

Fact Check: Are Schools of the Air (SOTA's) duplicating services provided by the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE)?

Background

From the Press Release “*Education savings measures to help contribute to budget repair*”, 13/12/2017, 12:45 pm: “*Schools of the Air (SOTA) will also close. The School of Isolated Distance Education (SIDE), which is the major provider of distance education for rural and regional students, will take over the provision of education services delivered by SOTA. This eliminates duplication.*” This statement implies that the five Schools of the Air duplicate services that are also/already being provided by the School of Isolated Distance Education. This Fact Check discusses seven key aspects of SOTA service delivery and the degree to which they are currently provided (and could realistically be provided by SIDE in future), and the consequences of abandoning that aspect of service delivery for remote children.

Aspects of Service Delivery Assessed

- Belonging And Connectedness
- Provision of Learning Programs
- Teacher Contact
- Socialisation
- Support and Monitoring
- Provision of Full Curriculum
- Effective Use of Limited Bandwidth

Summary of Findings

It is incorrect to say that Schools of the Air duplicates services provided by the School of Isolated Distance Education. In all but one area Schools of the Air services *exceed* those provided by the School of Isolated Distance Education. It seems likely that this is the case for Provision of Learning Programs too, however the programs offered at SIDE and SOTA are too different for quick comparison. Comparison in other service areas was relatively straightforward. The overarching goal for Schools of the Air is to provide an education for remotely located children equivalent to that offered to rural and metropolitan students. The School of Isolated Distance Education does not currently attempt to provide a full school experience, and its location relative to clients would make such an attempt prohibitively expensive. The result would be a second-class education for children located in remote Western Australia.

“Children who live outside the major population centres in Australia should not have to settle for a second rate education”¹

¹ Commission Chris Sidoti, cited in the Final Report: Rural and Remote School Education, A Survey for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Stokes, H., Stafford, J. and Holdsworth, R, 1999. https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/human_rights/rural_remote/scoping_survey.pdf, accessed 17 December 2017.

ONE: BELONGING AND CONNECTEDNESS

Background

The more communities a child belongs to and the more valued roles a child has within those communities the more resilient they are. *“A sense of belonging has been found to help protect children against mental health problems and improve their learning. Children who feel that they belong are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than others. They are also more motivated and more successful learners.”* Kidsmatter Website, accessed Dec 2017.

Belonging and connectedness also improves parent wellbeing, which then goes on to make life better for children. Remote communities are shrinking – the more remotely located, the more acute the trend.

Schools become even more important in these circumstances as they also provide connectedness and belonging for parents.

Schools of the Air offer a school community that meets regularly in person, supporting both the child and parents in better caring for the child. . The location of the school in a regional centre also means the school can be visited by students as needed. Community and school are inextricably linked, as with most schools in WA. In addition, children who belong to a local school – and SOTA’s are local schools – are also invited to represent their school at community events such as Anzac Day Ceremonies.

Vs

SIDE offers shared reading in the form of newsletters and updates.

Does SIDE offer an alternative way of creating Belonging and Connectedness for remote students and their families?

No adequate alternative is currently offered.

How possible would it be for them to duplicate what SOTA offers or provide an alternative approach?

Distance constraints would make replicating SOTA’s current approach impossible for SIDE. SA has a single SOTA but has a much smaller geographic area (984,000 square km vs 2.64 million square km – more than 2.5 times the size). As real life contact is required for children to achieve a sense of community, SIDE will not be able to duplicate ‘community’ for children. Parents currently drive for hours to get their children to camp, teachers drive for hours to visit a child in their home - should the SOTA’s be replaced with SIDE those drives would take at least a day, and possibly most of a week.

Does it matter if the Belonging and Connectedness aspect of SOTA servicing is abandoned?

Belonging to both a school and a community is known to positively impact on children’s wellbeing - and isolation makes this all the more important for these children. Decreased wellbeing impacts all aspects of a child’s life including educational outcomes.\

VERDICT: SOTA are not duplicating SIDE in the area of Belonging and Connectedness. SOTA are exceeding SIDE’s service provision in this area.

TWO: TEACHER CONTACT

Background

Compared to normal schools, teacher-student contact in distance education is minimal. Most weeks of the year children communicate through 'air lessons' with their teacher for at least one hour a day. It is through relationships that children learn - regular air lessons maintain the relationship created by prior personal contact with teachers as well as presenting learning opportunities.

A high content-to-class management ratio characterises these lessons, but they are still a very limited amount of time for teacher-student interaction. They work best when they are supported by in-person contact with both the teacher and fellow pupils. In addition, that strong teacher-child relationship is perhaps more valuable for a remotely located child as they have fewer opportunities to participate in meaningful relationships.

Schools of the Air offer at least a daily air lesson with classmates/teacher which is supported by contact in person with both the teacher (two home visits) and fellow pupils (two to three camps). Additional lessons cover curriculum extension topics (eg. Coding) or meet other educational needs (eg. Remedial maths).

Vs

SIDE offers daily air lessons for students, but with no guarantee of regular personal contact to support air lessons.

Does SIDE offer Teacher Contact?

Yes, but considerably less than what is provided by SOTA.

How possible would it be for SIDE to duplicate/match what SOTA offers for Teacher Contact or an alternative approach?

The regular personal contact with teachers offered by SOTA which makes air lessons more effective will be hard for SIDE to replicate. Leaving that aside, the replication of SOTA's greater allocation of air lessons appears possible. However, on closer investigation timetabling and bandwidth issues will make this extremely difficult. While teachers are able to give air lessons from their desks, due to bandwidth issues (more details provided under Effective Use Of Limited Bandwidth) only a few students can attend a lesson. With more students, timetabling issues will result in SIDE losing the flexibility to provide the air lessons that address other educational needs.

Does it matter if the Teacher Contact component of SOTA servicing is substantially reduced?

If contact with teachers is reduced (in line with what SIDE offers now) the likely consequences include decreased contact with peers and teacher, decreased ability by teacher to ensure learning is occurring by child and a resulting decrease in learning – a second-class education would result.

VERDICT: SOTA are not duplicating SIDE in the area of Teacher Contact. SOTA are exceeding SIDE's service provision in terms of Teacher Contact.

THREE: SOCIALISATION

Background

Residential camps were developed by SOTA's in order to overcome the impact of limited socialisation opportunities for remote students. (Camps also improve teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships which are vital for good learning outcomes in the remote setting.) Interpersonal and self-regulation skills (the main learning focus on these camps) are essential in the workplace. The role of education in preparing students for work is well acknowledged, and as most education providers are aware, this is mandated in the Australian curriculum. *"It's crucial that our schools are well equipped and resourced to support students who are there to learn the skills they need to secure decent jobs."* (WA State Budget, 2017-2018.)

Schools of the Air offer at least two one week long residential camps approximately over the year. (They also offer 'cluster camps' at other locations eg. On pastoral properties.) The longer camps include Home Tutors Camps and Sports Camps. Each of these has a program of events for both children and home tutors designed to improve curriculum outcomes for children in all areas. While upskilling home tutors so they can better help children learn, SOTA staff use these times to give children practice in group-work and interpersonal skills in a classroom environment.

Vs

SIDE offers a place to stay in Perth when visiting teachers but no camps.

Does SIDE offer a program for socialisation?

No.

How possible would it be for SIDE to duplicate SOTA's program for socialisation?

SIDE cannot meet these requirements. It would be hard for SIDE to offer camps as all camps in proximity to students (eg. Bluff Point camp school) have been defunded. Camps in Perth would be more expensive in terms of travel costs and loss of time in the classroom. The cost of teachers travelling from Perth is also high. It would be hard for more than one camp a year to be offered, and this would be arguably insufficient. (For contrast, Longreach School of the Air mini and multi camps occur every six weeks in order to ensure adequate learning time in group work skills.)

Does it matter if the Socialisation aspect of SOTA servicing is abandoned?

The experience of working closely with their peers - of knowing other children by more than their face and name, knowing how they think and feel - prepares students for life as a worker and fellow citizen. The most important skill in the world is getting on with others. Both getting on with others and having friends is vital for long term mental health - and this is what School of the Air camps offer these otherwise isolated children.

VERDICT: SOTA are not duplicating SIDE in the area of Socialisation, and in fact no attempt is made by SIDE to address this area of student need.

FOUR: SUPPORT AND MONITORING

Background

Home visits by teachers are essential for ensuring a child's learning needs are being met. They allow a child's teacher to gain detailed knowledge of the child in a short time and thus increase their ability to relate to children they rarely see. Home visits also act like a 'parent-teacher night' where sensitive topics can be raised and addressed. In addition, while SOTA teachers don't see children every day they do develop an understanding of a child through interactions at camps and on air. This allows them to detect issues more easily from such things as gaps in subject knowledge all the way through to recognising a child at risk.

Schools of the Air offer home visits to support both home tutor and student and phone and internet support for both home tutors and students. The school regularly contacts students and families through email, phone calls etc. to check service provision is adequate and provided equipment is working well.

Vs

SIDE offers some home visits for some families. Families are strongly encouraged to visit when in Perth and to call when there is a problem.

Does SIDE offer Support and Monitoring?

SIDE offers some home visits and some support to students and home tutors.

How possible would it be for SIDE to duplicate/match SOTA's level of Support and Monitoring?

Regular home visits (annual or bi-annual) to SOTA students would be prohibitively expensive from Perth. Consider the cost of two teachers being away for up to one week, and multiply by at least one hundred - and then add in travelling costs for two and the cost of relief teachers for that time. It would be possible for SIDE to do this, but far more expensive to achieve than it is currently, and would probably require the employment of itinerant teachers. Phone and internet support could be achieved easily.

Does it matter if the Support and Monitoring aspect of SOTA service provision is abandoned?

It does, and even if these these visits be carried out by itinerant teachers these benefits would be greatly reduced. There would be no benefit to the relationship between class teacher and child as the class teacher would not have met with the child. An itinerant teacher wouldn't have existing knowledge of the child and thus would miss subtle yet significant difficulties including the signs that a child is at risk.

VERDICT: SOTA are not duplicating SIDE in the area of Support and Monitoring. SOTA are exceeding SIDE's service provision in terms of Support and Monitoring.

FIVE: PROVISION OF LEARNING PROGRAMS

Background

Learning programs should be customised to the child. As with all other groups of children around Western Australia different children have different learning needs. Teachers are expected to differentiate for groups and individuals within their classes. The MacGowan Government has stated that the quality of education will not be impacted by the location of the child.

Schools of the Air offer individualised education plans where required. SOTA teachers do not have a single learning program which they modify, but can draw broadly from a *range of resources* to produce customised learning for individual children and class groups. Around Western Australia most teachers are expected to work in the same way as SOTA teachers: the standard expectation is that teachers are drawing from a wide range of resources to produce customized learning for their classes.

Vs

SIDE offers a learning program in the form of modules. *These modules* are modified by teachers to meet the needs of the student.

Does SIDE provide a Learning Program that is customized to the child?

Not really - SIDE teachers are modifying one main learning program, which limits their ability to innovate for class and individual needs.

How possible would it be for SIDE to duplicate/match SOTA's current provision of Learning Programs?

Adding more children to SIDE without adding more teachers will result in a too-high teacher-to-child ratio. This is likely to result in less modification of the existing program and more 'rolling out' of pre-packaged education options such as Mathletics. It could be done if existing SOTA staff were all retained, if there were no space constraints at the Leederville SIDE site, and if camps and air lessons remained as they are now.

Does it matter if SOTA's level of Learning Program provision is abandoned?

Rolling out of pre-packaged education options (including SIDE's own learning modules) is known to be counterproductive in terms of promoting advanced creative and problem-solving skills.

VERDICT: SOTA is not duplicating SIDE in the area of Provision of Learning Programs as what is provided by SIDE draws from a narrower set of resources than what is provided by SOTA.

SIX: PROVISION OF FULL CURRICULUM

Background

There are many things that children who live remotely cannot find in their 'local school' - regular sporting competitions, lessons for a special interest - and therefore the Education Department must find alternative ways to provide opportunities for remotely located children to learn these skills in order for these children to achieve with their age peers and to their potential - and this is what SOTA's do in addition to the core curriculum.

Schools of the Air offer a range of activities designed to build children's sense of competence and willingness to risk in the 'full curriculum' offered to all rural and metropolitan students. For example, SOTAs offer a weekly sports program reviewed with peers, a whole school assembly each week, older students visible and celebrated as role models, school captains and the opportunity to compete against other schools of the air at a sports carnival in Perth. This sports carnival is the centrepiece event of a camp attended by all School of the Air children from around the state – again, this camp focuses on ensuring these students receive the full curriculum.

Vs

SIDE offers a range of activities within learning materials. The children do not share their results and efforts weekly. No school assemblies, school positions or sports carnivals are offered. As stated earlier, no camps are offered.

Does SIDE offer the 'Full Curriculum' in the same way as provided by SOTA?

No.

How possible would it be for SIDE to duplicate/match the SOTA provision of the Full Curriculum?

The problems of distance (outlined earlier in this document) make this almost impossible for SIDE to achieve.

Does it matter if the Full Curriculum aspect SOTA servicing is abandoned?

It is inequitable for these children to not experience the full curriculum provided to all other children in WA. These programs are designed to excite, stimulate and inspire children to learn (from the Education Department website). Children deprived of these opportunities will find it harder to be motivated to learn. Poor motivation leads to decreased success which leads to increasing motivation difficulties – it is the beginning of a preventable vicious cycle.

VERDICT: SOTA are not duplicating SIDE in the area of Provision of Full Curriculum. SOTA are exceeding SIDE's service provision on this front.

SEVEN: EFFECTIVE USE OF LIMITED BANDWIDTH

Background

Bandwidth (how much information per unit of time an internet connection can handle) is smaller in the bush which means less data and slower speeds. In addition, poor bandwidth exacerbates the impact of distance. Lag times grow with physical distance. An air lesson delivered from Perth to remote children will experience more lag than an air lesson delivered in closer proximity to children's locations. Delay also increases with the number of logged-in participants and this has consequences in terms of possible class sizes for 'air lessons'.

Schools of the Air offer a mix of online and paper curriculum, with face-to-face teaching on long camps, cluster camps, home visits and school visits. The majority of learning materials are similar to those provided in other schools – units of work customised to the group and the child. Use of online pre-packaged programs and online resources is minimized in recognition of lower bandwidth. Whole school assemblies are paced to accommodate delays.

Vs

SIDE offers air lessons. Unfortunately, internet delay often reduces learning time for students. SIDE staff are well-known for misinterpreting internet delay for lack of student compliance, impacting on student-teacher relationships. SIDE also asks parents to print much of the hands-on learning material, which is costly in terms of both download and inequitable as most children in WA receive these from their school.

Does SIDE demonstrate Effective Use of Limited Bandwidth?

Yes, but this is limited by their location and funding.

How possible would it be for SIDE to duplicate SOTA's Effective Use of Limited Bandwidth?

The expertise developed by SOTA staff in working with delays, in maximizing use of available internet to families and in giving targeted high content air lessons would obviously be very valuable in improving on SIDE's current service delivery. However, to compete with the geographical advantage offered by SOTA would require all students be provided with much larger bandwidth, or, alternatively, class sizes of about two students per lesson. Obviously this is impractical, far more expensive and reduces the positive benefits of peer interaction. It may prove that replacing the services of five SOTA's is more expensive than keeping them.

Does it matter if SOTA's Effective Use of Limited Bandwidth methodology is lost/abandoned?

Smart use of a limited resource obviously matters, as does knowledge of bandwidth limitations – unfortunately, apart from this, it may actually be beyond the control of SIDE to lift their performance on this front. Increasing the bandwidth to ensure that air lessons run as smoothly as with SOTA is likely to be prohibitively expensive.

VERDICT: SOTA are not duplicating SIDE in the area of Effective Use of Limited Bandwidth. SOTA are exceeding SIDE's service provision on this front.

Document compiled/fact checked by Jo Jackson King, occupational therapist, experienced SOTA and SIDE home tutor and child development expert. It will continue to be updated as information/corrections come to hand. Please don't hesitate to contact Jo on jojacksonking@gmail.com or find her on Facebook for the latest version or to offer suggestions.