will take courage and visionary leadership to fund and put these services back into the regional areas where it is most needed.

### Recommendations Pillar 1:

***‘Western Australia is one of the most vast and isolated jurisdictions in the world. It covers almost one-third of Australia’s land mass and has a population density of just one person per square kilometre.’ Education Regional Strategy Document.***

1. In this strategy it should be recognised that equity means more resources are required, and should be allocated, in smaller to medium sized district schools to support those community families and students to continue learning.
2. Don’t define regional as the major regional centres, there are a number of communities that rely on the education system to promote growth and jobs in their areas and cannot afford or have the resources to send their children to Regional Centres such as Albany. Regional should be defined as every town that requires the same education opportunities for their children.
3. Retention of quality teachers and subject specialists in regional schools via increased financial incentives and higher standard State Government funded GROH housing is required. Promotional and monetary incentives are required.
4. Resourcing locally based educator support services, in the schools themselves, must be prioritised, to counter the already challenging and isolated environments in which regional educators work.
5. Justification for capital and operational investment should not be based only on student numbers, but instead judged on the broader improvement in school performance against benchmarked standards, innovation and excellence and contribution to social outcomes.

### ***Pillar 2: Expand curriculum delivery***

The Shires observation is whilst children receive an education in Kojonup, the Shire views there are a number of children who remain in town past year seven (7) to year ten (10) and above, that are not receiving the support or ‘High’ quality education due to the limitations, lack of resources, lack of funding and lack of support in the system to customise the education to these students needs.

The strategy needs to be clear on how this is being measured for success. The metrics of ‘High Quality education’ is critical to comparing how a student is growing holistically, not just academically. In some cases, in rural WA, the skills of entering the workforce are more important than a high academic grade.

Metrics are not just about NAPLAN or academic results in the regional areas, there are other metrics that are required to measure the success of a student such as social welfare, mental health, engagement in the community, self-esteem and the ability get a work placement etc.

A resource based strategy and hands on approach to education would benefit these students. A pathway is required to be developed, funded and implemented that allows the school to put in place educational strategies that lead to students extending into trades or Agricultural Colleges.

Allowing the school farm to be more effectively utilised and supporting programs through the farm could be worthwhile and needs to be investigated, developed, funded and implemented.

These programs need to be meaningful, but there appears to be a risk averse approach to utilising these assets and resources that are deemed to be “risky” for the children and therefore increasing liability for the school or department. This mentality trivialises the outcomes, students don’t learn the skills they need, and this approach needs to change if rural towns are to survive and the system is to provide pragmatic education opportunities.

A lot of students don't see a pathway to the workforce and this has implications discussed elsewhere in the paper with their self-esteem, well-being and social cohesion. World skills are more important for most of these students, than academic outcomes, however we cannot afford to wait for them to go to TAFE to embed the skills necessary. It has to occur much earlier in their education journey to be successful.

Small towns and communities don't have the luxury of living in a metro area where risk aversion is infectious, out in the regions we need to be pragmatic and approach the problems face on. These types of programs can achieve more for the students, to thrive in rural Western Australia, than the standard academia approach. Risks need to be managed.

Recently we have seen a number of families move out of town to support their children in schooling in Albany and Perth because Kojonup does not offer the right programs and only goes through to year 10. They have also made the conscious decision not to send their children to Katanning.

The Shire is aware of the desire of most families to keep the family unit together, without having to relocate or be separated to provide their children with the opportunities that are not able to be provided locally due to the restrictions regional schools have regarding student numbers and staff availability.

A pathway for students from an early age is required in smaller towns where a number of students and their families have limited opportunities to be academically educated.

It is obvious that a lot of the children in Kojonup that remain in the local education system are going to gravitate toward more vocational careers such as shearing, farm work, engineering trades, shire roles and other frontline work. Most roles where degrees and diplomas are not required.

The strategy needs to fully consider the sustainability of smaller regional communities when determining where investment and effort takes place.

## Recommendations Pillar 2:

*'Regardless of location or context, all Western Australian students should have access to high quality education with a range of opportunities open to them during school and beyond.'* Education Regional Strategy Document.

1. Increase access and permission for local schools to build alternative programs for non-academic, disaffected and at-risk students, particularly the use of new technologies and other resources to provide access for disadvantaged students.
2. This should provide skills and pathways to the work place.
3. A strong focus and attention on vocational training skills from a younger age is required in towns like Kojonup. This also will enhance and increase the probability of a student's placement into the workforce.
4. Increase the diversity of programs such as ATAR, VET and other WACE subjects offered, in-school and/or virtually, supported by qualified specialist teachers.
5. Fully fund and utilise assets more effectively, such as the KDHS school farm, must be prioritised and funded, even if it appears to create inequity with other modes of education.
6. Investment in alternative education programs and delivery modes (e.g. virtual delivery) that improve education standards, equity and diversity in regions is critical.

### ***Pillar 3: Strengthen support for student wellbeing***

**Holistic and social development outcomes for students is often more important than academic metrics.**

The current model needs to change to accommodate those children that fall through the cracks simply because the current education model doesn't fit them, or they don't fit the current model. An example of this is the difference between 'farmers' children that usually leave town at the age of 12 to either go to Perth or to Albany for their education and the children that remain in the town. The children that remain need and deserve to be rewarded with an education that can promote just as many opportunities for them as a private education in Perth.

Local community focused programs, with sufficient capacity to support students experiencing challenging home environments, school refusal, truancy, learning difficulties, increasing mental health concerns and behaviour management issues.

Regional communities and families should be assured that students are engaged in local support that addresses their individual needs, their personal development, cultural needs and reengagement with standard or alternative school programs.

More peripheral resources and funding is required to manage the holistic nature of students. For example, there is no youth counsellor in the Shire of Kojonup. Kojonup families travel to Albany to access services. The requirement to travel and the cost implications are often prohibitive, especially for families with complex needs and low household incomes.

Where students are retained in regional education, but are disengaged and not sufficiently supported through alternative or diversion programs, counselling, behaviour management, or social support, there are lifelong impacts that diffuse into the community:

- a. Higher risk of unemployment and lower incomes, leading to long term financial instability.
- b. Reduced social networks, poorer physical and mental health outcomes.
- c. Higher reliance on social welfare and healthcare services, increasing costs to government and community.
- d. Engaging in crime and consequential engagement in the justice system.

***The State Government has a role to play in ensuring other regional services, including primary health care and childcare are available utilising the education system in regional Western Australia.***

These services provide essential support and ensure community sustainability and well-being, both mental and physical. As such, they are a major factor in attracting and retaining families living in the Shire.

#### **Recommendations for Pillar 3:**

1. Localised and customised education is important to the health and wellbeing of students in these towns.
2. As with all societal modes today the system must adapt to a more multi focus on the needs of different individual learning styles, cultural differences, academic attitude and mental health diagnosis (autism, ADD, ADHD, etc.).
3. The current regional model needs to change to accommodate those children that fall through the cracks simply because the current education model doesn't fit them, or they don't fit the current model.
4. Enable earlier access to vocational education, perhaps even in latter primary school years, for students that are not academically inclined and will be better engaged in practical, life skills and job focused training opportunities.

5. Expand school farm curriculum to include trades, traditional farming and agriculture practices, but also shearing schools, innovative farming and agriculture practices and income diversification.
6. Prepare regional and rural children to be not only employable but also successful leaders in their own communities.
7. Provide a pathway and prioritise regional student acceptance into farm / agricultural schools.
8. Make school culture safer places the students want to attend, provide students with a sense of pride, belonging and connectedness with the school and its community.
9. Specialised education streams should be distributed more widely across the region, rather than centralised into regional centres.
10. Increase access for regional schools to psychologists, behaviour specialists and health professionals providing more local support for students with complex needs. One way to achieve this is to create Behavioural Support Centres in local areas, not regional or metro centres.

#### ***Pillar 4: Develop partnerships to create opportunity***

Increased local partnerships is of course an advantage to local schools, but requires support and funding from the State Government to ensure success.

Integration with local community agencies, businesses and other educational institutions to innovate and diversify education opportunities and create local employment pathways is always going to provide a social return on capital.

It is important that the state government partners with the Keneang Noongar for cultural competency in schools and funds programs that leads to cultural education and future employment opportunities in our local community.

Incorporate local Noongar culture, language, knowledge and custom into regional school curriculum, providing truth telling and engendering respect for our diverse heritage.

This may contribute to increased community knowledge, respect and cohesion as well as retention of Noongar students in education. It could also be a pathway for non-academic students to be a part of the workforce for example rangers, local workers etc.

A curriculum such as this must be developed and be lead in partnership with the local Keneang Noongar Elders.

Regional schools need flexibility and self-determination to innovate and deliver education services that meet the specific needs of the student and community.

Provide regional schools with independence and flexibility to innovate and go beyond like-for-like comparison measures, to address local needs and determine what excellence looks like for that school and that community.

Regional schools require standing in their community, where the school's culture and its leadership demonstrate and is recognised for excellence and social connection with the wider community.

### **Investment in Regional Education Technologies**

In the Shires view, virtual classroom technologies are the future and can provide substantial benefit in providing more educational opportunities in regional WA to those students remaining in the community.

Investment is necessary in technology and connectivity, as well as educator capability to develop and deliver courses in a virtual environment.

Virtual classrooms can facilitate benefit for regional schools to:

- provide greater diversity in course availability, supported by the most experienced and qualified educators (who may live outside the region);
- enable students who find the school environment challenging, to remain engaged; and,
- enable academically inclined students, and those with challenges to join in class cohorts of similar standing and receive the level of specialist support required.

### **Recommendations Pillar 4:**

1. State Government to invest in Regional Education Technologies (virtual classrooms) and associated programs;
2. Regional schools need flexibility and self-determination to innovate and deliver education services that meet the specific needs of the community and individual students;
3. Increase momentum, permissions and resources for schools to create local customised partnerships.
4. Flexibility around finances for schools to invest for their customised future;
5. Provide greater diversity in course availability and modes of delivery, supported by the most experienced and qualified educators (who may live outside the region);
6. Improve internet connectivity;
7. Increase support of Allied Health Practitioners in regions, particularly for mental health and behavioural issues for both students and staff;

## Summary

The Shire of Kojonup and its community needs the State Government and the Education Department to understand the requirements of regional rural schools, the rural communities they are part of, and to support the wellbeing of all students at an individual level. You can't separate community from education and view one without the other. What happens in the education system has far reaching consequences into the community.

If support cannot be provided to the staff and students within our school network, and additional funding needs of schools in rural areas cannot be sourced, then we will see a continual demise of schools in rural communities and then the communities themselves will decline, both population and socially.

Education is an essential service to grow a community and is up there next to the provision of base medical services.

The Shire hopes the government will implement a relevant pragmatic strategy that will deliver results to our towns and help us deliver our 'Placemaking' strategies to grow population and create a community.

To achieve this it is important that this strategy is supported by first-hand knowledge and data that outlines the needs assessment of our individual students and communities, bottom up approach.

The Community of Kojonup invites you to visit Kojonup and to engage with us to have more community based discussions on this strategy.

Yours Sincerely,



Grant Thompson

**Chief Executive Officer  
Shire of Kojonup**