

Discussion paper

‘Rural Education - Time for Action’



Glen Park Primary School

T. Shaw July 2015

Regional Victoria provides significant economic and social benefits for the State. Among key indicators, rural and regional Victoria accounts for about a quarter of the State’s people, jobs and economic activity. Regional Victoria is the primary source of the State’s agricultural output, food production and processing, and energy and mineral resources. It is where a significant portion of our secondary goods and services are also produced. All Victorians benefit from strong regions and the prosperity they deliver.

(Page 4 Victorian Government Response to the Rural and Regional Committee Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Disadvantage and Inequity in Rural and Regional Victoria.)

Preamble

A recent Auditor General Report entitled *Access to Education for Rural Students* found conclusively that students in rural Victoria (for some time now) have less educational opportunities and perform markedly below their counterparts in metropolitan Victoria.

There is a sizeable gap in achievement and that gap is widening. He makes it perfectly clear that *'DEECD has not provided access to high-quality education for all students. The gap in performance between rural and metropolitan students in Victoria has persisted and shows no sign of narrowing.'* (Page 11) He was also critical of the scrapping of the Victorian Rural Education Framework in 2010 *'...many of the actions committed to within the framework were not pursued. As a result, DEECD's approach to overcoming barriers to rural student's participation and achievement in education remains fragmented'*. (Page 33)

Poverty in Rural Victoria

Lost opportunities and the lack of a strategic 'all of government' approach to this problem will have a serious impact on the future prosperity of Victoria. The lack of education is a recognised cause of poverty (ACOSS' Poverty Report Update, October 2011) People with higher levels of education generally earn more and are less likely to be unemployed (There are persistently high levels of disengagement from employment and training among rural young people aged 15-24) or to stay unemployed. Conversely, people with low levels of education are likely to have less capacity to escape from poverty.

Young people in rural and remote areas are less likely to complete high school and less likely to commence higher education. However, they are more likely to participate in vocational education. Poorer educational outcomes for young people in rural and remote areas appear to be affected by a number of factors:

- The perceived lower relevance of education in rural and remote areas. Fewer opportunities for highly educated workers reduce the motivation of students to strive for better education.
- Lower levels of commencement at university in part reflect the additional barriers to tertiary education for young people from rural areas, particularly the impossibility for most to live at home while at university (because of remoteness from major cities) and therefore the need to be able to afford accommodation in the city. The development of rural universities has reduced but not eliminated this as a problem.
- The lower prevalence in rural and remote areas of jobs requiring higher levels of education or training means that young, qualified people find it difficult to return to

work in rural areas, and consequently the population of adults living and working in rural areas tends to have lower than average educational attainment.

International and Australian evidence demonstrates that the failure to complete school or gain equivalent qualifications carries serious consequences for young people, including adverse future health and economic outcomes, and is associated with poorer labour market outcomes and greater insecurity in building careers.

At the post-compulsory education level, the disparity in educational attainment between regional and metropolitan students is exacerbated, with metropolitan students pursuing higher education and higher-level vocational qualifications at a significantly higher rate than their regional counterparts.

In light of the disparities in educational attainment between metropolitan and regional Victorian students, and the demonstrated health, economic and societal benefits associated with school completion and gaining post-compulsory education qualifications, there is a proven need for governments to encourage ‘educational aspiration’ amongst rural students and identify inhibitors to this and seek out best practise (in Australia and overseas) to enable rural students to achieve their potential.

The formation and development of education aspirations commences at an early age, while the expression of this occurs in adolescence. (It needs to start in kindergarten and primary school)

Educational Aspiration

Barriers to educational aspiration are similar to that of students of low socio-economic status, and is driven by five key factors; retention, exposure to and provision of post-compulsory education, motivation and lack of transition support. Government can intervene to impact directly on these factors through a systematic all of government plan of action.

Regional students face a myriad of challenges to participating in post-compulsory education, necessitating a multi-faceted approach to address each barrier. There is a primary need to address those which inhibit participation in and completion of secondary education. Such initiatives equip students with the academic aptitude to pursue Year 12 (or equivalent) and emphasise the value and attainability of post compulsory qualifications. Following this, other (secondary) interventions including transition and financial support can assist students in remaining in the postsecondary education environment.

Research into Educational Aspiration for Regional Victoria page 32

There are some programs in place (such as in my region the *Grampians Virtual school* which provides virtual education to remote students who can follow a face-to-face class in a school via video conferencing.) but as the Auditor General discovered these programs are fragmented, often they are stand-alone programs dependent on the financial support of governments (we have seen many disturbing cut-backs to funding by the Commonwealth in the last two budgets) from one budget to the next with often little accountability and concerns that they do not comprehensively cover all barriers. Research has found that a multi-faceted approach to improving student education aspiration is necessary, as no single intervention will be sufficient to overcome the various barriers to education participation. (Refer pages 64-109 *Research into Educational Aspiration for Regional Victoria* for examples of the barriers faced by Regional students to participation in higher levels of education, and the need for multiple interventions and support. Research has found that a multi-faceted approach to improving student education aspiration is necessary, as no single intervention will be sufficient to overcome the various barriers to education participation. Interesting case-studies are provided)

Conclusion

The State Government has recognised improved educational opportunities for Victorians as a driving force in improving the state economy and the quality of life of all of its citizens. To break the cycle of poverty in rural Victoria and to share the wealth and prosperity of the state to all stake holders, not just those in Melbourne (which will apparently be the biggest city in Australia by 2056) action needs to be taken now.

The Auditor General has sounded a warning that the whole government needs to hear. Engage rural students and their families in the value of lifelong learning at an early age, provide them with the educational opportunities metropolitan students enjoy and inspire them from an early age to ‘aspire’ to be the best they can be. Such a strategy will help all Victorians.

Bibliography

Report entitled ‘A Snapshot of Poverty in Rural and regional Australia

http://ruralhealth.org.au/documents/publicseminars/2013_Sep/Joint-report.pdf

Research into Educational Aspiration for Regional Victoria

https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/200439/EducationAspiration_Full_Report.pdf

AEU response to the Inquiry into Geographical Differences in the Rate in Which Victorian Students Participate in Higher Education (Victorian Parliament's Education and Training Committee)

http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/jg_parlt_inquiry_into_geogdiffs_aeuresponse_1.pdf

The Auditor General's Report

The Auditor General in his report on rural student's access to education released in April 2014 found that students in rural areas for a long time have not performed as well as their metropolitan peers.



The Auditor General's report

He said that the Department of Education (DEECD as it was then) had not managed to overcome that gap. The gap has not narrowed in **fact it is getting wider**.

The Auditor General said that unless DEECD adopts a cohesive and targeted strategy, it is unlikely that outcomes will improve.

The auditor said (somewhat sadly) that he has little confidence that DEECD's proposed Rural and Regional Plan will be the kind of 'game changing' plan that will make a difference for rural students. (That was released late last year and he was right. It was rubbish!)

Unfortunately I am not surprised by the Auditors findings; the fact is that DEECD is doing nothing to address a problem that all rural educators know exist.

The Rural population in Victoria suffer from a disproportionate level of disadvantage. (At Regional Directors meetings we have watched endless PowerPoints showing this worrying

data for years. We saw it again in term 1 this year) Students from rural Victoria represent about 30% of the total school student population. A significant number of children and families yet in every data set looked at by the Auditor general from breast feeding to access to higher education, rural children are behind metropolitan students and the gap is widening.



The state of Victoria's children report - Gram

Some of the data can be accessed via The State of Victoria's Children report

The report contains detailed data showing : the socio-economic disadvantage faced by rural communities, the lack of alternative education models, higher school absence rates, the lower percentage of rural students meeting minimum standards in literacy and numeracy, poor retention rates, lack of educational aspiration, lower NAPLAN data etc. This data is well known. Students from rural schools generally achieve poorer outcomes than metropolitan students. Academic performance is poorer and students are less engaged in education resulting in lower retention rates.

There have been some haphazard attempts made to provide funding to rural schools to address the gap between rural and metropolitan students but DET has no empirical evidence to support improvement as a result of this ad hoc state and federal funding.

DEECD produced a 'Rural Education Framework' in 2010 (I was involved in its development) It was a modest attempt to address the concerns of rural educators and included providing financial support for rural teachers to participate in PD, increasing opportunities to access LOTE and piloting community education plans. One of the key principals of the framework was the recognition that improving education outcomes needs a wide ranging approach incorporating school, family, community, network, region and central office.

There was a change of government in November 2010 and by December 2010 the Framework disappeared never to be seen or spoken of again. It is hard to see this as anything other than a political decision and it resulted in a fragmented, half-hearted attempt to address the growing gulf between country and city students which was well-known at the time and has grown since.



The original Rural Education Framework document released mid 2010. (disappeared by December 2010)

After 4 years of doing nothing! DEECD created a new plan a new framework (Once again e-invent the wheel) which according to the auditor's report *will draw upon school networks to allow performance to be measured and reviewed at a local area.* (What Networks are they talking about? The previous government scrapped and dismantled networks and sacked or re-assigned network leaders. Many rural schools are not part of recognised networks as opposed to collegiate groups. What data collection are they talking about? What support will we get to gather this data? How will they facilitate the establishment of these networks? My regional office likes to artificially group schools into Local Government Areas which is irrelevant and impractical to schools) this is of course a moot point anyway because the new plan was released a fortnight before the election and has already seems to have been forgotten about.

The Auditor General said that it would not be sufficiently robust to make a difference to student outcomes and he was spot on. One of the auditor's recommendations was that: (DET as it is now called) completes its Rural and Regional Plan, ensuring that it is comprehensive; outcomes focused, contains detailed time bound actions, and is informed by high-quality research and stakeholder engagement. The auditor, throughout his report put a lot of trust in this plan (A plan that was late and which he believed was inadequate) to solve the long standing problems with rural education. It was released but was useless (no budget, no clear goals, no timeline and no accountability. It even contained spelling errors.)

The previous government's 2013 policy Professional Practice and Performance for Improved Learning acknowledges the problems without actually articulating how it will monitor, support and guide schools to a solution. DEECD amalgamated nine regions into four cutting services and support along the way. For political reasons 'DEECD defined Networks' were abolished with schools encouraged (without too much enthusiasm shown by stripped to the

bone regional offices) to form their own networks based on curriculum provision and performance outcome criteria.

In the Ballarat area that has been patchy to say the least. Glen Park is part of a long standing collegiate group (The old Bungaree Cluster was originally formed to support shared specialists in the early 1980s) but many schools are on their own.

DEECD hoped that peer review would help schools understand their performance better and work together to solve common problems. Will they provide the genuine support required to do that? By their very nature rural schools can be physically isolated. How will peer support work in those schools? (The new performance and development procedures put into effect from May this year makes that redundant anyway)

The tyranny of distance has a significant impact on schools. Apparently DEECDs new plan incorporated (page 23 of the Auditor's report) a review of digital learning in curriculum provision and has recommended that DEECD expand the use of digital technology in schools while ensuring that all students maintain a degree of face to face contact with teachers. (I find this amusing given that video conferencing equipment was distributed to some schools at least 5 years ago but not to mine which is a one teacher rural school. You would think an isolated one teacher rural school would be the first to be given that equipment!) There is a push to use digital technology to provide LOTE by 2015 - rather than employ sufficient teachers but I would have to do that using my own lap top with cobbled together technology. Nobody who has taught Preps would advocate teaching them anything via video conferencing equipment anyway!

In conclusion the 'new plan' was useless but the old Framework (hardly old dated 2010) would have been an excellent place to start.

A new plan (Let's not take 4 years to do it!) needs to include:

- Acknowledgement that there is a problem. DEECD's response to the Auditor general's report was to say that they'd already *addressed the concerns raised in the report* - which they hadn't. (The then secretary of the Department, Richard Bolt was quoted by the Age as saying that the department accepted all the recommendations, but he said *he was concerned the report contained findings based on "unrealistic or absolute standards"*. The same standards set for metropolitan schools possibly?) The report was never sent out to schools, we were never asked to provide our own insightful feedback and no mention has been made about it at a regional level. (When I asked about it at a Regional Director's meeting last year before the last election I was told that it was 'too political' to discuss at that time.)

- Genuinely consult with stakeholders (embark in a conversation with principals, teachers, parents, children and concerned community members about what is great about rural education and what isn't and ask about what strategies can be developed to help across the system to make rural education better and what can be done at a local level to make a difference. Regions could facilitate public forums, data could be collected from those forums as well as rural school specific surveys and forums specifically aimed at tapping into the wide experience of rural school principals and teachers. (Possibly organise a rural school conference to explore the issue. The last one was held in 2005) Using all this feedback to create a workable plan for central office as well as regional or even network plans.
- Financial support for small rural school educators to access quality PD
- Financial incentives to keep good quality teachers and school leaders in rural education. Ensure that staff are qualified to teach the subjects they are required to teach especially in STEM subjects. (This is a long-running issue in secondary schools)
- Access for all rural schools to state of the art video conferencing equipment. (Do an audit and locate all the equipment still sitting in boxes or in old portables covered in dust in big schools)
- Genuine hands on and financial support for small rural schools to form learning networks where they can share expertise, resources, best practice and enable funded peer support.
- Encourage rural universities with an education faculty to embark on quality research led by school need in rural schools.
- Ensure that there is sufficient DET staff to support rural schools not one or two people trying to stretch themselves across a region that is half the size of Victoria.

These recommendations (and they are not an exhaustive list. Not being a secondary teacher I have kept my recommendations to actions that can be taken at a primary level. What is achieved in the primary years will of course have an impact on the educational outcomes and aspirations of rural students in their secondary and tertiary education) will cost money and require hard work from DET and more heavy lifting by rural principals and their learning communities but the gap between metropolitan students and rural student school achievement is widening! The 2010 Framework was a good start but we have already wasted 4 (now nearly 5) years!

Unless we want to see a two tiered state with a dominant Melbourne and the rest of Victoria a wasteland that young people can't wait to flee from then we need to start now.

If the current government is serious about transforming Victoria into the *education state* then we need to act now.

To do that we need the political will to accept past failures and accept that action needs to be done and we need DET to get its head out of the sand and fight more effectively for state education and to make closing the rural/city gap it's number one priority.

Appendix

- Discussion paper for Minister Lenders 2007
- Discussion paper on Leadership issues in rural schools 2011 (Embedded documents in this paper also include parliamentary submissions on *Effective Strategies for Professional Learning* and the *Rural Inequity Inquiry*. Also included are papers prepared on matters such as; *Mentoring Small School principals*, *Creating a Rural School Association* and a *Response to the 2010 Rural Education Framework*
- Response to the SiMERR Rural survey 2007
- Small rural School issues discussion paper for Minister Dixon (Meeting with Minister 07/03/12)
- Regional Services Consultation paper 2015
- Recent information 2022-23



Discussion Paper for Minister Lenders

By T. Shaw (Principal Glen Park Primary School 1997-07)

Presented to Minister Lenders 29/06/07

Preamble

There are many pressing issues affecting small rural schools and their communities and which are voiced regularly within small school clusters and at network and regional level.

Many concerns were raised at the Shepparton Small Schools Conference in 2005 (<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/SmallSchoolsForumReport.pdf>) but are still waiting to be addressed. In this paper I have outlined five issues which have been discussed amongst small school leaders for many years and which I believe can be alleviated with minimum cost or alteration to current practices.

This discussion paper has been written to stimulate ‘big picture’ discussion amongst small school principals invited to attend a forum with Minister of Education Mr. John Lenders on 29th June at Warrenheip P.S.

Issue 1

Workload

In the thirteen years that I have been a head teacher/principal in one-teacher rural schools I think it is fair to say that our workload has decreased and that DoE has listened to the grievances of principals in schools of all sizes across the state who have felt that they were being smothered in red-tape.

The easy to read and react to Internet ‘School Bulletins’ and the development of a compliance checklist have or have the potential to, make our role as school administrators (especially those of us with a full-time teaching load) much easier.

One concern however is the introduction of DoE initiatives into schools which we are expected to ‘take-up’ with short timelines and often limited back up and support especially in remote areas. (CASES 21, E-Recruitment, the new report card)

The implementation in 2008 of Ultranet has the potential to cause more angst and headaches.

Recommendation

1. Currently a working party of the Grampians Small School’s Rural Focus Group is working on a proposal for the development of a statewide ‘small school association’. Such a group could provide the necessary support to DoE to ensure that central initiatives are ‘user-friendly’ within small schools.

Such a group could give timely and knowledgeable advice on how best to implement initiatives such as Ultranet in schools. Small rural schools often have limited technical support, serious time constraints on Principals who are changed with seamless implementation of technical change and who often suffer from poor communication and power links.

A small school association could help choose small schools to pilot such initiatives, provide support to those schools and their leaders and liaise with DoE on how initiatives should be supported in small rural schools. (More time may be needed for full implementation, more SSO or TSI time may be required, CRT funding may be required to free up the principal and teachers to integrate the initiative into the school, alterations may be required to infrastructure. I found that out when my school swapped to Broadband)

A small school association like the one proposed (The working party will have a proposal ready by July) could further re-enforce DoE's commitment to small rural school communities.

2. New South Wales schools with enrolments between 1-45 have 12 hours of clerical support time (The equivalent of a 0.2 time fraction) A similar formula adopted in Victoria (Our system has devolved more administrative roles to schools than NSW. Refer: <http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/mur02145.htm>) should enable small rural schools to keep up to date with all system requirements.

Issue 2

Security

Security issues have been headline grabbing not only in Victoria but also New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT in recent times *. The media has labelled these incidents 'Parent Rage'. Disruptive intervention in schools by parents as well as violent attacks and intimidation are bad enough in large city/suburban schools but could have dire consequences in rural and remote small schools (especially one and two teacher schools)

Even in small schools relatively close to regional centres such as Ballarat the response time for emergency services can be agonisingly long. In remote areas the time difference could be critical.

Recommendations

1. Ideally no school should be staffed by one teacher alone. (A staffing establishment of 1.5 would be more reasonable in very small rural schools)
2. Make it easier for schools to document issues related to assaults and intimidation to teachers and principals in schools. The ACT Government takes a very hard-line on violence in schools: <http://www.det.act.gov.au/publicat/novis.htm>
3. Create a no-blame and no-denunciations environment for Principals who document incidents. It has been claimed that principals don't report these incidents because they are

concerned that their school will be ‘labelled’ as violent. This concern should never impede a principal from reporting violent incidents in schools.

4. A strictly no-tolerance policy when it comes to parental violence in schools should be part of a responsible use policy for all government buildings and public servants. Some high profile prosecutions would send a powerful message to violent parents.

Issue 3

Welfare

The idealised picture of rural families and communities is a hallmark of the Australian ethos of the suntanned larrikin Aussie battler. For some families living in rural areas life can be slower, with a strong sense of community and traditional family values. For some however the harsher reality is that rural families can feel isolated, financially insecure and despondent.

Some traditional country families are feeling under pressure from the rural decline, drought and recent, and probably now more frequent natural disasters. New families to rural communities (some fleeing for a better lifestyle and others seeking cheaper rental opportunities) often don't fit in and the clash of cultures can often be played out in rural schools (playground and school council/parents club)

Most rural communities have been severely affected by the withdrawal of community services such as banks and local offices of government departments. Case studies such as the ‘Leadership for rural school –community partnerships’ by Sue Kilpatrick (<http://www.rirdc.gov.au/pub/shortreps/sr112.html> abridged version.) have looked into rural school – community partnerships and they have shown that a strong rural school-community partnership can deliver positive outcomes for youth and for the community.

More and more the school is becoming the ‘one stop shop’ for community and family problems with an increasing burden on school principals and staff.

Schools need more support if they are going to be expected to fulfil the roles once adopted by government representatives, football coaches, police, priests or respected senior community members.

Some of our schools have Primary Welfare Officer funding but in small rural schools this funding does not provide for a welfare officer with a significant time-fraction so principals take on that role as well as everything else they do.

Recommendation

Other than restoring services lost to rural areas over the last 20 years, which would be impractical, schools could be given support to provide important information on government and community services that families in need could access.

This could take the form of a display rack of relevant brochures which can be updated on a regular basis or a community workstation with a touch screen PC which can act as a direct portal to government and community service providers.

Issue 4

Promotion

One issue that was made loud and clear at the Shepparton Small schools conference in 2005 was the need to promote small rural schools to the wider community.

Kennett Government education policies saw the closure of scores of small rural schools across the state in the early-mid 1990s and through the Government's Quality Provision process inaccurate but lasting doubts were raised about the quality of small school education.

There has never been a concerted effort by DoE to address the wrongs and disinformation used to close down often viable and vibrant schools. (Principals at the Big Day Out have also requested a greater effort by DoE to promote the public school system.)

Recommendations

A television, radio and newspaper campaign to promote the quality and diversity of our excellent public school system. (To the wider community not just our existing school community) Part of this campaign should focus on the benefits of small school education and the benefits of becoming an active and supportive member of a small school learning community.

Issue 5

Staffing

There is a lack of movement for staff in our schools. This particularly affects small rural schools. Some schools have had the same principals and teaching staff for 10-15 years and often longer. (This is only a problem when principals and staff become jaded and need/want to move on. But where to?) Many concerns about staff that are under performing or reluctant to be adventurous in teaching strategies could be attributed to teachers and principals requiring new challenges and new surroundings.

Recommendations

1. Groups of small schools have discussed staff swapping informally between themselves at a local level. The practice would gain more support between schools if DoE would endorse and promote it and make it a seamless and painless exercise.
2. DoE may need to provide some financial support for staff that will have further than normal to travel or have some relocation expenses. Successful case-studies can be promoted through the Education Times and even via DVD.

3. Small rural schools could be reinvigorated by having graduate teachers appointed to rural schools for a year over and above the schools staffing establishment (paid for by DoE) These graduates would benefit financially and professionally by the experience (which could lead to further employment) and the school would benefit by having some ‘new blood’ in their learning community. (Refer to an AEU report on teacher shortages:

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Campaigns/teachersupply.pdf> and the ‘Good Beginnings: Beginning teachers in their schools: ready, willing and able’ report

<http://www.cornerstones.org.au/media/pdfs/Beginning%20Teachers.pdf> . Also refer to a US report entitled: ‘Finders Keepers: Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Rural Schools’

<http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Osterholdm,%20Karen,%20Finders%20Keepers%20->

[%20Recruiting%20and%20Retaining%20Teachers%20in%20Rural%20Schools.pdf](http://www.nationalforum.com/Electronic%20Journal%20Volumes/Osterholdm,%20Karen,%20Finders%20Keepers%20-%20Recruiting%20and%20Retaining%20Teachers%20in%20Rural%20Schools.pdf)

Other issues

1. Research

Some valuable research has been undertaken on behalf of the Commonwealth and various state education departments that directly relates to and influences government decision making in regards to small rural school education. (The Kirkpatrick study into small school community links and the Schiller report into the roles and responsibilities of teaching principals have already been sited.) As well as these studies there is also the:

- ‘Rural and Remote Education Inquiry’
(http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/human_rights/rural_remote/scoping_survey.pdf)
- ‘Putting rural into pre-service teacher education’
(<http://www.aare.edu.au/04pap/boy04081.pdf>)
- The SIMERR National Survey
(http://simerr.une.edu.au/national_survey/Abridged%20report/Abridged_Full.pdf)

The Victorian DoE should also invest in small school education research that would better inform the system when making decisions that affect rural learning communities.

The proposed small school association could facilitate this research on behalf of DoE. (Given recent increased Federal Government intrusions into state educational matters it would be advantageous to have as much relevant, local and current data available so that Victoria can fully engage in future debates about education.)

2. Curriculum provision and Professional development

A recent memo from the Grampian’s Regional Director (5th June) reminded principals about the importance of teaching LOTE in all government schools.

Small rural schools (particularly isolated schools) have always had difficulties accessing qualified teachers capable of delivering a suitable LOTE program that would meet the requirements of the new Standards. (I know of local schools with over 300 enrolments which don't have a LOTE program for the same reasons)

A possible solution to this could be the development of small school specific LOTE modules with accompanying resource material (DVDs, blackline masters, software and audio CDs) which could go some way toward meeting the Standards. (The loss of the Shared Specialist program due to short-sighted political expediency at the time is still being felt today. I sincerely believe 'the gap' today would be much smaller if children in small rural schools still had access to specialist teachers.)

A small schools association could take on the role of assisting DoE to develop links between schools (indeed across Regions) to facilitate the sharing of resources, local expertise, P.D. and mentoring opportunities.

The boundaries are limitless (especially with Edumail and video-conferencing) for DoE to help small rural schools to 'get together'.

To make it easier for small schools to respond quickly to professional development opportunities and available grants a different application process / application standard for small schools could be initiated so they could express an interest in funding for a new initiative. Say, 15% of Teacher Professional Leave funding should be 'partitioned' so that it can only go to small schools via a different / more simplified application process.

One request from the Shepparton small schools conference was for a small school contact list for all small schools to be able to access. To my knowledge that has never been done.

3. **Infrastructure**

Some rural schools have recently benefited from major capital works expenditure however there are still too many rural schools in a dilapidated condition.

Luckily we have been able to benefit from Commonwealth funding (the Investing in our Schools Program) and some schools have benefited from grants to update toilet blocks.

Many schools have to contend with portable classrooms well past their 'use by dates'. (I was embarrassed to show off my school to prospective families and I know I lost potential enrolments because the 40+ year old portables that make up my school were sub-standard. Investing in Our Schools money has temporarily alleviated that)

Children and teachers should not have to endure poor learning environments simply because they are in a remote setting or have a small enrolment.

What better way of showing confidence in our rural communities than providing them with 'new schools'. An excellent public relations exercise would be to provide purpose built environmentally

friendly small schools (Designed by small school teachers) as a priority in the government's school re-building program?

Conclusion

These issues have been highlighted and discussed over many years with my colleagues from the Moorabool Collegiate Group (eleven small schools between Ballarat and Bacchus Marsh) and other small school principals I've 'talked to' via Edumail over the last 10 years.

Many of the recommendations are also products of these discussions and a result of the 'can do' attitude of small school principals.

About the Author

I have been a teacher for 23 years and a head/teacher principal of one-teacher schools for 13 years. I was a member of the DoE focus group looking at the roles and responsibilities of head teachers in 2000, small schools representative for the Highlands Network 2004-06, Moorabool Collegiate Group secretary for 10 years and Grampians Small Rural Focus group member and member of the Small School Association Working Party in 2007. This report was tabled and revised at the June 25th Moorabool Collegiate Group meeting.

I have been a member of the ALP since 2003 and am committed to state education and small school education.

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* Newspaper reports detailing issues related to 'Parent rage' across Australia can be found at these sites.

<http://www.news.com.au/adelaidenow/story/0,22606,21910273-5006301,00.html>

June 16, 2007 'This is reflected by Education Department figures showing the number of parents being banned from schools for violent behavior jumped from 13 in 2005 to 21 last year.'

<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/05/01/1083224646204.html>

May 2, 2004 'Over the past two years, teachers and principals in Victoria have reported nearly 100 incidents of parental rage, ranging from abusive language to iron-bar attacks on car windows' Also refer a more recent report in the Sunday Age 10th June

http://canberra.yourguide.com.au/detail.asp?class=news&subclass=general&story_id=591669&category=general

23 June 2007 'ACT Education Minister Andrew Barr has moved to crack down on violence in Canberra's public schools, introducing a form of mandatory reporting and ordering a sweeping audit of every school's bullying policy. "Schools must report instances of bullying, harassment, violence, racism and sexual harassment that pose an immediate threat to safety of student and staff as critical incidents.'

'This report must be made to the Director of Schools immediately by phone and in writing within 24 hours.'

Mr. Barr said "it will no longer be for the schools themselves to make the call on when to bring in the police, as the Director of Schools will be immediately involved".

Leadership Issues in Small Rural Schools



The Country Education Project (CEP) hosts an annual rural learning summit to explore issues and ideas relevant to rural learning. August 2010

Discussion paper for the Moorabool Network May 2011

T. Shaw Principal March 2011

Introduction

Many challenges facing small rural schools have related to resourcing and ‘bricks and mortar’. Over the last few years state and particularly commonwealth funding initiatives and grants have led to dramatically improved resourcing for small rural schools and largely due to Building the Education Revolution (BER), dilapidated infrastructure has been modernised or replaced. I have told my school community that we now have buildings at Glen Park that complement the modern and innovative education occurring inside them.

The challenges of small school leadership are many and varied and depend greatly on a variety of factors but predominantly:

- Actual size (Definitions of what constitutes a small school vary from state to state.) The following schools in Grampians Region are all classified as small rural schools by DEECD's definition: Glen Park (single digit enrolment) Lake Bolac P-12 (90 students from P-12) and Myrniong Primary school (160 students and rising) Although all small rural schools the issues effecting them will differ considerably.
- Location (Some small rural schools can be on the periphery of large rural centres (Glen Park, although a one-teacher school for the last 18 years is only 12 km out of the Ballarat CBD) while schools such as Yaapeet also a one teacher school would be regarded as remote. Other small rural schools can service small towns while others have no community to speak of other than the school community.

Generalising about small schools is therefore problematic. Small rural school's come in all shapes and sizes and own their own histories and traditions. Having said that, small school leaders can face many similar challenges and some of those will be discussed in this paper.

Advantages of small rural schools

According to the Isolated Children's Parents Association (ICPA)

An appropriate school in one which provides schooling at the required year level with sufficient curriculum offerings to enable all children to achieve their individual potential.

'In other words from a rights perspective every child has the right to quality education regardless of where their families occupation takes them'.

(Page 14 'A Collective Act', Anderson et al. ACER Press 2010)

Perceptions of small rural schools vary from the nostalgic notion of children riding to school on horseback, (They still did that at Glen Park up until the late 1970s) ringing the old school bell by hand and helping the teacher chop wood for the open fire to the hard-line economic rationalist view that small schools are not 'cost-effective'. The latter view (masked by the public assertion that small schools could not accommodate a diverse enough curriculum) saw many small rural schools abruptly closed in the mid-nineties. The stigma of those forced closures still haunts small rural schools today.

Student performance data from small rural schools education varies. The 2007 National Report on Schooling in Australia identified that students in years 3,5 and 7 from urban schools outperformed students in rural and remote areas however some small rural schools in Grampians Region outperformed larger schools in 2009 (Lal Lal P.S. and Mt Blowhard P.S. performed exceptionally well in

My School data) In the US small schools are thought to promote higher academic achievement and better student outcomes. (Page 6- *A Collective Act*)

In the US small schools are seen as safer with positive student attitudes to the school and better student retention. (Page 7- *A Collective Act*) It would be informative to access similar data generated for comparison in DEECD schools (From Annual Student and parent opinion surveys)

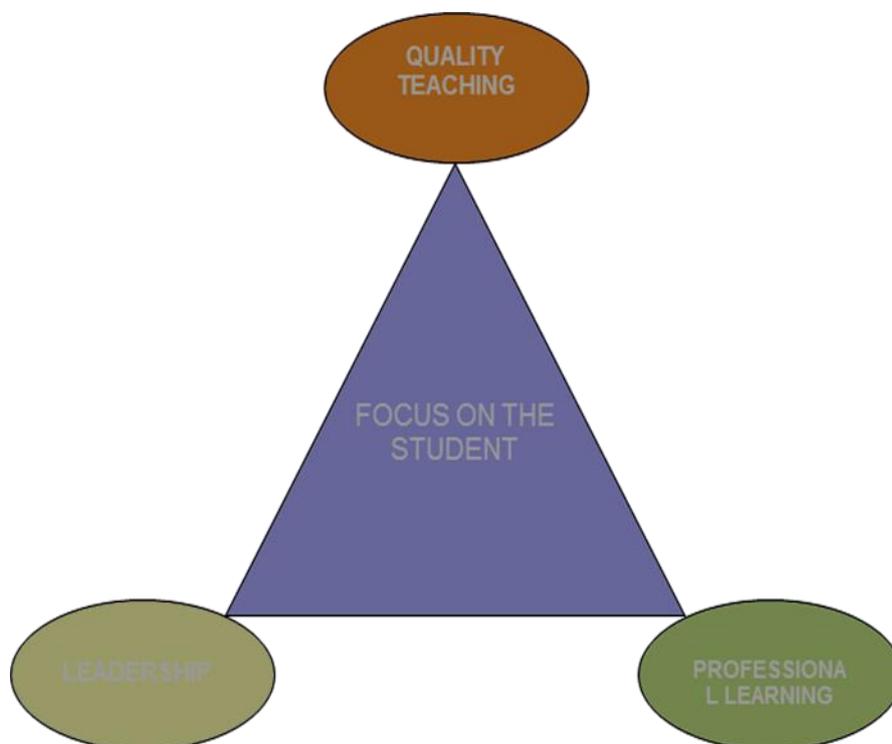
It is accepted that small schools provide greater opportunity for more personalised educational opportunities. (A lot is written about the need for differentiated learning, in small rural schools it is a matter of course.)

Leadership in small schools focuses more on pedagogical issues rather than organising staff, timetabling and juggling finances. Small school leaders are true instructional leaders.

Small school leaders tend not to focus on being small but more on *how can we turn being small to our advantage*. Small school leaders can reflect on and enhance the pedagogy to ensure the best conditions are in place to help learning to flourish. There are many positives to small rural schools which need to be better promoted and celebrated by DEECD.

Why School Leadership matters

Stephen Dinham (Also refer Hattie) writes that leadership for exceptional learning involves the 'success triangle' (Refer the diagram below)



Dinham S, Hattie J, Developing the Potential for Learning 2007

Dinham believes education systems should amongst other things direct their energies to improve:

- Teacher education
- Quality teachers
- The quality of teaching

To do otherwise he regards as ‘fiddling around the edges of schooling’. Viviane Robinson (*School Leadership and Student Outcomes 2007, ACEL Monograph Series No. 41*) found that the greatest effect size in relation to student outcomes came from leaders participating in and promoting teacher learning and development (Including participating with teachers in formal and informal professional learning)

Given this research consider how powerful the role of the full-time teaching principal is to the success of teaching and learning in their school.

Issues affecting the teaching principal

The teaching principal role holds significant challenges especially in schools where the principal has a full-time teaching role. As well as needing a comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum. (From P-6 in a one teacher school such as Glen Park for most if not all Domains) Solid understanding of the curriculum areas is essential to establish credibility with the school community. An expansion in the principal role especially over the last 15 years has increased management workload with ‘life balance’ implications.

Enever (Stress and Burnout, unpublished thesis, 2007) used the Maslach Burnout Inventory to compare teaching and non-teaching principals in NSW in the late 90s and found that teaching principals had a higher degree of emotional exhaustion and lower perceptions of accomplishment than non-teaching principals. Murdoch and Schiller found teaching principal’s expressed feelings of guilt and frustration at not – in their eyes – being able to do their dual roles.

Sometimes the small size of a school can magnify the challenges that in a larger school would be comparatively easily absorbed or deflected. In turn, this can put at risk successful maintenance of a school leader’s life balance. An illustration of this is where one principal recalled in a study the negative impact that just one person undermining teamwork can have in a small school.

...if someone does not want to be part of that culture they can break a small school.

(p.42 ‘A Collective Act’, Anderson et al. ACER Press 2010)

Non-teaching principals have an advantage over teaching principals as they have a more flexible daily schedule. Murdoch and Schiller found that while parents are prepared to cut the teaching

principal a 'bit of slack', they were wary of them spending too much time out of their class covering other issues. Parents don't like their teaching principal to be out of the school too often. This impact's on the teaching principal's ability to engage in professional learning and involvement in conferences and opportunities to connect with and engage in the 'big picture' issues promoted by DEECD.

Some rural schools are hard to staff. There are many reasons for this such as the fear of dislocation from family and friends and anxieties arising from having to adjust to new and unfamiliar surroundings. There have been many initiatives and incentives put in place to address this issue (DEECD announced some belated responses to this problem in their Framework for Rural Education released in October 2010)

Leadership positions in small rural schools have also become difficult to fill in recent times. Traditionally they have been seen as a pathway to principal positions in larger schools. This appears to be no longer the case in Grampians Region. (Especially close to Ballarat) Movement in small school principal positions is fairly stagnant.

Australian and international data has shown that involvement by the school and especially the principal with the local community is essential to a small rural school's ongoing improvement for students. Fundraising efforts and school-community partnerships (local fairs/festivals and recognition of local history and identity) are typical ways that small rural schools maintain and sustain their social networks. Because of the importance of this link it is essential that the small school principal is mindful of their emotions and how to manage them when engaging with their community and staff (some of whom may be locals themselves) Clark and Wildy (*Context Counts: Viewing small school leadership from the inside out*, Journal of Educational Administration 2004) say that small school leaders need heightened emotional intelligence.

Some professional learning options

Many small school principals feel ill-prepared for their new role. Small school leadership specific induction or even opportunities for internship do not exist in Victoria. There are also no formalised mentoring programs. (The NSW Department of Education and Training offers a Teaching Principals Program which is a state-wide program for experienced principals of small schools.) These initiatives would better prepare small schools principals for their roles. (Many new teaching principals may also be ill-equipped for teaching multi-age classes.)

Small rural school would also benefit from access to periodic sabbaticals so that teaching principals in particular can catch up with pedagogical and administrative policy development and seek professional renewal. (Possibly a program similar to the High Performing Principal Program but specifically tailored to meet the needs of small school principals.) DEECD recognises that professional learning is a significant issue for leaders in small schools. Instructional Rounds is an attempt to address that issue but it neglects the specific needs of small schools. (Schools under 4 classrooms are not eligible for instructional rounds)

Strengthening cluster, collegiate groups and networks would also benefit small school leaders by:

- Providing greater access to a range of shared resources (equipment and expertise including tapping in to in-house teacher skills and abilities)
- Sharing leadership opportunities (It frees up leaders to nourish ideas for teaching and learning which can address the pressing issue of teacher quality, helps to send out the message to staff that they are trusted and respected and can act as an emotional pressure valve.)
- Sharing staff which could help to attract and retain quality staff and develop potential future leaders
- Offer emotional and moral support to colleagues
- Overcoming the feelings of isolation especially in remote and one-teacher schools

These groupings should form organically to meet the needs of individual schools and their communities and should receive financial and moral support from regional and central management. Professional learning support to help establish meaningful small school groupings or even a state-wide small school network (such as the one in South Australia) would be advantageous. (Refer to the SiMERR report findings)

Setting up special projects within the school that have a ‘focus on students’ as their objective can also provide opportunities for shared leadership and provide community involvement. At Glen Park we develop a ‘curriculum based’ project every year. Past projects have included: developing digital portfolios, formalising personalised learning, creating play-based learning centres, initiating a thinking curriculum across the school, developing a school management guide etc.

The Victorian Rural Education Framework placed a lot of faith in the Ultranet to be able to conquer the ‘tyranny of distance’ for rural schools whether it is online learning or the provision of professional learning for rural teachers and leaders but as of writing this paper Ultranet is still hindered by a plethora of ‘teething problems’. Online learning is still an option for delivering professional learning to remote schools or to combat excessive travel times but it is still only available at Regional Office and some secondary schools and is not suitable for all professional learning programs. (For example West Australian First Steps could not be undertaken successfully online).

Conclusion

In conclusion there are many challenges to the leadership of small schools. Those challenges are unique to each school but there are some common concerns which require further comparative research to be undertaken and a system wide initiative to address them (such as the Victorian Rural Education Framework or a future Commonwealth Rural Education Framework).

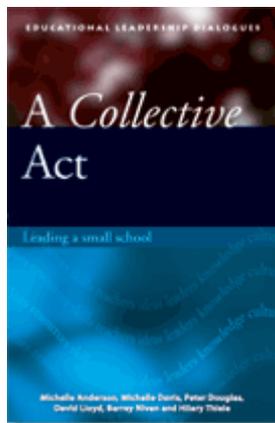
In this paper I have suggested some professional learning ideas which I think would assist small school leaders, especially teaching principals to improve their educational leadership skills and benefit their school community and teaching and learning in their schools.

Bibliography

<http://www.icpa.com.au/>



The ICIP has a presence in all states and federally except Victoria.



A Collective Act by **Anderson, Michelle/ Davis, Michelle/ Douglas, Pete**, ISBN 9780864318626, ACER Press.



School Leadership and Student Outcomes

Viviane Robinson (School Leadership and Student Outcomes 2007, ACER Monograph Series No. 41)



Innovative And Effective Professional Learning

Dinham S, Innovative and Effective Professional Learning For Student Accomplishment, 2007



National framework for rural and remote education

National Framework for Rural and Remote Education

<http://cep.org.au/2010/07/21/rural-learning-summit-2010/>

CEP site

<http://www.mindgarden.com/products/mbi.htm>

Maslach Burnout Inventory



Murdoch and Schiller,
Teaching principals in

Murdoch and Schiller, Teaching principals in smaller schools, 2002, AARE Conference, Brisbane.

<https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/proflearn/areas/sld/programs/teachpp.htm>

Teaching Principals Program NSW.

The screenshot shows a website titled "Professional Learning and Leadership Development". The main heading is "Teaching Principals Program". Below this, it lists "Target group: Principals of PPS and P96 schools" and "About the Program". The "About the Program" section states: "The Teaching Principal Program is a state-wide program. It is designed specifically to support the work of experienced Teaching Principals as they seek to 'make a difference in their classroom and the classroom next door.'" It also lists key documents used in the program: Quality Teaching Framework, Leading and Managing the School, the Professional Teaching Standards, and the School Leadership Capability Framework. A list of issues explored in the program includes: characteristics of ongoing effective leadership, school culture and shared vision, continued educational improvement, establishing effective networks, developing your staff and your community, and implementing Habits of Mind.



willing to lead
document.pdf

<http://www.familyschool.org.au/pdf/news1102.pdf>



Family School Partners February 2011

Rural Education

In this edition we focus on issues associated with rural education, a topic all the more sensitive since the effects of natural disasters have devastated large sections of rural Australia. The influence of three key rural independents should force greater attention and, more particularly, the allocation of more resources to supporting rural communities. Education has been identified as an area requiring investment. We want to give you an idea of what the issues are and what is being done to address those issues. Follow the links for more detail.

Before we start, please take a moment to note that the Bureau has a new direct phone contact and postal address. We are still co-located with ACSSD in the newly refurbished Chifley Hub, but have a new phone number: 02 6282 5887. The new postal address is PO Box 3910, WESTON 2611. Manager Kate Lytle remains contactable on mobile.

<http://www.austparents.edu.au/rural-students-to-benefit-from-federal-schooling-agreement>



Rural students to benefit from Federal schooling agreement

Author: Justine Ferrari
The Australian, Page 6 (Thu 9 Sep 2010)
Bush to benefit from flow of funds — ELECTION 2010

SCHOOLING
RURAL schools will get the first bite of spending on education initiatives under the minority Gillard government, with one-third of funding quarantined to be spent in the bush.

Latest News & News Archive

- APC's Election Coverage for Parents
- Strong community support for independent schools
- Labor is being too about support for private schools
- How to get the best out of the My School website
- Consultation on draft K-10 Australian Curriculum
- Textbook for all about My School

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/human_rights/rural_remote/scoping_survey.pdf

Rural and remote School education final report by the Human Rights Commission.

Education Review March 2011(<http://educationreview.com.au/>)

In an article by Professor John Halsey, (page 21) data from a survey of rural education leaders undertaken by the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education at Flinders University (<http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/education/rural/>) found that school leaders had 3 priorities for improving rural education leadership as a career pathway: 1. Education Departments publicly acknowledging and recognising their work, 2. financial incentives and 3. Valuing the experience of rural leaders equitably when applying for city/urban promotion/position. It also showed amongst the 683 rural education leaders who took part in the survey that there is a clear interest, indeed passion in being a rural education leader.

Discussion papers and submissions from Glen Park Primary School



Rural Framework
response.doc

Note: The DEECD link to the Victorian Rural Schools Framework no longer opens. The program has been scrapped by the new Victorian Government.



rural inequity inquiry
submission.pdf

Submission to the 2010 Parliamentary Inquiry into Rural inequity



mentoring small
school principals.pdf

Mentoring small school leaders proposal



rural schools
association discussior

Response to the SiiMERR National Survey and proposal to establish a small school's association



Effective Strategies
for Teacher Professio

Discussion paper about effective strategies for professional learning in rural schools.



Instructional
Rounds.pdf

Instructional Rounds discussion paper

Response to the SiMERR (Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Survey) National Survey



Glen Park Primary School 2006

Anthony Shaw

(On behalf of the Moorabool Collegiate Group/PLC)

February 2007

Preamble

On December 6th 2005 myself (Tony Shaw Principal Glen Park Primary School) and Peter Clifton (Principal Magpie Primary School) attended a Community Cabinet Meeting at Bacchus March to meet with the then Minister of Education and Training, Lynne Kosky, the

then Secretary of the Education Department Grant Hehir and Grampians Regional Director Malcolm Millar. We met with the Minister to discuss our proposal to establish a ‘Rural School Network’ to provide support to small rural school communities across Victoria.

The Moorabool Collegiate Group

We believe that small rural schools provide choice to parents wishing a more intimate and immediate learning environment for their children. In remote areas the rural school helps to create a focus for small communities many of which in recent times have seen a gradual loss of services and a drift away of young people to urban centres which can offer more diverse educational and occupational opportunities. We are concerned about the lack of recognition, support and promotion of small rural schools across the state and the impact that is having on the rural communities we serve.

The Moorabool Collegiate Group consists of 12 rural schools ranging in enrolments from 7 to over 100 students between Ballarat and Bacchus Marsh. We are a group of dedicated school leaders who are determined to ensure that: -

- The importance of small schools is recognised and valued.
- Innovative and best practices are created and shared.
- The best possible educational outcomes are achieved by our schools for our students.
- Principals of small schools are supported through the group.

We all believe that small schools are ‘great schools’ and we appreciated the Minister’s acknowledgement of this through her invitation to us to make a submission to Community Cabinet.

We believe that one approach to addressing our concerns could be the formation of a state-wide small schools association similar to the one established in South Australia. Their association deals directly with the Minister and the Education Department to help deliver government education policy effectively and efficiently to small schools and their communities.

The Moorabool Collegiate Group’s philosophy is that small schools are uniquely placed to deliver a ‘whole person’ approach to education. Our intimate knowledge of the background, abilities and aspirations of children and their families lends itself to addressing all the needs of the child and to set them on the road to life-long learning and responsible citizenship, achieving their full potential.

Our data tells us that small schools are achieving at a very high level but now face increasing difficulties ensuring that children attain their potential because of our changing social landscape.

We believe that rural schools in Victoria would benefit from the professional collegial support and advocacy role of a rural schools association following the South Australian model.

It was pleasing to read that the SiMERR National Survey also advocates the creation of a similar organisation.

Unfortunately The Moorabool Collegiate Group received no feedback from the Department of Education for our proposal.

With the release of the SiMERR National Survey and the recent national focus on education (Kevin Rudd's 'Education Revolution', performance pay, the national shortage of science and mathematics teachers, a proposed national curriculum etc.) we feel it is time to revisit our proposal.



At the Moorabool Collegiate group Conference in 2005 we played host to our colleagues from small schools in South Australia. We have forged strong links with the South Australian Small Schools Association.

The SiMERR National Survey

In 2006 all Victorian public schools received an abridged report of the SiMERR National Survey prepared for the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training. The SiMERR National Survey generated over 100 findings relating to the needs of Australian teachers involved in science, ICT and mathematics education.

Some of the recommendations of the survey included:

- The development of a national Rural School Strategy to break down geographic disparities in school education and to co-ordinate often disparate programs addressing rural school needs.
- That education authorities review their recruitment incentive schemes for rural and remote areas and actively promote the advantages of living and teaching in rural communities.
- That state and territory education systems sponsor the establishment of a professional Association of Rural educators.
- That education authorities in collaboration with universities and professional organisations establish a Rural School Leadership Program to target experienced teachers with leadership potential.
- That a National Rural School Education Taskforce be established to develop a national rural school education strategy and facilitate the ongoing co-operation between federal and state/territory governments and other stakeholders.
- There were also many recommendations related to the delivery of science, ICT and mathematics in rural and regional areas.

The Moorabool Collegiate Group endorses their recommendations especially those regarding a Professional Association for Rural Teachers which mirrors the proposal we put to the Minister on 6th December 2005.

The authors of the SiMERR survey suggest that state and territory education systems sponsor the establishment of a professional Association of Rural Educators, with a central office in a regional area of each state/territory and branches in rural areas. They proposed the following charter for the association:

- Supporting the orientation of new teachers
- Supplementary peer support
- Advocating for rural teachers
- Enhancing the status of rural service
- Promoting a sense of collegiality between rural teachers
- Maintaining the institutional memory of the profession in rural areas.

Further to the proposed charter for this group we would also suggest the following structure and additional goals:

- small school input into curriculum and program development to make sure it is 'small school friendly' and not one size fits all.
- specific maths, science and ICT programs aimed at small schools (especially isolated schools)

The organisational structure must be based on people currently working in small schools - not a central office committee. Rural school principals also need to be supported financially to attend meetings and actively support colleagues across the state.



Members of the Moorabool Collegiate group Karolina Kuzmich (Principal Little Bendigo Primary School) and Paul Yeatman (Principal Balliang East Primary School) at our annual conference in Melbourne 2006.

Recommendations

We believe that given our initial proposal to Minister Kosky and the findings of SiMERR National Survey which supports it, the Victorian Government needs to immediately establish a Rural Schools Professional Association possibly along the lines of the South Australian Small Schools Association or that proposed in the SiMERR Survey.

We believe that such an organisation would support teachers and their communities and address the concerns voiced by stakeholders in the survey about student outcomes, the status of rural teaching and access, connectedness and opportunities for teachers and students in the bush.

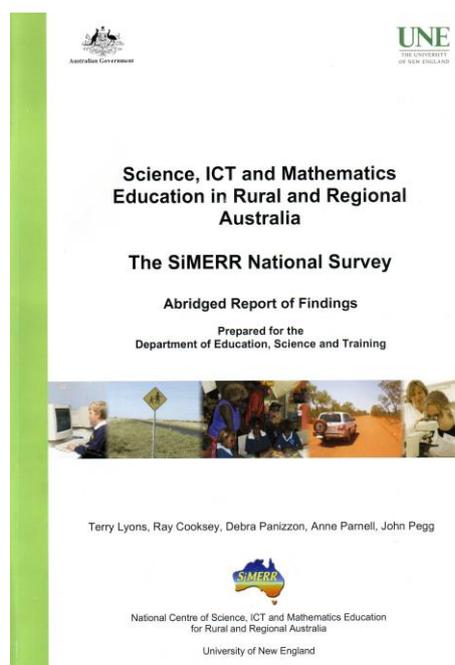
The SiMERR National Survey advocates a nationally co-ordinated approach to address many of the issues they raised in their report (i.e. a National Rural School Education Strategy and strategies to attract and retain teachers for rural schools) Strong, mature Federal leadership and co-operation between the states would be essential in delivering badly needed rural education reform across the country.

The Moorabool Collegiate Group would appreciate feedback from the Minister and the Education Department on the proposal put forward in this report and would be willing to actively participate in the future development of a Rural Schools Professional Association.

Anthony Shaw Principal Glen Park Primary School Secretary Moorabool Collegiate Group and Principal Learning Community

References

- National Centre of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Australia National Survey, T. Lyons, University of New England, 2006
- SiMERR web site:
http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/issues_teaching_science.htm
and http://www.simerr.une.edu.au/national_survey/
- South Australian Small Schools Association web site: <http://www.ssasa.sa.edu.au/>



Small Rural School Issues

Discussion paper for Minister Dixon

(Darley P.S. 07/03/12)

Preamble

After 22 years of teaching in rural schools (17 of them in one teacher schools) I believe that small schools are uniquely placed to deliver a 'whole person' approach to education. Our intimate knowledge of the background, abilities and aspirations of children and their families lends itself to addressing all the needs of the child and to set them on the road to life-long learning, responsible citizenship and achieving their full potential. Although from my experience I believe that many of the disadvantages and inequities of rural education have been addressed I still feel there is a long way to go before we can say that metropolitan and country children have identical educational opportunities.

Research and legislative background

Since the 1999 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) inquiry into rural and remote education there has been developing recognition that rural students are often disadvantaged in many areas. The Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2001 paper *National Framework For Rural and Remote Education* raised a number of key issues around rural education delivery and outcomes. The paper highlighted the need for an overarching framework. This work has since been complemented by research by the National Centre of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR).

The *Melbourne Declaration* developed an Action Plan 2009-12 which contained a number of key actions, one of which was: *improved reward structures for teachers and leaders working in disadvantaged indigenous, rural/remote and hard to staff schools*. DEECD has developed a Rural Education Framework, sponsored by John Allman (General Manager, Education Partnerships Division) and released in November 2010 (after a focus group of which I was a member met to commence work on it in September 2009) but unfortunately after its release which much fanfare it disappeared without warning with nothing to replace it.

Introduction

Many rural communities are in crisis. They must deal with the rapid pace of change in terms of globalisation of the economy and changing world markets, which have brought about a decline in traditional industries such as mining, agriculture and manufacturing. Associated with this, are the attendant problems of unemployment, global warming and declining

population, and, in particular, a drain of youth from the country to the city. Most communities have been severely affected by the withdrawal of other important community services such as banks and local offices of government departments.

Schools in rural areas provide much more than educational services and are vital to the economic and social wellbeing of many communities, a report, Commissioned by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) and titled 'More than an Education - - Leadership for rural school community partnerships' (Refer: <http://www.rirdc.gov.au/reports/HCC/02-055.pdf>) has revealed that rural schools provide a number of economic and social benefits, many of which have not been well understood.

Dr Sue Kilpatrick, from the University of Tasmania's Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, said rural school community partnerships deliver a variety of positive outcomes for youth and for the community, including the provision of education and training that meets student and community needs, improved school retention, increased retention of youth in rural communities, positive environmental outcomes, cultural and recreational benefits from sharing physical and human school resources.

"Schools also provide significant economic benefits as a key employer and consumer of local goods and services," she said.

"However, schools can also be a vital, but often overlooked, component of rural community development and provide one of the major opportunities for community interaction while also helping to build individual and community social capital, including knowledge resources."

Knowledge resources refer to knowledge of *who, when and where* to go for advice or assistance, and knowledge of how to get things done.

Dr Kilpatrick said rural school community partnerships build social capital by: creating new networks or strengthening existing networks within the community; utilising and making others aware of the skills and knowledge available within the community; establishing clear and widely understood rules and procedures for getting things done; facilitating communication within the community, and providing opportunities for people with differing values and attitudes to come to appreciate each other's viewpoints and work on shared projects. The report identifies a leadership process model for developing school-community partnerships. Rural schools and their communities need strong and effective leadership.

Rural schools play a vital role in strengthening linkages within their communities, by providing opportunities for interaction and networking, which contribute to the community's well-being and social cohesion. The close links between the survival and development of rural schools and their communities are demonstrated by a number of researchers (Jolly & Deloney 1996; Bowie 1994), who provide evidence that many rural communities have failed to remain viable after losing their school.

Historically, rural schools have offered unique benefits and attributes—for educators, students and communities. Rural and small town schools pioneered many successful education reform tools in widespread use today:

- Peer assistance
- Multi-grade classrooms
- Potential for multi-campus sharing of ideas and resources.
- Mentoring
- On site local management
- Cooperative learning
- Pioneering use of ICT as a teaching tool and administrative communications link.

Rural communities depend on their schools to serve many functions beyond their primary mission of educating children. Rural schools are often performing the vital role of representing state government services, they also serve as the social, welfare recreational and cultural foundation of their communities.

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission released a report into education in rural and remote Australia, (http://www.humanrights.gov.au/human_rights/rural_education/index.html) concluding that country children suffered “substantial disadvantage” that amounted to “discrimination”

This study, published in March 2000 after a year-long national inquiry, presented a range of statistics showing that on every indicator country students fared worse than their city counterparts. They were, “less likely to participate in schooling, more likely to be absent, less likely to complete the compulsory school years, less likely to complete Year 12 and less likely to participate in tertiary education and training”.

Many spoke of the threat of school closures due to declining enrolments. Small rural public schools, like those in the cities, were competing for students against a proliferation of highly subsidised private schools. A “roll-on effect” meant that when enrolments were down, school funding was cut, more students left, resulting in teacher transfers and “the death knell of the school”. A school council president from Mungindi in northern NSW described a “spiral going down, not going up or even stabilising.”

The Victorian Department of Education website states the following:

‘Victoria’s government schools are there for all children. They offer opportunity, choice, cultural diversity, life skills and a great education.’

(<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/default.htm>)

Part of that concept of choice entails the location and size of school that parents want to send their children to. The Victorian system does not have a one-size fits all mentality when it comes to school identity across the state.

Background

In 1872 the Education Act was passed by the Victorian Government setting up an Education Department and guaranteeing children 'free, secular and compulsory education'. Victoria was the first Australian colony to introduce this major reform. Since this time Victoria has prided itself on having an innovative, diverse and community responsive education system providing state education to children across the state.

Victoria has led the way in post compulsory education, integration of disabled students, the development of school councils, transparency and accountability measures years ahead of the private system and other state systems and the provision of a strong and solid system, where high statewide standards in education are maintained.

At the same time, each school has the flexibility to tailor its programs to meet the individual needs of students and the local community. State education has always been a priority area in Victoria no matter what government is in power.

The diversity in education provision in Victoria means that the system provides special schools, P-12 schools, English language schools and centres, distance education, home

schooling, and unique school settings such as the Sovereign Hill schools. Victoria can also boast large schools meeting the needs of large communities and small schools meeting the needs of small communities. The standard of education and opportunity for students attending large and small, rural and metropolitan should be equal.

In 1993 the then state government initiated the 'Quality Provision' Framework. At the end of the Quality Provision process, 171 school sites had been closed and 118 new entities (merged schools or large schools with small school annexes) created. The greatest impact was on those schools with less than 201 students.



Glen Park Primary School students before World War One.

As the Auditor General stated in his report (The Changing Profile of State Education School Reorganisations: <http://www.audit.vic.gov.au/old/sr36/ags3601.htm>)

The process put in place for assessing the need for school reorganisation was not completely effective in ensuring that all schools that needed to restructure did in fact participate in the process. Furthermore, for some schools that participated, it created disruption and disharmony during the process within those school communities, which had still not been overcome more than 12 months after the process, had been completed. In essence, while most schools did not necessarily disagree with the need for reorganization, they expressed dissatisfaction with the implementation process.

Results from the process confirmed that schools with the lowest enrolments relative to the other neighboring schools represented the majority of closures.

For small schools the process was one of survival rather than an assessment of the delivery of education and the learning achievements of students. The process set schools and their communities up against one another in a battle to see which ones would survive. It was an unpleasant time for small school communities, the ramifications of which were still being felt years after the event.

All small school rural communities felt that the value of the education they had striven to provide for their children for generations had been dismissed out of hand and their pride in their schools undervalued. This occurred hand in hand with an adjustment to the staffing establishment for schools and the loss of ‘shared specialist’ specifically affected small schools. (The vast majority of which are found in rural areas.) Refer to this site for a list of rural schools as designated by DE&T in 2004:

http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/hr/recruit/advert/Rural_Schools.pdf

The loss of a significant quantity of staff from rural areas reduced many two-teacher schools to one-teacher schools and the loss of shared specialists degraded the quality of education that could be provided especially in many remote areas of Victoria.

The loss of staff affected the viability of some schools in the eyes of their community. Many small schools closed which shouldn’t have and many were forced into annexing arrangements with nearby larger schools with mixed results. The ‘Quality provision process’ was a cost cutting measure (The Government saved \$200 million through school closures and the loss of often experienced staff) and had nothing to do with improving the quality of education provided in rural schools.

Small rural schools suffered a significant blow to their status in the general community due to the question mark raised about their viability and the quality of the education they provide. Small schools have had to work very hard to turn around the adverse publicity and inaccurate perceptions they unfairly received during the process.

Small schools and the communities they represent have fought back since those times and become stronger and more resilient. There are still concerns that the ‘voice of rural school education’ gets swamped and that decisions can be made centrally with little reference to their practicality in small school settings. It is for these reasons that I believe we need a small school ‘association’ to advocate for our needs.

(Refer to this study on the effectiveness of school leadership in rural communities:
http://www.crlra.utas.edu.au/files/discussion/2000/DO1-2000_with_cover.pdf)

Small school voice

In 2006 all Victorian public schools received an abridged report of the SiMERR National Survey prepared for the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training. The SiMERR National Survey generated over 100 findings relating to the needs of Australian teachers involved in science, ICT and mathematics education.

Some of the recommendations of the survey included:

- The development of a national Rural School Strategy to break down geographic disparities in school education and to co-ordinate often disparate programs addressing rural school needs.
- That education authorities review their recruitment incentive schemes for rural and remote areas and actively promote the advantages of living and teaching in rural communities.
- That state and territory education systems sponsor the establishment of a professional Association of Rural educators.
- That education authorities in collaboration with universities and professional organisations establish a Rural School Leadership Program to target experienced teachers with leadership potential.
- That a National Rural School Education Taskforce be established to develop a national rural school education strategy and facilitate the ongoing co-operation between federal and state/territory governments and other stakeholders.
- There were also many recommendations related to the delivery of science, ICT and mathematics in rural and regional areas.

I fully endorse all their recommendations. Indeed their recommendations mirror the proposal myself and the Principal of Magpie P.S. (Peter Clifton) put on behalf of our small school collegiate group (Moorabool Collegiate Group represents 10 small schools in the

Ballarat Bacchus Marsh area) to Minister Kosky at a Community Cabinet held in Bacchus Marsh on 6th December 2005 and to Minister Lenders at a small school forum held at Warrenheip P.S. on June 29th 2007.

The authors of the SiMERR survey suggest that state and territory education systems sponsor the establishment of a professional Association of Rural Educators, with a central office in a regional area of each state/territory and branches in rural areas. They proposed the following charter for the association:

- Supporting the orientation of new teachers
- Supplementary peer support
- Advocating for rural teachers
- Enhancing the status of rural service
- Promoting a sense of collegiality between rural teachers
- Maintaining the institutional memory of the profession in rural areas.

Further to the proposed charter for this group we would also suggest the following structure and additional goals:

- small school input into curriculum and program development to make sure it is 'small school friendly' and not one size fits all.
- specific maths, science and ICT programs aimed at small schools (especially isolated schools)

The organisational structure must be based on people currently working in small schools - not a central office committee.

Rural school principals also need to be supported financially to attend meetings and actively support colleagues across the state.

I believe the role of such an association should include:

- Promoting and providing experienced based input into state and regional support structures which bring about efficient and effective education for people in rural areas;
- encourage both the collection and sharing of relevant information on the provision of education in rural areas;

- promote consistency in the development of high quality education service to regional and remote students and their families
- facilitate partnership building between rural schools and their communities to support services and structures related to the provision of education in regional, rural and remote locations and in so doing building capacity of rural and remote communities .
- promoting a positive view of education in rural areas and encourage innovation and initiative in the provision of education services.
- provides the framework for sharing concerns, issues and experiences relating to education in rural Victoria.
- supporting partnerships through clustering of neighbouring or similar sized schools as a way to supporting education provision
- Liase with Central and Regional personnel to ensure smooth implementation of DEECD initiatives in small rural schools
- Liase with small school organisations Australia wide (Such as SPERA, SASSA, CEP, REFA and others)
- Collate, disseminate, participate in and act upon research that affects small rural school communities
- Initiating an annual small school conference.

The abridged version of the SiMERR National Survey suggested the following charter for a rural school association:

- It should support the orientation of new teachers
- Provide supplementary peer support
- Advocate for rural teachers
- Enhance the status of rural teaching service
- Promote collegiality between rural teachers
- And maintain the institutional memory of the profession in rural areas.

(Page ix SiMERR National Survey – Abridged Report, University of New England, 2006)

I believe that given my initial proposal to Minister Kosky and the findings of SiMERR National Survey which supports it, the Victorian Government needs to immediately establish a Rural Schools Professional Association possibly along the lines of the South Australian Small Schools Association or that proposed in the SiMERR Survey or the proposal put forward by the Grampian's Rural Schools Focus Group. (Refer appendix)

I believe that such an organisation would support teachers and their communities and address the concerns voiced by stakeholders in the survey about student outcomes, the status of rural teaching and access, connectedness and opportunities for teachers and students in the bush.

The SiMERR National Survey advocates a nationally co-ordinated approach to address many of the issues they raised in their report (i.e. a National Rural School Education Strategy and strategies to attract and retain teachers for rural schools) Strong, mature Federal leadership and co-operation between the states would be essential in delivering badly needed rural education reform across the country.(The introduction of a new national curriculum in 2011-12 could be the catalyst for such a national strategy.)

Following a letter from me in 2006, the Secretary of Education asked the Grampians Rural School Focus Group to help draft a proposal for a rural schools association which functions under the auspices of DEECD as opposed to a union style advocacy group outside DEECD. The proposal included suggestions for the membership, role and operations, structure and support for such a state-wide body. (The final proposal can be found in the appendix section of this submission. It was entrusted to the Grampians Regional Director to present to the other Regional Directors and the Department Secretary in 2007-08. I have not been informed about what happened to it.)

A small school advisory body presents a unique opportunity for small schools to be given a forum to voice strategies and solutions to issues affecting small schools and their communities. It can enable the small school association to develop a productive and legitimate partnership between DEECD and small schools to develop the best possible outcomes for small school learning communities.

Such a representative body can become the primary advisory body for the Secretary and Minister when they are considering the changing nature of small school education in the twenty-first century.

The small school advisory body should be included within the Department's structure. It should be seen as the 'go to' group for the Department (and other agencies) on small school issues. (Presently there are too many 'voices' in rural school education. None make a decisive impact on decision makers or speak as a whole for all small schools) Such a group

can provide strategies and advice to alleviate the unique challenges faced by small rural schools and enhance the provision of our world-class education system across the state regardless of the size and location of our schools. It should be involved at the beginning / onset of DEECD initiatives to ensure their smooth implementation and to ensure that the estimated 280 schools which qualify as small primary schools (35 000 students) receive a strong voice.

Although the ‘association’ should not be seen as a lobby group (It was suggested that Small Schools Common would be a better title than Association so that the group would not be identified as a lobby group but an advisory body such as the Principal’s Common) if it is to be a respected forum for small school leaders and their communities its members need to be able to speak up for its constituents (but should do so within the structures of the Department of Education not through press releases.)

It needs to be practical, transparent in its membership and decision making processes and prepared to be outspoken and able to formulate workable solutions within the organizational structure of DEECD.

Through its executive it should not only be able to directly advise the regional directors, secretary and minister but it should have the opportunity to liaise with all groups affiliated with small school education and supporting small rural communities such as the Country Education Program. (The CEP has a brokerage role with DEECD providing services such as the ‘Leading Across Effective Small Schools’ professional development.) It could also provide advice and support to other government departments as requested. (Often small rural schools are the only government agencies within their communities)

Workload

Small rural schools in Victoria are regarded in many rural and remote areas as the cornerstone of their communities.

Rural schools, many of them geographically isolated deal with issues and local requirements particular to their circumstances. For example teaching principals are under considerable pressure to undertake essential administrative tasks while shouldering a full-time teaching load. Changing demographics in the country combined with isolation can provide security concerns especially in one-teacher schools. New Department initiatives and technical developments can become overwhelming issues for small schools and the lack of readily accessible professional support can lead to staffing, professional development and welfare concerns.

These challenges are balanced by the close community bonds that can be formed around small schools, the ‘can do’ resourceful nature of small school staff and principals and the

meaningful sense of accomplishment when you can see that you are making a difference to whole families and their communities.

Alleviating the administrative burden for rural schools, in particular small ones, is an area that DEECD has attempted to alleviate. (The Local Administrative Bureau (LAB) model, established at Horsham currently services 44 schools across the Grampians and Barwon Regions at a reasonable cost to those participating schools.) This service could be scaled up to be available to all rural schools.

While this model does have wide applicability, it should be noted that many small and/or rural schools to date have chosen *not* to take advantage of such a service, suggesting that 'buy in' to LABs should be invitational rather than mandated. I choose not to use the LAB because I have the services of an experienced and competent administrative assistant for half a day per week. Some small schools, especially remote schools find it difficult to get that support especially as the skills required to manage the administration (OHS, finance, human resources) become more complex over time.

An extension of the LAB and an invitation to 'buy in' to its services would be beneficial to all small schools.

Information Communication Technology (ICT)

There is broad agreement across stakeholders that ICT has the potential to provide many solutions to issues of provision, enhanced pedagogy and in preparing children and young people for life and work in the 21st century. Ultranet is the next big ICT challenge for our system and for small rural schools in particular. (The Ultranet is a student-centred electronic learning environment that supports high quality learning and teaching, connects students, teachers and parents, and enables efficient knowledge transfer. One of the six key benefits of the Ultranet identified by the Department is improving educational opportunities for regional, rural and remote Victorians.)

However my experience as a head teacher/principal since 1994 is that ICT based Centre initiatives are full of glitches and can tend (certainly at the outset) to cause more difficulties and drain on principals time than they alleviate. The last three, CASES 21, Recruitment Online and CHESS have had more than their fair share of teething problems.

As has Ultranet (technical problems with Internet/wireless connections, hardware/software faults, user skill deficiencies, timing out, privacy issues, clunky handling, lack of on-site and on-going technical support which is a huge problem in remote rural schools etc)

A standing reference group of small school leaders (such as the proposed small school common) would be a great 'sounding board' for the introduction of system wide initiatives such as Ultranet and OHS in small school settings. It could also give practical on the ground advice on other matters we discussed such as provision and retention and also small school leader workload.

There are numerous international models operating to deliver curriculum and enhance student and teacher use of ICT in education, these include highly centralised models such as in Idaho, highly decentralised models such as in Saskatoon and models that have elements of both such as in Newfoundland. Consideration needs to be given as to which model can best meet the needs of rural students in Victoria, and what role the DECV could play in this. A common factor that runs across is ensuring that on-line teachers have sufficient training and support to transition from class room teaching to the vastly different requirements of on-line teaching.

Developing a Victorian Rural Education Framework, DEECD 2009

Other considerations include:

- Utilising Networks and clusters to pool resources and development collaborative and shared programs.
- Access to high-speed broadband and sufficient ICT architecture.
- Use of video-conferencing and new technologies, such as mobile phone technology, to enhance learning opportunities and outcomes.
- Developing the 'e-literacy' of teachers in rural schools.
- Examining the range of existing virtual learning models, including cost and efficacy.
- Access to appropriate levels of technical support time.

Different Models

The Grampians Region often proposes the 'Woody Yallock model' when the issue of varying school 'governance' is mentioned in relation to small rural schools. It should be recognised however that Woody Yallock (4 small rural schools set up as campuses under one principal)

is only 'one model' not *the* model' for innovative restructuring of school administration in clusters.

Woody Yallock came about as a result of the quality provision process when the 4 schools involved faced either closure, annexing or merging. They chose merging. It has been going for over ten years but is still an 'orphan' even in the Grampians Region. It has been promoted heavily in the past but has never 'taken off'. (I recall it getting a luke-warm response from small schools leaders at the 2005 small school conference)

By all means produce and promote 'partnership models' (partnerships tend to happen naturally in small school communities, they don't work well if they're forced) Woody Yallock doesn't work because most small schools don't like to surrender their autonomy and identity. With the imminent demise of Networks it would be advantageous for existing small school collegiate groups (which have outlived Clusters and now Networks) such as the Moorabool Collegiate Group should be encouraged and financed to fill the local peer support role. These groups which exist now could act as the vehicle for helping schools to work closer together without surrendering their independence.

Removing principals from schools and replacing them with 'campus leaders' as with the Woody Yallock model seems superfluous unless you just hope to save on Principal wages. If you want to retain teachers in rural areas then some will want to aspire to leadership positions (There are very few leading teacher jobs anymore) Without those leadership career paths (Small school principals become excellent Instructional leaders, something our larger school seem to lack) and the experience that comes with those diverse roles then where will our future leaders come from?

DEECD needs to make teaching and leading in small rural schools an attractive prospect with an obvious upward and mobile career structure which doesn't require potential leaders to move to the city. (It's not just jobs for spouses, housing and extra pay) Workload, status and the quality of the job are also important factors in attracting and retaining quality teachers and principals.

Research

I see great value in further research into small school education. It's something I've advocated for years. Maybe some of our rural universities with education faculties could be encouraged to undertake credible and relevant research 'in their own back yards' for a change.

Rural school leaders and parents would like to know how students from small schools cope in higher learning. (Anecdotally we believe that they become self-motivated, independent

learners willing and able to provide peer support and become natural leaders) some hard data backing up or refuting that would be valuable.

This leads into my belief that small schools need a P.R. make-over. The general community still believe small schools are extinct or endangered (A by-product of the 1990s mass small school closures) There are also many misconceptions from within the system which is very frustrating.

A small school focus in DEECD advertising and some positive articles in *Inspire* would also help raise the profile of small rural schools.(Other ideas could include; starting up the Small School conferences again, small school teacher/principal of the year award, greater use of local media, highlighting the fantastic recent performances by small schools in NAPLAN (Gordon, Lal Lal, Trentham, Blowhard and others) high profile visits to small schools by the minister and premier. (Many of our Prime ministers were educated in small rural schools – Paige, Scullin, Curtin and Rudd)

Links to the community

One way of further involving the local community into developing a relationship with small schools is to make those schools a hub for local/state/Commonwealth Government information. This could take the form of providing small schools (that are the only representatives of government in their area) with a dedicated information PC which can connect users to Government sites (You could also provide a fax and copier) and/or a rack/stand that contains information brochures that the community can access. Resources and funding could also be provided to allow schools to open up their libraries / meeting spaces for the community. Some schools of course do that but the status of schools as community hubs through appropriate signage and extra funding could raise government profile through the school and also enhance the image of the school as a genuine and legitimate community partner.

Provision

The provision of a wide range of educational opportunities is a burning issue in small rural schools. (Attracting specialist staff is an area of concern) It is also difficult to take children out of their school to experience educational opportunities through camps and excursions due to the cost of transport. Bus hire is very expensive, although train travel can be cost effective. Provision issues especially since the removal of shared specialists in areas such as P.E. and music have a detrimental effect on small rural schools but the problems of provision have a greater impact in secondary schools.

Some issues to consider:

- More data needs to be collected into the range of education providers and provision currently accessible to rural communities, including the gaps.
- Rural students are particularly subject to a lack of educational providers such as TAFE and ACE, have historically lower university enrolments, and higher levels of deferment, suggesting specific action around these issues is required.
- Digital learning needs to be ‘strategically’ managed not left to chance and isolated regional or network responses (There is potential inherent within the Ultranet to provide a truly broad curriculum and to develop virtual learning networks across the state. ICT, such as video conferencing and interactive whiteboards, has demonstrated capacity to alleviate specialist teacher shortfalls, with pilots in rural and remote NSW demonstrating effectiveness in this area) Nothing beats face to face interaction with teachers.

Small school teachers/leaders talk and share their knowledge and experiences now and we try to open the wide world up to our students now, and always have, its just that the technology we have is clunky and transport is time consuming and costly.

When the glitches in Ultranet are ironed out, small schools will embrace it and it will have the potential to easily open up a whole new world of educational opportunities for us but it is not the ‘holy grail’. Small schools still need quality teachers with access to state of the art professional learning, strong community links, enthusiastic leadership from committed leaders and an empathetic central administration willing to listen and respond.

It is important that when deciding the future of rural schools that DEECD tap into the accumulated knowledge, experience and wisdom in small schools.

Staffing

A serious concern in small rural schools is that there is very limited opportunity for teachers to move around within the system. This career stagnation can see teachers remain in the same school long beyond their ‘use by date’. Consideration needs to be made to make it easier for teachers in small rural schools to re-energize their careers through easier movement within the system.

Shortfalls in staff could easily be alleviated by providing graduate staff with the chance to take up small time fraction positions with 1 teacher schools such as mine as 'extended pre-service teacher' positions but with payment direct from DEECD for short periods of time. One teacher schools usually have a fractional position (mine has a 0.3 teacher role funded from my schools credit component, rurality and welfare grant) that could also be supplemented by a short-term 0.7 position for graduates or even those intending to return

to work. Giving those teachers valuable experience and giving one teacher schools an effective full time second teacher which alleviates the concern that schools communities have regarding security issues in their schools (often only having one teacher on duty especially in remote areas often with poor communication links)

Such a proposal would be a win - win situation for DEECD, small schools and returning / starting teachers and would not be very expensive. (It would also be very popular in small rural communities serviced by one teacher schools such as my own.)

Professional learning

In small rural schools (schools where the principal has a full-time teaching load) some of the challenges in providing effective professional learning consist of:

- Gaining access to quality professional learning
- Balancing system requirements with local needs
- Developing professional learning communities in isolated areas
- Supporting school leadership which fosters school based professional learning
- Cost and time constraints of accessing professional learning

Time and cost

Finding sufficient time for professional learning is a significant issue for small rural schools. In remote schools travelling to venues can take just as long, even longer than the professional learning.

Combined with the cost associated with accessing external professional learning small schools especially those in remote areas find themselves at a significant disadvantage compared to their metropolitan colleagues.

The provision of online professional learning can help alleviate transport problems but not always time constraints. (There are also other concerns related to online learning which I will discuss later)

Principals are expected to attend four Regional Directors meetings, numerous Network meetings, the annual regional conference (this may vary between regions) as well as the Big Day Out accounting for at least ten school days. Time out of school can cause considerable disruption in small rural schools especially when combined with the availability and cost of employing Casual Replacement Teachers.(CRTs) These requirements every year impose

severe limitations on small rural schools without even factoring in the schools individual professional learning needs.

To lower the cost of CRT replacement and avoid difficulties associated with finding suitable replacements and the disruption caused by the significant change of routine in small schools when all or most of the teaching staff is absent, the one-size fits all model for the allocation of curriculum days (4 per school) is insufficient.

Small rural schools should have their curriculum day provision increased to at least 8 days in schools where there is only one teacher and 6 days in other small schools where the principal has a full-time teaching load.

Small rural schools, especially remote schools will require additional funding to cover their transportation and accommodation needs, the cost of professional learning providers visiting onsite and the cost of additional CRT support.

Access, balance and professional learning communities

To access professional learning, schools often need to send representatives to regional centres or Melbourne often for extended periods of time causing a considerable financial and organisational burden to schools.

It is possible to attract professional learning providers to sites accessible to small rural schools (the Grampians Teacher Education Network or TEN performs this function by providing schools with affordable professional learning opportunities locally at the cost of a membership levy based on school enrolments.) but without subsidies or the economies of scale it would entail considerable costs to be met by schools.

Ideally groups of schools can co-ordinate their mutual needs and combine their financial and local expertise to provide local professional learning. These groups of schools need to develop out of mutual need and shared vision rather than be created artificially along geographic or political lines from a central or regional level.

Schools will need financial support to access professional learning locally and to support them in seeking grants such as Quality Teaching Program Grants. (QTPG) The TEN model could also be replicated in other rural regions.

Professional learning providers should also be encouraged to develop abridged versions of their programs for rural schools constrained by distance and cost. For example Grampians Region has designed the Small School Literacy Intervention Program (SSLIP) as a response to the inability of small rural schools to provide the time required to train Reading Recovery tutors. This program has proved very successful to those using it.

Financial and moral support for local professional learning communities comprising small rural schools teaching and non-teaching staff would also help provide internal professional learning opportunities.

The Professional Learning Communities will need to:

- Have a supportive and shared leadership developed through local principal collegiate groups. (DEECD should re-instate the \$250 collegiate grant to support these groups)
- Shared values and vision (enhanced by a shared language of teaching and learning across the system.)
- Supportive conditions (allocating curriculum days for sharing and joint planning and providing shared local expertise, space and resources)

Leadership

Principals especially those in small rural schools have to balance their administrative and curriculum professional learning needs. New initiatives introduced by DEECD often require considerable professional support. (CASES 21, EduPay, OHS compliance, BER, Ultranet and Recruitment Online have recently required principal's to allocate considerable time and resources to ease their implementation in schools.

Principals have an important role in providing the leadership essential in creating professional learning communities. In small rural schools principals and teachers have the unique opportunity to work together to grow professionally.

It is the principal's job to create an environment in which the staff can learn continually. In small schools the principal learns alongside his/her staff and has a vested interest in ensuring professional growth and improvement as a team member and not just as the principal. Professional learning teams established by principals within small school networks can facilitate peer mentoring, professional talk and resource sharing within and across schools reducing the isolation of teachers and increasing commitment to the mission and goals of the school and the system.

Extra financial and technical assistance will be required to support small school leaders to meet the systems requirements to seamlessly implement DEECD initiatives.

The creation of a state-wide small schools association could help facilitate the development of improved models of delivery of professional learning in small schools. Such a body could support the establishment of local networks that could share resources and expertise as well as directly advice DEECD as to the ongoing professional learning needs of small rural schools.

Technical Support

Teachers are becoming extensively computer-literate (The Curriculum Corporation in a 2001 report found that 73% of teachers described themselves as quite confident at using computers and only 2% regarded themselves as beginners.) Therefore it is not unreasonable to think that teachers are well placed to 'learn in an online world'. Online professional learning can be an effective mode of delivery for some professional development modules however the effectiveness of learning online in isolation without the opportunity of professional collegiate banter and joint input is doubtful. (It can also be very time consuming if there are technical hitches as I found recently when video-conferencing between Ararat and Ballarat)

There needs to be a balance between informal/unstructured and formal structured discussion and reflection. Sitting in isolation in front of a computer is not necessarily an ideal learning environment. Online learning is appropriate in some circumstances. Suitable bandwidth capacity and quality hardware and software are a prerequisite. Video-conferencing would provide excellent opportunities for on site professional learning linking providers and groups of small schools across the state, even across the country breaking down the tyranny of distance while learning online with colleagues.

Small schools are dynamic innovative education settings. Just as small rural schools can gain from outside expertise to improve teaching and learning the wider education community can also gain from the work of small schools and small school learning communities. The Internet provides excellent opportunities through forums and dedicated web sites to promote the successes of small schools.

Recommendations

In conclusion small rural schools are disadvantaged in accessing quality professional learning because of their limited budgets and relative isolation. (From professional development providers and each other)

On the plus side small rural schools boast strong leadership, supporting communities and pre-existing networks formed over decades of commitment and mutual support.

The constraints can be rectified by:

- Adopting needs based funding for professional learning
- Providing small rural schools with extra curriculum days
- Ensuring small rural schools have world class information communication technology

- Supporting the leadership skills of small school principals
- Factoring in the effects on small schools caused by extended professional learning to support DEECD initiatives and administrative requirements
- Supporting the establishment and sustainability of small school networks which develop mentoring and professional learning across their constituent schools
- Support and model effective small school professional learning models so that schools are not 're-inventing' the wheel.
- The establishment of a 'small schools association' to help facilitate the suggested reforms
- Providing leadership training for principals and aspirant principals in small rural schools
- Consider flexible hours for the provision of professional learning (Why do all central office briefings in the regions have to start at 4:00pm? Central office briefings in regional centres do not take into account the fact that teaching principals can't walk out of their schools dead on 3:30 and then drive significant distances and be there at 4:00 pm. Briefings on the Principal of Learning and Teaching, Digilearn, ePotentials, and the National Curriculum were classic examples of this lack of empathy.)
- Investigate abridged professional learning courses for time poor small rural schools. (Do rural tertiary institutes, especially those with education faculties do enough to provide professional learning to the schools that provide mentors for their Pre-Service Teachers?)
- Developing online forums for small school principals and teachers

Quality professional learning can not only improve teaching and learning in rural schools but help to invigorate staff who often feel isolated and trapped within schools that they have taught in often for longer than they may have anticipated. It can also help to retain quality graduate staff if they feel they are not disadvantaged professionally by teaching in small rural schools.

The success of these reforms in schools can be assessed through the performance and development culture framework where schools are expected to review their professional learning and determine its impact on the quality of teaching and learning in their school.

These recommendations require some additional funding and some flexibility in procedures that could easily be incorporated into accepted practice with the guidance and expertise of a ‘small schools common’.

Leadership

At the Term 3 and 4 Grampians Rural School Focus Group meetings in 2009 a proposal was put forward to develop strategies at a local regional level to promote the advantages of small rural school principalship and thereby increase the number of acceptable candidates for small rural school vacancies. Regional approaches are short-sighted and contribute to a belief that reform in our system when it applies to small rural schools is ad hoc at best. A system wide (even national) approach to this issue would be preferable.

One proposal that was put forward was for new small rural school principals to have the support of an experienced principal class mentor to help them to adjust to their new role. In this discussion paper I will explore the purpose and potential of principal mentoring. I will also provide some recommendations for implementing a principal mentoring program in small rural schools.

The positives of being a small rural school principal

Sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts and is fundamental to enduring and widespread school improvement. This observation is especially germane to the context of leading small primary schools in rural locations, where challenges encountered by principals in engaging with the complexities of continuous improvement are often accentuated.

Hargraves and Fink

The Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership, 2003

The small rural school principal position has many advantages which should make it an attractive proposition for experienced teachers looking to move into principal class.

One of the more significant factors often cited by small school principal colleagues are that they relish the opportunity to ‘be their own boss’.

‘Well prepared principals serving as instructional leaders and change agents are necessary resources for assuring that all students learn at high levels.’

The most valuable resource for student achievement is quality instructional leaders’

Quotes from US Superintendents and small school leadership teams involved in principal mentoring. Browne-Ferrigno and Allen, 2006

Being a small school principal provides ample opportunities to take decisive action when required that can make positive impacts on student learning. Small school principals can react quickly to changing situations and important opportunities that will benefit their schools immediately. Small school principals have the opportunity to ‘lead from the front’. A small school principal needs to ‘reframe’ the principal position from one of simple school management to that of instructional leader.

Head teachers were performing two different jobs: being a teacher and being a head teacher within the same school. It was evident that trying to balance the competing demands of each was a cause of concern.

One head teacher was quoted as saying ‘Teaching is always the part I can do, but the paperwork, I am just getting into that as a newly appointed headteacher. It doesn’t matter if it’s a big school or a small school you still have to fill in the paperwork, put it into folders, collect evidence to show what children have done, this, that and the other. It is all in the filing cabinet, assessing it, dating it, most of the time no one ever looks at it’

Leadership in Small Scottish Schools, 2007

The challenges of being a small rural school principal

There are many challenges to the small rural school principal role. Overwork, increased responsibilities and a feeling of inadequacy when faced with complex welfare issues affecting families are often cited as issues causing principal ‘burnout’ The technical, conceptual and people skills demanded of principals have increased dramatically over the last 10-15 years. Small rural school leaders face all these challenges and more. It should also be emphasised that small rural schools provide an unprecedented opportunity for teachers to display leadership skills at a young age, gain valuable experiences with diverse people in often safe, quiet and harmonious rustic environments.(refer Zimmer, 2001 Quoted in

Changing Pre-service Teachers Attitudes for teaching in Rural Schools, Hudson and Hudson, 2008)

What makes an effective small rural school principal

There are many attributes a modern small rural school principal requires to perform the role well.

'Rural leaders must become both proficient and creative in using technology to promote access and reduce isolation. They also need more sophisticated interpersonal, collaborative, political and community building skills to strengthen relationships with staff, the community and other civic institutions.'

It may not be possible to train rural leaders for all the non-educational roles that they often have to play-plumber, bus driver, or jack of all trades. However, *it is no longer enough to say, here are the keys, now do the job'*

Preparing Leaders for Rural Schools, Institute of Educational Leadership, P. Cokley, 2005

Headteachers of small rural schools in Scotland felt that small school leaders required certain personal qualities to help them manage change. Some of their suggestions included:

- *Adaptability, flexibility and a good sense of humour*
- *Accept that change doesn't happen over night*
- *Listen and observe before making decisions*
- *Organise and prioritise tasks*
- *Only touch a piece of paper once*

I would emphasise the need to organise and prioritise and also include being self motivated. Many US studies I've read stress the importance of identifying and grooming potential leaders so they fill vacancies with suitable applicants.

'The US Department of Labor estimates that 40% of the 93 000 US principals are near retirement. The result is that an increasing number of districts are now making efforts to 'grow their own' school leaders. 84% of superintendents are actively and deliberately grooming someone on their staff for more senior positions and 67% of principals say they are doing the same in their schools.'

Making the Case for Principal Mentoring, Brown University, 2003

There are similar figures in Canada, NSW, South Australia and New Zealand

Mentoring

There is nothing new about mentoring. The word mentor comes from Homer's *Odyssey*. Mentor was a teacher, guardian and guide left behind by Odysseus to care for his son when he sailed for Troy. Mentoring has been used particularly in US corporations to help new employees to settle into the workplace.

Positive impact of mentoring

'A successful principal appreciates the value of and need for mentoring within the principal profession. The principal learns valuable lessons from other leaders. Just as a principal should institute a mentoring program for teachers within the school, today's principals should also view principal mentoring as a valuable tool resulting in improved leadership skills and ultimately a stronger learning environment'

Making the Case for Principal Mentoring, Brown University, 2003

Many US studies make a compelling case for principal mentoring:

- *The principal and retired principal form a holistic relationship characterised by trust, confidentiality, honesty, sensitivity, shared expertise, personal and professional growth.*
- *The goal of the program is to help pull the first-time campus administrator out of the morass of management issues and keep them focused on leadership issues.*

'Mentoring is a form of collegial supervision....The mentoring relationship is special because of its entrusting nature. Those being mentored are dependent upon their mentors to help them, protect them, show them the way, and develop more fully their skills and insights.

Sergiovanni and Starratt, 1998

- *What the mentors really need to do is help the new principal find his or her own way. So they are trained to ask questions in order to get the mentees to reflect and make decisions for themselves.*
- *When it comes to training principals there is really nothing better, as long as the mentor is guiding you in the right direction and has the skills to help you get where you need to go.*

These are quotes from mentor program facilitators discussing their programs in practice. Making the Case for Principal Mentoring, Brown University, 2003

Similarly feedback came from rural principals in NSW involved in mentoring through the NSW Department of Education and Training Leadership Unit about the positive outcomes from their trial mentoring program which occurred in the Dubbo area involving 34 participants.

Principals from rural schools made these observations:

- *I believe now with a greater array of tools and on-line communication we can do better than we have in the past.*
- *It has been exciting to experience some new ways of communicating and learning.*
- *I don't know what I would have done without him. There needs to be more of this throughout the teaching industry.*

All the principals interviewed rated the support from experienced colleagues as effective or highly effective. Principal mentors were also excited by the opportunity to give back to the profession with over 100 principals volunteering to mentor aspiring leaders.

Quotes from Building Coaching and Mentoring Capabilities in School Leaders: With Special Reference to Supporting Colleagues in Rural and Remote Schools, C. Simmons, N.S.W. DET.

There are many models available of successful mentoring programs for principals and considerable literature on the subject. A successful program however appears to require certain common features such as:

- Organisational support (Mentors are more likely to schedule time with their mentees if they know the 'organisation' values the practice.)
- Clearly defined outcomes (The program should clearly define the knowledge and skills to be attained)
- Action Research (The experience of the NSW mentoring program is that an action research task should be at the heart of it)
- Screening, selecting and pairing (Refer to the next section)
- Training mentors and mentees (Training for mentors should include communication, needs analysis and feedback skills. Training for mentees should include strategies for needs analysis, self-development using an individual growth plan and reflection)

- Learner centred focus (Feedback should focus on reflection, address that which the mentee can control and change, be confidential and timely.)
- An investment of time and commitment (from both the mentor and mentee)
- The creation and maintenance of a mutually enhancing relationship (this relationship involves the mentor and mentee attaining goals that relate to personal development, career enhancement and system requirements)

From 'Elements of Effective Mentoring', Making the Case for Principal Mentoring, Brown University, 2003

The New Zealand system offers an 18 month program to support first time principals. As part of the program each principal receives a mentor and becomes a member of a learning group. Despite the voluntary nature of the program *97% of principals take up this support.*

Refer Generational Change in the Principal ship, Morgan and Hawkins NSW Department of Education and Training for more details on mentoring programs in New Zealand, NSW and South Australia

Getting the right mentor

An effective mentor for a small rural school principal will have through their career, accrued considerable recent experience as a principal in small rural schools. The mentor's principal experience must be 'authentic' for the mentor to be able to make credible and qualified comments and provide learned advice to their mentee. It is also essential that mentors are highly skilled in listening, communicating, and analysing, providing quality non-judgemental feedback and negotiating.

Issues impacting on the development of a mentoring program in rural areas could include geographic and professional isolation, community attitudes, limited time and financial constraints. This has been circumvented in the US and UK by the intervention of Universities which can co-ordinate collaborative programs and develops mentoring professional learning opportunities with school districts.

Experiences in the UK would suggest that it is important that peer mentoring programs for principals be led by principals. This might be difficult with novice principals and principals in remote areas. For those reasons it would be desirable to have institutional input. (University education faculty, professional association such as a Small Schools Common or Bastow Institute)

The creation of a small rural school mentoring program raises a number of issues.

- Should only new principals be accepted as mentees or would more experienced principals also benefit?
- Should mentors be recruited from volunteer principals, or should they be carefully screened?
- Who will the mentors and mentees be ultimately responsible too for the success or otherwise of the program and how will success be determined?
- Should a mutually agreed action research project be at the heart of the program?
- Will training be required for mentors and mentees and who should provide that training?
- Who will finance the program (in rural areas there will be CRT and transportation costs.) Some mentors, especially retired principals in the US receive a small stipend to defer costs they incur.
- If a mentor has concerns about the ability of the mentee to perform the suitability of a small rural school principal should they convey their concerns to the mentee's RNL?
- Can the mentoring protocols used for VIT accreditation be transferred to a principal mentor program?

Making the small rural school principal job more attractive

The availability of experienced mentors to first time small rural schools principals may help allay some trepidation felt by potential applicants that they will be left to 'sink or swim' in their new principal position.

However there is a lot DEECD can do to make the role of small rural school principal an appealing prospect for young principal applicants.

- Supporting teachers to experience small rural school learning environments before applying for a 'rural posting'. (hopefully dispelling misconceptions about rural living and teaching)
- Providing affordable modern housing if required for principals in remote rural areas.

- Recognising the experiences and extra responsibilities shouldered by small rural school principals and providing access to fast tracked promotion or access to high remuneration increments.
- Providing additional administrative support to small rural schools (Unfettered access to experienced ESs and access to the LAB and timely and experienced support with school compliance issues)
- Financial and organisational support to facilitate meaningful collegiate links with like schools.
- Provide a clear career path for young small rural school principals including a viable exit strategy into bigger schools (hopefully still in rural areas).

Conclusions

In conclusion studies undertaken in NSW, NZ, Canada and the US indicate that mentoring principals especially principals in small and often remote rural schools has a beneficial impact on student learning and principal morale. It also has the potential to help attract new candidates willing to apply for small rural school principal positions if they know they will have access to expert guidance in a trusting and supportive mentoring program.

Recommendations

Following my reading and 17 years of experience as a head teacher/principal of one teacher schools in two settings I would make the following recommendations:

1. A mentoring program for new rural school principals using existing small school principals or recently retired small school principals should be developed at a regional level with a focus initially on finding and supporting suitable candidates for hard to staff small rural schools. Ideally a principal mentoring program should be available to all principals and be organised centrally. Until such a program is developed it would be desirable to trial a program involving a small group of mentors and mentees in the Grampians Region for schools identified by the regional director as 'hard to staff'. Ideally this should be managed by a Regional Small Schools Common (Similar to the current Grampians Regional Small Schools Focus Group but with greater 'ownership' by small school members and with a central executive responsible to the Assistant Secretary) A trial mentor program could be managed from within the region (Network Improvement Officers and displaced RNLs with input from the principals involved) As stated earlier there are a lot of issues to consider before developing a program. Further research into mentoring programs in NSW and SA would be desirable. It would also be desirable to have input from the

University of Ballarat into the development of the program and the professional learning required by both mentors and mentees. Unfortunately I don't believe there is sufficient expertise within the University's Education Faculty at present regarding the development of mentoring programs and the issues related to small rural school education. I think it would be desirable to inform them of the program but not involve them. (In the long term links need to be made with UoB to encourage them to undertake research aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a small rural school mentoring program and to explore issues related to small school leadership.)

2. The system at a regional level has to be more 'hands on' when it comes to the selection of principals in rural schools. RNLs (or their replacements) with the support of principals need to be able to identify potential leaders from within schools to step up and apply for positions in small rural schools. Regional personnel should develop strategies to identify talented early career teachers and alert them to the need for career and leadership planning. (Proactively informing teachers and principals of upcoming vacancies and addressing concerns and misconceptions possibly by inviting potential applicants to visit rural schools to 'see for themselves'.) Some principals are excellent at promoting the leadership potential of their staff and others act as 'gatekeepers' not wanting to lose their valuable human resource.
3. Mentoring programs can connect principals in a formal way with people who can help them test ideas, reflect on practice and affirm approaches but in a less formal environment research from Scotland, NZ and SA indicate the high value placed on collegiate or cohort groups. Many new principals value the support collegial groups give. The concept of 'just in time' support where a new principal can call on an experienced principal in a critical situation is highly valued. Within a collegiate group new principals can make their own decisions about who they can trust and confide in. The success and longevity of the Moorabool Collegiate Group and the Seven Hills Cluster (As well as a myriad of other similar groupings in the Grampians Region) are testament to the power of such groups. These groups need to be supported at both a Network and Regional level. If possible the \$250 Collegiate Grant provided by DEECD should be restored. The small school conference (Shepparton 2005) which was supposed to be a bi-annual event should also be resumed. The small schools conference was an excellent networking opportunity for small school leaders.
4. The potential for small school mentoring and networking online through the Ultranet should be explored. A dedicated small schools site could be used to directly inform small school leaders of upcoming compliance requirements, professional learning opportunities that may be relevant to them and shared experiences that they can learn from ('you are not alone') Ultranet and to a lesser extent video conferencing

have the capacity to ‘break down’ seemingly intractable geographic barriers to not only student learning but also the sense of isolation felt by some small rural school leaders.

5. DEECD should create and maintain a list of experienced small school principals who are approaching retirement or who have recently retired who would be suitable mentors. These mentors should self nominate but be vetted for their suitability by RNLs or their replacements. Mentoring experience could be of a general nature but also be specific in areas such as maintenance, finance, curriculum, working with school communities, dealing with difficult people and managing student behaviour.
6. DEECD needs to ‘walk the walk’ when it comes to excessive ‘red tape’ and compliance so that in reality the job of a small rural school principal is not too demanding and unattractive. The balance has to be right between challenging and impossible. DEECD and the Region need to promote the amazing things happening in small schools at every available opportunity.

Conclusion

DEECD has come a long way in the last ten years in addressing some of the fundamental difficulties experienced by small rural communities and addressing some of the hardships unnecessarily caused through the ‘quality provision’ process of the early 90s. However there are still **many challenges** ahead which are recognised by the Commonwealth (The Melbourne Declaration) and the State. (The development of a Rural Education Framework)

Many initiatives which have been canvassed in this submission can be implemented immediately with minimum cost:

- A small school advisory body
- Small School Leaders mentoring program
- Review and elimination of unnecessary and burdensome red-tape
- Commitment to metropolitan school’s infrastructure and performance expectations for ICT in rural schools
- A realistic approach to teacher learning in rural communities
- Flexible approach to staffing in small rural schools
- A commitment to enhancing and promoting small school leadership
- Lifting the profile of small rural schools

- A speedy replacement to the Rural Education Framework (This was a good start and it puzzles me that it disappeared) which could encompass the initiatives listed above. Whatever follows it should be based on its modest recommendations. Let's not re-invent the wheel.

I hope for the sake of parents and children in rural Victoria and the teachers and Principals who choose to work with them that something productive and meaningful can develop from the Governments changes to education to be announced this year.

About the author

I have been a head-teacher / principal of one teacher schools in the Grampians Region for the last 16 years. I am currently principal of Glen Park Primary school. I have been Secretary of the Moorabool Collegiate Group / PLC for the last 10 years. I was small schools representative on the Highlands Network for 3 years and a member of the Grampians Small Rural School Focus Group which developed a proposal for a DEECD endorsed state-wide small school 'association' for 5 years. The author has also contributed a submission entitled Effective Strategies for Teacher Professional Learning *A Small Rural School Perspective* to the Parliamentary Committee investigating teacher learning. Submissions have also been made to an enquiry into rural inequality, the BER in Victorian schools and Commonwealth education funding. The author was recently involved in a DEECD focus group which developed the Rural Education Framework

Tony Shaw Principal Glen Park Primary School (1997-2012)

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Small rural schools performing well

A view of Glen Park Primary School March 2012



Appendix

Grampians Rural Schools Focus Group

Rural School Association Working Group Report on the creation of a state-wide small schools common.

Rural Schools Working Group membership: T. Shaw (Glen Park P.S.) P. Tacey (Creswick North P.S.) K. McCann (Pomonal P.S.) A. Fyfe (Warrenheip P.S.) and G. McArthur (Grampians Region)

July / September 2007

Executive Summary

In response to an invitation from the Deputy Secretary, (Office of Government School Education), the Grampians Rural School Focus Group has developed the following paper which recommends the establishment of a Small Schools Principals Common. The following paper outlines the rationale for this proposal along with suggested purpose and role statements for the Common and possible operational guidelines. This proposal was developed by a working party of small school principals in collaboration with Malcolm Millar, Regional Director, Grampians Region. It has been endorsed by the Grampians Rural Schools Focus Group.

Preamble

Small schools in Victoria are often regarded as the cornerstone of their communities, especially in rural and remote areas. They make a valuable contribution to the diversity and provision options available for students in Victoria.

Small schools, many of them geographically isolated deal with many unique challenges particular to their size and location. One of the most significant of these is the role of the Principal, where balancing the work of a teacher with that of a school leader and manager can present significant challenges. Other significant issues for small schools include:

- The adaptation of new initiatives and technologies to a small school context including the resources available to the school and access to the support most appropriate for successful implementation of the initiatives.
- Changing demographics in rural areas sometimes resulting in a reduction of community services, as well as school enrolments.

- Access to staff and an increased awareness of security and the well-being of isolated principals and teachers.

These challenges are balanced by the close community bonds that can be formed around small schools, the ‘can do’ resourceful nature of small school staff and principals including the meaningful sense of accomplishment associated with making a difference to the lives and wellbeing of students, family and community..

The particular needs of small schools have been raised in many forums, including the 2005 Small Schools Conference in Shepparton, national and state sponsored surveys such as the SiMERR report (2006), and the Minister’s Small School Forum in Ballarat on June 29th 2007 .The Moorabool Cluster of Principals in the Grampians Region proposed the establishment of a state-wide Small Schools Forum early in 2007 and in response the Deputy Secretary (Office of Government School Education) requested the Grampians Rural School Focus Group to provide him with a report in relation to this proposal.

A working party was established to develop this proposal and members consulted with a range of small school Principals through established Cluster and Network forums in relation to the development of this paper.

Following this consultation, the working party recommends the establishment of a **“Small Schools Principals Common”**, with functions similar to the existing Principal’s Common, but with a specific focus on small school issues. This is seen as preferable to an organization which functions outside the auspices of the Department. The suggested purpose and role of the Small Schools Principals Common are outlined below, but it is envisaged that this body would report to the Deputy Secretary, (Office of Government School Education).

The establishment of a Small Schools Principals Common provides an opportunity to develop a productive and legitimate partnership between DEECD and small schools principals, including a forum for appropriate consultation and advice related to small school issues.

Purpose and Roles

Purpose: The Small Schools Principals Common would represent small schools and their principals for the purpose of professional support and capacity building, consultation and advice.

The role of the Small Schools Principals Common would be to:

1. Provide a forum for responses related to the implementation of proposed DEECD policy and initiatives in small schools.

2. Support the development of leadership capacity of current and aspirant small school leaders in partnership with the DEECD framework
3. Organize a bi-annual state-wide small schools conference and other designated professional learning activities as appropriate.
4. Promote models of collaborative planning related to enhanced education access and provision for students in Victoria.
5. Promote models of best practice in human resources management, technical support, school administration, curriculum delivery, school improvement, provision and access.
6. Support research into small school issues, including the development of appropriate partnerships with tertiary providers.

Membership

To provide all small schools with an opportunity to participate in the small schools principals common some flexibility is desirable:

- ❖ Membership should be based on enrolments. (75 -80 primary enrolment suggested)
- ❖ 80 students should be regarded as a guiding figure only. Other schools are welcome to join if they consider themselves to be ‘small schools’. Small secondary colleges and P-12 College may also be members (All schools of 80 or under are automatic inclusions)

Operations

- ❖ Each region is encouraged to form its own ‘Small Schools Focus Group’, including structure and operations. Representatives from these groups will form the state-wide principals common.
- ❖ Members of the Small Schools Principals Common and Regional Focus Groups would be expected to consult widely and provide appropriate feedback to all small school principals.
- ❖ The Small Schools Principals Common to be chaired by Deputy Secretary or representative, for instance Regional Director or General Manager.

Possible focus areas for the small schools principal’s common

The Small Schools Principals Common would act as a “*Sounding Board*” for input into proposed policy initiatives/priorities.

Once established the common will establish its own operating guidelines and agenda. Focus areas for the common could include but should not be limited to:

Curriculum Provision

Sharing resources and expertise and supporting the development of innovative models.

ICT

Investigate the potential of ICT initiatives to enhance the provision of education in small and remote settings. Professional support for schools in realizing the potential of emerging technologies and initiatives.

Professional Learning

Promoting excellence in professional learning opportunities in a timely and cost-effective manner for small schools. Organizing a state-wide small schools conference every 2 years.

Human resources

How best to manage and organize staff in small schools. Identifying opportunities for schools to work together in this area, including the development of creative options.

Provision& access

Investigating, supporting and modeling best practice in the provision and access to education in rural communities. Support trialing of emerging virtual schooling models

Resourcing

Participation of Principals in meetings of the Small Schools Principals Common and the Regional Rural Schools Focus Groups would require support for travel, replacement and administrative costs. Regional support may also be provided through the use of video conferencing facilities.

It is envisaged that the Small Schools Principals Common could meet 3-4 times per year and that Regions could determine their own meeting schedules for Rural Schools Focus Groups.

Conclusion

A state-wide Small School Principal's Common would assist in the implementation of DEECD initiatives including the identification of emerging issues and strategies. It would help bring together the knowledge and experience of rural school principals and the OGSE leaders to further enhance education opportunities for children across the state in schools of all sizes.

We welcome the response from the Deputy Secretary, OGSE to this proposal.

Submitted to Mr. Malcolm Millar (Regional Director Grampians Region September 2007)

Note: From the Victorian Government Response to the Rural and Regional Committee Inquiry into the Extent and Nature of Disadvantage and Inequity in Rural and Regional Victoria, 2011

Recommendation 14: That the State Government facilitate the development of a rural schools professional association to strengthen the relationships between small schools across rural and regional Victoria and with the aim of reducing the time, travel and financial costs imposed upon teachers in rural and regional locations fulfilling professional development obligations.

Supported in Part: School clusters and networks can use the collaborative and supportive functions of the Ultranet and other web 2.0 technologies to support professional development and strengthen the relationships between small schools across rural and regional Victoria. (page 21)

Regional Services Consultation

Submission



Tony Shaw

Principal Glen Park PS 2015

Preamble

When I first started teaching in the Central Highlands Region in 1987 the Regional Office was regarded as a valuable resource for teachers. Consultants were freely available to support teachers and school programs and initiatives and the regional office itself had resources available for teachers to freely access. The election of the Kennett Government saw the dramatic downsizing of Regional Offices and the end to School Support Centres. School Charters and the Curriculum Standards Framework was introduced. Roles formerly performed by regional staff were devolved to schools. The notion of 'self-governing schools

was introduced. Schools were placed in clusters according to their geographical location and given the responsibility of managing support staff. Rivalries rather than co-operation and competitiveness between government schools were encouraged. Over 300 government schools were closed through the Quality Provision process.

The election of the Brack's Government saw the expansion of the regions and the management of school support personnel was once again centralised at a regional level. Attempts were made to genuinely consult with principals and school communities and the widespread punitive closure of schools was stopped. My region was re-branded the Grampians Region and schools were aggregated into networks and given a Regional Network Leader (RNL). Their role was to foster co-operation between schools, to identify shared trends across the network (such as poor results in NAPLAN writing tests beyond year 3 and 5) and maximise support for affordable professional learning to address shared needs. A National Curriculum (AusVELS and a standardised student report system was adopted.)

The election of the Bailleau/Napthine governments saw the merging of regions (from 9 to 4 incorporating urban and non-urban regions). There was a widespread reduction in services as these larger regions actually meant a reduction in support staff available to schools rather than an increase. The networks and RNLs were abandoned and schools were left to their own devices. Support for small and remote schools declined culminating in a scathing report by the Auditor General into the increasing gap between urban and rural educational opportunities and achievements for students in government schools (May 2013).

Schools did adapt to the *laissez faire* approach to support and oversight from a regional level with many schools seeing it as an opportunity to grow and legitimise previously informal collegiate groups and shared interest networks to meet shared needs. The last four years has seen Gonski reforms stalled nationally, a flawed and failed performance and development regime mishandled, the abandoning of Ultranet, TAFE emasculated and promised increases in funding 'misappropriated' (In its final year \$450 million of Gonski funding did not reach the schools that it was promised too). The government was perceived as a 'do nothing' government and the region I'm currently part of (South Western Victoria) has been mostly invisible and ineffective for the last four years. The Andrew's Government was elected in 2014 with the promise to make Victoria the *education state*.

Recommendations

Regions need to be de-merged. Not necessarily to their former boundaries but they are not working at present and will not if they don't become more relevant and approachable to their client schools. A region based in Footscray cannot and does not respond adequately to the needs of schools in Ballarat and Horsham.

The Region's main role should be to manage and ensure the equal distribution of specialist services to schools. Children are presenting at mainstream government schools with disabilities and impairments which effect their learning and schools need the support of trained, experienced staff to support students with physical and emotional disabilities. It is also essential that rural and remote schools receive equal access to this essential support.

Regions have a responsibility to facilitate the engagement of principals and teachers in developing their understanding of modern trends and innovations in education. One significant impact of the merging of Grampians Region was that we lost access to the excellent locally managed and resourced Grampians Teacher Education Network (GTEN) which provided cost effective professional learning opportunities using local and ‘imported’ experts meeting the needs of teachers and principals in our region.

Regions have a role in addressing important issues effecting recognised cohorts of schools. Every data set used by the Auditor General in his report entitled ‘Access to Education for Rural Students’ May 2014, found *‘that there is a persistent gap in achievement and outcomes between rural and metropolitan students’*. This gap has existed for some time but was exacerbated over the last four years. As a region encompassing large sections of rural Victoria it would have been reasonable to expect some action to be taken to ‘close the gap’ **but nothing was and is being done.**

A transparent and accountable state education system is the benchmark for a diverse education system that aims to meet the educational needs of a prosperous Victoria. The system of checks and balances we have helps to eliminate the excesses and hyperbole of the private education sector often more interested in manufactured tradition and status (Refer Mowbray College and others) than an equitable education for all. The region has a role in ensuring the accountability of principals and School Councils to guarantee that the needs of the student (as a member of a school community and as an individual) is the number one priority of every school. Regions should oversee a sustainable and respected performance and development culture and should actively promote our system in the same way the Catholic Education Office promotes there’s.



Conclusion

An effective Regional Office should not act simply as a cypher for Central Office or be so large that it is too slow to react to the needs of the schools in its care. I believe that our existing unwieldy regional structure should be dismantled and replaced with smaller regions. Those regions in rural Victoria need to be led by a dynamic executive that has the imagination, organisational skills and enthusiasm to tackle the significant challenges facing rural schools and educators in 21st century Victoria.

Tony Shaw

Principal Glen Park Primary School

1997-2015

Recent information 2022-23

Includes:

- Response to the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students 2019 (executive summary)
- Correspondence with Thompson term 3 2022
- Correspondence regarding Professional Practice Days
- Correspondence (and updated data) with M. Heffernan (Scan of her story : 'Country Students still lag their city peers' page 5 The Age 13/03/23 and follow up (unanswered email)

Response to the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students



Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

*Recommendations for the Minister for Education on improving
educational outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria*

2019

T. Shaw 2019

Background

In 2018-19 Henrietta Cook from The Age wrote a series of stories about the performance and opportunity gap between rural and metropolitan schools (I was one of her sources) This series highlighted the lack of opportunity and support for students, teachers, and rural communities from the state education system. Neglect of rural students is long standing. There have been many reviews and reports (by governments, DET, NGOs and universities) over the years with very little to show for it. Certainly, no systemwide, strategic approach to improvement. I welcome this report (even though it was initiated with limited consultation and dumped with no fanfare) but looking back at my own modest recommendations for reform, little has changed, either in the system or in my recommendations since I wrote a report on the findings of the SiMERR report (Rural education in NSW) in 2005 for my then collegiate group colleagues.

Below is a link to an example of one of Cook's stories.

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/we-re-in-a-bubble-country-kids-left-behind-as-education-gap-widens-20190611-p51wfm.html>

Below are the recommendations from the report and my commentary (in italics) of them as a head teacher /principal of 34 years' experience.

Recommendations

1. Planning and strategy

- 1.1. Develop a comprehensive five-year strategic plan for rural and regional education that recognises and addresses the specific opportunities and challenges of rural and regional education and establish a Rural Education Consultative Group and a Regional Education Consultative Group to support the effective implementation of the strategic plan.

This is a long overdue initiative that will help focus the reform process. The strategic plan requires clear achievable goals, a generous timeline, a sizeable budget and names attached to the project to ensure accountability.

2. Wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices

- 2.1. Consider a range of options to support the development of wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices by rural and regional students, their families, schools and communities, including additional support to ensure rural and regional

students have access to VCE study resources; the development of a resource hub of case studies of successful programs linking local employer/industry with schools; and the recruitment of international students to rural and regional schools in order to expand the diversity of rural and regional communities and global awareness of rural and regional students.

This is a very wide-ranging recommendation that will require extensive planning and support from experts to support linking students to industry and higher education and recruiting international students to rural and regional schools. (The latter could be disastrous if there is no adequate preparation and support for international students. Rural universities such as Federation University should be able to support this initiative.) Rural school reform has always suffered from an ad hoc approach to addressing the widening gap between rural and metropolitan schools. A strategic approach is long overdue. Many agencies will need to be consulted and involved for this recommendation to work.

3. School resourcing

- 3.1. Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the SRP design in relation to rural and regional schools, including the definition of ‘rural’ and ‘regional’ schools and other measures such as the introduction of a ‘deemed’ annual SRP over, for example, a three-year cycle to reduce the impact of volatility of enrolments on staffing
- 3.2. Examine the current funding arrangements for rural and regional schools, including maintenance funding and the effectiveness of the current VSBA service delivery model for rural and regional schools.
- 3.3. Consider whether the current Camps, Sports and Excursions (CSE) fund should be extended to include all students in rural and regional schools with indexation to reflect greater distance.

Reform to the SRP would provide greater support and certainty to rural education leaders. Maintenance funding is an issue. Our BER buildings are approaching 10 years of use and maintenance issues are starting to arise. If we are to ensure that these buildings aren’t allowed to deteriorate like the buildings, they replaced then inspections and additional funding will be required. (There are also other pressures on small rural school budgets associated with expenses associated the use of tank water, flood and bushfire mitigation, vermin infestation, waste removal, vandalism, lack of storage etc)

Transportation costs make camps and excursions very expensive for rural and remote schools. (It costs \$900 for a bus trip from Ballarat to Melbourne. Schools have to subsidise excursions, otherwise they would be financially out of reach for families.)

4. Student support

- 4.1. Develop a strong culture and clear practice of “soft boundaries” in the delivery of rural and regional services and education provision, both across sectors (for example, health and justice) and across locations, to ensure the interests of every student is placed at the centre of service delivery.
- 4.2. Consider improved models of support for rural and regional schools to address student mental health as part of the response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, including consideration of the following:
 - 4.2.1. Expansion of mental health support services to primary schools.
 - 4.2.2. Provision of trauma-informed training to all teachers in rural schools and regional schools where support services are difficult to access
- 4.3. Review and develop local plans for the provision of alternative settings in regional centres
- 4.4. Examine steps to increase access to support staff, in particular paediatricians/speech therapists, including the provision of facilities to enable the delivery of virtual support services
- 4.5. Consider the development of consistent access practices in special school enrolments in rural and regional special schools.

Additional support (particularly for small and remote schools) from health professionals (whether it be psychologists, speech therapists or visiting teachers) has been an ongoing issue for rural educators for decades. (As close to Ballarat as we are, it is impossible to get consistent speech therapy support here. For remote schools, even funding private health practitioners would be impossible.) Anything DET can do to get more health professionals engaged in supporting rural students would be greatly appreciated by rural communities.

5. Inclusive communities

- 5.1. Consider further steps that can be taken by rural and regional schools and communities to strengthen the development of inclusive cultures for all students and staff
- 5.2. Develop common teaching and learning programs across clusters/networks of schools focused on Aboriginal knowledge, histories, and cultures.



More Korie educators (professional and volunteer) involved in an ongoing manner in rural and remote schools would be an asset to

small school communities. I would expect some political blowback from this, but an ongoing awareness program would do more to promote cultural awareness than one-off initiatives.

6. Curriculum provision

- 6.1. Examine how the provision of VCAL in rural and regional areas can be strengthened
- 6.2. Support and consider incentives for networks/cluster of secondary schools (all sectors) to develop timetables that enable delivery of VCE subjects across multiple schools
- 6.3. Review the design and delivery of virtual learning
- 6.4. Examine how access to existing digital platforms can be supported.

I was once told by the Secretary of Education in 2014 that Ultranet would be a ‘game-changer’ for rural and remote school communities. It would ‘bring the world into small rural schools.’ Ultranet was of course a costly disaster. Virtual learning always sounds good, but it depends greatly on the reliability, cost effectiveness and speed of Internet connections in rural school communities. As close to Ballarat as Glen Park Primary School is, our internet is slow, unreliable, and prone to disruption, sometimes for weeks depending on the weather. For remote schools it must be very problematic. Unless Internet speed and reliability is addressed then digital learning will not be viable.

7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers, and support staff

- 7.1. Consider a range of incentives to attract high quality principals, teachers, and support staff in order to provide the most appropriate locally determined measures
- 7.2. Examine the steps that might be taken to increase the pool of available CRTs for rural and regional schools
- 7.3. Support the development by schools, in collaboration with local communities, of strong induction and welcome programs for potential or actual new appointments, including programs for partners/family members
- 7.4. Consider steps that can be taken to strengthen the support provided to new principals and teachers
- 7.5. Examine the feasibility of the increasing number of administration hubs for clusters/networks of rural and regional schools to reduce principal workload.

Extra money is not necessarily the panacea to attracting and retaining staff in rural areas that many believe. When I taught in Queensland 30 years ago, we received a rural allowance. The extra payment was determined by how far you were away from Brisbane. That might be something DET could consider.

A more attractive inducement would be to make the job of teaching or leading in small rural schools more user friendly:

- *Less administrative burden and more ES support (ES office personnel are usually part-time. More funding would be needed to attract and retain these valuable assets to school communities.) Convoluted and unnecessary administrative practices in small schools are turning principals and ES staff away.*
- *Not providing Professional Practice days to teaching principals in the current EBA is scandalous. I have been told that that will be addressed.*
- *More support with OHS and school maintenance (OHS in small rural schools is far too onerous)*
- *No school should be staffed by a single teacher. Currently I am by myself at Glen Park for the equivalent of 4 school days. This is inappropriate for a variety of reasons. Schools should be supported to have an ES or teaching staff member always employed one-teacher schools at DET expense. (As part of our staffing establishment)*
- *DET could employ contractors on a regular basis to complete necessary inspections and maintenance (especially in remote schools)*
- *Consideration should be given to restoring the very successful Shared Specialist program which was axed in the early 90s (Which could run out of Regional Offices as the Coaching initiative did in the early 2000s or out of Networks) Removing this program (Kennett era) was disastrous and counter-productive.*



8. Professional development

- 8.1. Examine measures to strengthen the delivery of and access to professional learning for rural and regional staff, including access to VCAA virtual VCE Assessor Training and the delivery of Bastow-based programs
- 8.2. Review the role of SEILS/EILS/network chairs to ensure adequate support is available for collaborative professional development.

Small and particularly remote, rural schools would benefit greatly from abridged and easy to access professional learning to cut down on the time we need to be away from our schools. Grampians Region once had the TEN program (Teacher Education Network) which organised outside PD providers and inhouse experts (there is a lot of expertise untapped in our schools) to provide cheap, timely and sustainable professional learning to teachers, ES and principals. The program was scrapped in the early 2000s to 'save

money'. A similar program could be rolled out with the support of SEILs across our regions using the TEN model.

Conclusions

As I said in the introduction to this response. Very little has changed since 2005 and my suggestions for reform are largely unchanged as well. Unless there is a strategic approach (Recommendation One is the most important of the recommendations) this report will fail like all the others. The 2014 Auditor General's report exposed through a comprehensive review of extensive data sets a scandalous indictment of years of neglect of rural school communities by DET and successive governments. Hopefully, this will be a turning point.

T. Shaw 2019

Auditor general's 2014 report: <https://www.vic.gov.au/rural-and-regional-victoria-funding>

Correspondence with Thompson term 3 2022

Good morning, Mr Thompson

Yesterday (05/07/22) I had a Webex meeting with Kathryn Hilt and one of her colleagues regarding their '*5-Year Rural and Regional Education Plan*'

I was very disappointed to be informed that the plan is not the 'Strategic Plan' recommended in the *Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students* report (Refer recommendation 1)

As you would know, a school Strategic Plan is based on an accumulation of school data which informs the setting of achievable goals with appropriate actions and includes a timeline, forecasted budget and a forensic period of review where current data is assessed, and progress measured and a formal review which includes the use of 'outside' reviewers who help to formulate the next Strategic plan.

That is not what they are doing. In fact, the word 'vision' was used. Giving me that gut-wrenching feeling that this is going to be a 'vision statement' full of lugubrious motherhood statements when we actually need dynamic *strategic* action. I expressed my disappointment in this but was assured that the completed document would address what we both agreed was a yawning gap between the achievement and experiences of students in metropolitan Melbourne and those in rural Victoria.

From the outset I said I was not an expert on all rural school matters. I do not know what the needs are of P-12 schools or secondary schools in large rural town, but I am an expert on one-teacher rural schools, and I believe I can speak with some authority on their needs. I made the following points in the time we had which I think I also covered in my conversation with you.

1. The best kick-start for education outcomes in small and remote rural schools would be the reintroduction of the shared specialist program (modelled on the state-wide coaching model of 2008-11.) I shudder to think what progress would have been made to close 'the Gap' if that program had not been axed 30 years ago simply to save money.
2. A proper Strategic Plan would put an end to the Ad hoc approach to 'reform' that we have now where we have a stream of funding being announced for uncoordinated projects which presumably aid small rural school. How is the success or otherwise of

these projects being determined? Who is responsible for their success or otherwise? How do they support each other and what safeguards are there that they do not add to the administrative burden of teaching principals? Is simply making announcements and then channelling money to schools the best way to ensure programs are implemented properly? (The answer to that is, no)

3. Simply throwing money at schools is not going to help. I used the example of giving schools more ES money to cope with increased administrative demands. Rural and remote schools have trouble finding ES support so giving them more money does not help. (My office manager is retiring. She says it is getting too complicated. I have not been able to find a replacement for her.) In remote schools this would be far worse. **The answer to this is to simplify the administrative burden on small rural schools.**
4. We also discussed some of the problems associated with attracting and retaining staff in remote areas (This matter first came to my attention in the 2005 SIMERR report on this very issue, nothing has changed) The sale of DET housing in rural areas in the early 90s was discussed along with poor quality internet and telecommunications infrastructure.
5. We discussed the need for ongoing research into rural schools and how universities with education faculties should be encouraged to embark on this important research (It would help inform future DET planning/funding) I find it gobsmacking that Federation University is not a national if not world leader in this area as they have a vibrant and varied rural education environment in their own backyard (small schools such as mine, large regional schools, school hubs, P-12s, special schools etc) I will write to the new federal minister via my local member about this.

There were a host of other issues we did not have time to discuss such as:

- Small school specific professional learning
- We touched on the need for a *small school infrastructure maintenance and replenishment plan* to ensure small rural schools do not get to the point where they are literally falling apart and to maintain BER infrastructure which is now 10 years old and starting to become costly to maintain.
- Budget support for increased costs in rural areas for transport and power (Why don't all rural schools have solar panels on their roofs?)
- No school should have only one full time staff member. (All one teacher schools should have dedicated funding for an ES member full time.)
- More support available for students with disabilities mental illness. (Again, throwing money at this and expecting small schools to find support as big schools can easily do in Melbourne is setting us up for failure especially for remote schools.)
- I also touched on the lack of Professional practice Days for teaching principals which in one act speaks volumes about DETs attitude to small rural school leaders. (And it not, we respect and appreciate the work you do)

Kathryn was a bit ambivalent about whether their plan would be out this year or not but sadly I don't hold out much hope that it will be the 'game changer' rural education needs. Without a proper Strategic Plan and a dedicated unit within DET to implement it, led by someone with actual experience working in rural schools I cannot see the changes we desperately need being addressed. (This would not only be the best way to deliver reform but might also discourage any new government more interested in raiding the coffers of public education than supporting school communities from being able to do it, like the Baillieu Government did with the Rural Education Framework in 2010) They are not insurmountable reforms. They are more or less the same as those I discussed with Minister Delahunty in 2000. It will take money, enthusiasm, dedication, and imagination but it can be done. Maybe the new minister can make it the defining issue of her ministerial career? Its refreshing to note she has a public school education.

Tony Shaw

Principal Glen Park PS (1997-2022)

Email 22/12/22

From: Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au>
Sent: Tuesday, 20 December 2022 1:30 PM
To: Chris Thompson <Chris.Thompson@education.vic.gov.au>
Subject: Rural and Regional education plan
Importance: High

I may have missed the memo, if I did then it was released with no fanfare...but it looks like the 'strategic plan' addressing the recommendations of the *Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students* has failed to materialise. (Sadly after the Webex meeting I had in the middle of the year, I thought that would be the case.)

That report was delivered in 2019. It's a very poor effort.

T. Shaw

Glen Park PS

RESPONSE

Hi Anthony

I hope the end of the year went well for you and Glen Park.

I have followed up with the area leading this work and have been advised the work continues, with the new Minister well across the recommendations from the Expert Advisory Panel. I understand the Minister met with the Country Education Partnership in the weeks prior to the Election.

Unfortunately, I don't have a timelines for any release but have asked the team leading this work to update me so I can advise you.

Sorry, well aware this isn't what we expected from earlier in the year.

Thanks

Chris

Chris Thompson Regional Director

South-Western Victoria Region Department of Education and Training

M: 0409 519 207

E: chris.thompson@education.vic.gov.au W: www.education.vic.gov.au

RESPONSE

Thank you for the update. It's still very disappointing.

It should be noted that the CEP doesn't represent all rural schools. (They are 'big' in some parts of the state but have little or no influence or presence with others and not in my part of the world.) If the Minister wants balanced feedback....hold a small school conference like the one organised in Grant Hehir's era back in 2005. (There was supposed to be one every 2 years...)

It's been a long year at Glen Park. We finished with the kids on Monday and celebrated the 150th birthday of the school and unknown to me my 25 years at Glen Park. On Tuesday I cooked the kids a big Christmas lunch. Trying to remain COVID free in a one teacher school for the year is gruelling . It took 12 month's to finish our decking. It looks good but is ridiculously over engineered. I'll be finished at work tomorrow and back again on the 15th. Hard work but someone's got to do it...that's why it's so important to get these reforms right.

Tony

No further correspondence in 2023.

Correspondence with J. Atta

Dear Ms Atta

My name is Tony Shaw; I am the principal of Glen Park Primary School (Near Ballarat in the South Western Region) Glen Park is a one-teacher rural school (We have an official website but also a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/learningwithliterature/>) and I am a full-time teaching principal and have been since 1994. I last wrote to you about these issues on the 23/09/19.

I was shocked and dismayed to discover that the recent EBA once again precluded teaching principals from access to Professional Practice days. (This also occurred in the 2018 EBA)

I was told by the AEU then that their EBA negotiators were ‘blindsided’ by DET regarding these days. The offer was for ‘1 Professional Practice Day per term for all teachers.’ Which they took on face value. When it came back in writing, it said ‘teacher class’ and the AEU negotiators failed to pick it up. Treasury apparently held them to the literal wording and excluded not only principal class but also teaching principals such as myself. (The four Professional Practice Days are calculated on teacher ratios of 1:18 students. Therefore, schools with lower ratios receive no funding.)

This time around they have once again failed to address this problem with DET. The text below is from their PCA (Principal class Association) representative, Tim Delany said:

Hi Tony

*We tried very hard. DET regard Principal contract arrangements as **incompatible** with PPDs. They also didn't support PPDs for Allied Health staff in schools.*

Tim

All small rural schools with a teaching principal as their only full-time teaching staff are missing out on these Professional Practice days again.

Representations have been made on my behalf regarding this matter directly to the Minister via the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee of the ALP back in 2018-19 and his office passed on their concerns regarding this matter to DET. I was contacted via email from the Executive Director Professional Practice and Leadership Division, Regional Services Group stating, ‘I understand that you would like further support as a teaching principal, to understand how you might be able to create a similar arrangement to the professional

practice days in the Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2017. A colleague from the School Financial and Resource Management Branch will contact you this week to provide further support for managing funding through the SRP.'

In other words, fund your own Professional Practice Days from your existing SRP.

This response lacked empathy and showed both disdain and contempt toward the leaders of small rural schools. (It's hard to imagine how DET could show how it undervalues our work as educators more than to say – you don't deserve your own Planning and Preparation days) I will take the opportunity to draw your attention to the Halsey Report into Rural and Remote Education released in 2018 and your own Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students 2019. Both exposed profound deficiencies in the level of support shown to rural school leaders and recognised this as a factor in the widening gap in educational performance and opportunities between rural and metropolitan schools. (Refer to page 18, 45-51 Independent Review into Regional, Rural and remote Education, Dr J. Halsey, Department of Education and Training, 2018)

Also refer section 7 page 33 of your own Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students:

Small school principals often carry a significant teaching load and sometimes the entire teaching load in addition to their leadership responsibilities in smaller schools, which can create stress for some professionals and act as a barrier to retaining high quality staff in those roles. This barrier can be addressed through the provision of targeted support to small school leaders...

Precluding teaching principals from accessing these days has a demonstrable impact on our performance as school leaders and belittles our complex role as both full-time teachers and principals in our small rural communities. The only teachers impacted by this manifestly unfair policy are teaching principals. I am requesting that you as the Secretary of DET reverse this decision at least in time for professional practice days funding to be included for us in term 3 2022. (Earlier would be preferable) I have requested support from my local member in a meeting with her 17/02/22. I asked her to lobby on behalf for the relatively small group of dedicated school leaders, many of whom are in her electorate with the Minister and members of the Education and Youth Affairs committee of which she is a member.

A minimum amount of Equity Funding goes to every state school (\$5000) so that no school misses out. This is also the case I believe with disability funding (All schools get minimum funding whether they have disabled students or not) This could also apply to Professional Practice Days; every school should receive funding for one EFT per school. The amount of

money involved, compared to the overall education budget, is miniscule, but would mean a lot to teaching principals across the state.

My fervent wish is that this oversight can be finally rectified promptly (prior to the EBA being signed off) and to the satisfaction of a small but very dedicated and hard-working group of teaching principals. (I also have concerns about the delivery of recommendations of the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students in an effective and timely manner but have addressed those concerns in a separate letter to the Area Executive Director, Central Highlands South Western Victoria Region)

Your reply to this letter is eagerly anticipated.

Tony Shaw

Principal Glen Park PS 1997-2022

18/02/22

Correspondence with M. Heffernan (February-March 2023)

Data recently sourced by M. Heffernan

Hi Anthony,

I'm going to do the story on the achievement gap between country and city kids for Monday. Quicker than I had hoped but I think it'll be OK.

Are you able to send through some comment about why the gap exists and what can be done to help bridge it please? Can I please confirm how long you've been principal at your school? Thank you. I'm on 0407 252 557

We've analysed the VCE data over the past decade plus the latest NAPLAN data and both show a significant gap.

I can see in the 2022 NAPLAN data that city kids outperformed country kids in 19 of the 20 domains. (The last one was a tie between city and inner regional students).

Year level	Domain	Major city	Inner regional	Outer regional
3	Reading	96.3	95.8	94.2
3	Writing	96.9	96.9	95.8
3	Spelling	93.7	90.6	88.7
3	Grammar and Punctuation	95.7	94.6	93.3
3	Numeracy	95.8	95.5	94
5	Reading	96.6	95.7	95.1
5	Writing	96	93.5	92.8
5	Spelling	95.7	93.1	92.3
5	Grammar and Punctuation	96.4	95	94.5
5	Numeracy	96.3	95.4	94.7
7	Reading	96.1	93.6	93.8
7	Writing	94.9	89.6	90
7	Spelling	94.5	89.3	89.2
7	Grammar and Punctuation	94.6	90.8	90.7
7	Numeracy	94.1	90.4	91.5
9	Reading	92.4	88.9	89.5
9	Writing	89.4	82.8	83.1
9	Spelling	93.3	87.8	88.2
9	Grammar and Punctuation	89.7	83.9	85.2
9	Numeracy	96	93.9	94.5
	AVERAGE	94.7	91.9	91.6
SOURCE: ACARA				

This is the median VCE study score data:

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Rural/r egional Victoria	28.542 16867	28.327 48538	28.092 48555	28.109 1954	27.954 02299	27.769 66292	27.653 63128	27.670 32967	27.809 78261	27.972 82609
Metrop olitan Melbou rne	29.776 27119	29.733 11897	29.777 42947	29.599 37888	29.619 6319	29.755 35168	29.676 82927	29.684 68468	29.633 92857	29.644 97041

Response to this information and request for comment:

Yeah that data is a worry. It's been like that for as long as I can remember. Nationally, it's probably worse!

There are many contributing factors. It varies greatly depending on proximity to regional centres and the type of school. There are very diverse schools across regional Victoria. (P-12s for example are very particular to relatively remote parts of Victoria and their needs are different to a large regional school or a very small rural school such as mine.)

My challenges are different to a small rural school in a remote part of the state (I'm very close to Ballarat)

Having said all that this is what immediately pops into my head...

- I think the loss of shared specialists has had an impact on small rural schools. (I wonder what the data would show if small rural schools had had continual access to specialist subjects taught by expert teachers for the last....nearly 30 years?)
- Attracting and keeping quality teachers in rural and especially remote areas. (The loss of teacher housing may have an impact there?) Teachers need to have a quality career path in rural/remote areas not just a fist full of cash absorbed by the higher cost of living in rural areas anyway. (Its more than just money. A whole 'package' is needed. In one US state for example they provide cheap home loans to teachers if they teach in rural areas.
- The administrative burden (increasing in complexity and sheer volume every year) placed on full-time teaching principals such as myself does not make my job an attractive prospect for many. It's a hard job.
- Limited services for students at risk. (It's great to get funding for mental health and disability inclusion, another matter to actually find people to do it in rural areas.

Must be practically impossible in remote areas. Maybe a shared specialist scheme for speech pathologists/psychologists and paediatricians?)

- We need a strategic and systematic approach to identifying and rectifying the issues impeding rural education. That means a proper strategic plan developed to address recommendation 1 of the *Response to the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students 2019*. With detailed analysis of the data, clear, achievable goals to address them, a timeline, budget and people identified as directly responsible for the hoped for improvement. Just like schools have to do.

I have attached a paper (and others in the appendix section of it which might help to explain the struggle.....)

My thoughts (for what they are worth have been circulating for a while)

I've been first Head Teacher then principal of Glen Park since 1997 and at Mt Wallace (another one teacher rural school between 1994-96)

Previous emails

On Wed, 1 Mar 2023 at 20:28, Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au> wrote:

Elmhurst was the one I was thinking of not Elmore. That has been unstaffed then for years. Dargo is sort of seasonal really. I think they'd leave that available to reopen if required.

Sent from my iPad

On 1 Mar 2023, at 5:08 pm, Madeleine Heffernan <mheffernan@theage.com.au> wrote:

Hi Anthony,

Here's the list of unstaffed schools, FYI:

- Stanley Primary School
- Elmhurst Primary School
- Dargo Primary School
- Lake Charm Primary School
- Nullawil Primary School
- Noojee Primary School
- Neerim District Rural Primary School
- Waaia-Yalca Primary School
- Gruyere Primary School
- Devenish Primary School

On Wed, 1 Mar 2023 at 14:01, Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au> wrote:

Ok, will do.

Hi Anthony,

Are you OK to talk please? Just background. I'm on 0407 225 557.

Thanks,

Madeleine

On Tue, 28 Feb 2023 at 17:42, Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au> wrote:

Thank you for that.

LOL - They wanted a puff piece and approached me to fill a space. They didn't ask for a follow up interview at all. In fact, when I complained they wouldn't take my calls and stopped sending the school a free copy of the paper. The owner had a long standing gripe with Catherine King (Their headline was 'A Kings Ransom') and used a story about the opening of a building (First one here since 1963) to have a go at King and Ruddfrom Ballan.

They flew up to Sydney for it and I gave my 'evidence' over the phone while I was teaching. Nowadays I probably wouldn't have bothered but I was more 'bolshie' then and I was proud of our new building and the work I'd had to put into project managing it. Needless to say I do my own PR nowadays.

Thanks

Sent from my iPad

On 28 Feb 2023, at 3:55 pm, Madeleine Heffernan <mheffernan@theage.com.au> wrote:

Here it is: <https://presscouncil.org.au/document/1520-anthony-shaw>

On Tue, 28 Feb 2023 at 15:36, Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au> wrote:

Elmore PS in our area is the same.

It may have officially closed by now but for at least the last 2 years it has been 'unstaffed' and the contact person is, I think the clerical person or the School Council President.

(Schools were often 'unstaffed' especially during the wars. My last school, Mount Wallace was 'unstaffed' for the duration of the war)

It seems to be a reasonably new thing if the school community think there is a chance it could re-open. (I think the region and the responsible SEIL has a lot to do with it) they may be designated 'unstaffed'.

My belief has always been that the school community via the School Council (A community meeting should probably be held to help inform this) determines the future of the school when enrolments dwindle.

Some schools, this is one, can get perilously small (I had 3 one year) but then bounce back. From what I gather at Learmonth (although there was a scandal involved there...nothing salacious) and Kingston and Smeaton that was the case.

Enrolments disappeared and they (DET and the school community) decided to close them. Elmore kicking on to me indicates they had hope of finding some students and were given some latitude. Sadly, once they are closed (especially in the country) that is it. Never known of a completely closed school reopening.

Interesting that you 'looked up' that Press Council decision. You're doing better than me. I was never officially informed in writing of the outcome, I was told over the phone after I rang repeatedly that the complaint was upheld. I was unimpressed with the process. (given to believe it hasn't improved)

T. Shaw

From: Madeleine Heffernan <mheffernan@theage.com.au>

Sent: Tuesday, 28 February 2023 12:30 PM

To: Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au>

Subject: Re: Victoria's smallest schools - media inquiry

Hi Anthony,

I'm not a fan of puff pieces myself! (And I looked up your Press Council ruling).

The reason for my inquiry is what is happening at Devenish Primary School, which has yet to be resolved. I have been told by the department that there are 10 schools in Victoria which have no staff assigned to them. I have asked for a list of those schools.

I'm interested in knowing how these decisions are made. If a school council votes to shut down a school but the school receives an enrolment request/s, what happens?

Thanks for the tip re: the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students. I'll ask what's happening with that.

Madeleine

0407 252 557

On Tue, 28 Feb 2023 at 08:26, Anthony Shaw <Anthony.Shaw@education.vic.gov.au> wrote:

We don't do 'puff pieces' at Glen Park.

We got stung once with one of those and ended up having to make a complaint to the Press Council. (Julian Burnside was chairing it then from Sydney. We won)

What you might do instead is find out what is happening with the recommendations of the *Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students*? They released their report (the executive summary at least) in term one of 2019!

Your colleague Henrietta Cook (who I spoke to at the time) had a hand in DET developing the initial report (My response to the Executive Summary I put together for my small school collegiate group is attached. I'd alter some of my comments if re-writing it today, but the sentiment remains. It was written when it was first released...in 2019.)

I have followed it up myself since its release.

Initial contact

From: Madeleine Heffernan <mheffernan@theage.com.au>

Sent: Monday, 27 February 2023 3:24 PM

Subject: Victoria's smallest schools - media inquiry

Good afternoon,

My name is Madeleine Heffernan, I write about education for The Age.

<https://www.theage.com.au/by/madeleine-heffernan-j7gc5>

We're doing a story on the state's smallest schools and would like to feature your school.

<https://discover.data.vic.gov.au/dataset/all-schools-fte-enrolments-feb-2022-victoria>

I'm on 0407 252 557 and am available to chat on Tuesday or Wednesday.

Thank you,

Madeleine

Madeleine Heffernan

Education reporter - The Age

I work Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Please email out of hours.



T +61 3 8667 2329

A 717 Bourke Street, DOCKLANDS, VIC, 3008

E mheffernan@theage.com.au

Western Australia will get on more next financial year would have under the old because of a 2018 deal by Scott Morrison when he was federal treasurer to appease the iron-rich state. It has been a net recipient of support since federation, and rising iron ore prices meant the GST was whittled back to just one dollar of GST it raised

payments from outside the GST pool to other states and territories – but only until mid-2027.

When the plan was announced, it was supposed to cost \$2.3 billion over three years. However, iron ore prices soared, leading to a massive increase in the cost of the deal.

The commission revealed the cost of Morrison’s “no worse off” guarantee to other states is now on track to pass \$25 billion since its

“That’s your choice, but you have been compensating us for that, and you need to keep compensating us for that,” he said. “It’s not even compensation – it’s just fairness, it’s just the right thing to do. We will not be worse off so that WA can be better off; we will not stand for that.

However, federal Treasurer Jim Chalmers, in Western Australia, said the government was committed to the deal it had inherited from

the last federal election and the state is now seen as crucial to its political fortunes.

The grants commission confirmed the total GST pool was expected to swell by \$3.1 billion to \$86.2 billion in 2023-24. Victoria’s share is expected to grow by \$621 million, to \$18.8 billion. That means the state will get about 85¢ back for every \$1 of GST collected within its borders.

Students still lag their city peers



Mark McLay, of Country Education Partnerships. Photo: Simon Schluter

A 2019 government report recommended developing a strategic plan for rural and regional education.

Mark McLay, chief executive of Country Education Partnerships, which advocates for improvements in rural and remote education, said there had been improvements in mental health, staffing incentives and workload reduction, but the government was yet to release its full strategy.

He said there was more work to be done building school clusters so that teachers and principals from different schools could work together to share staff and resources or run combined camps.

A government spokesperson said money had been spent on teacher recruitment, STEM camps, online education, student mental health programs and capital works.

“We understand there are unique challenges for students and teachers in rural and regional parts of our state – that’s why we’ve increased funding and support,” the spokesperson said.

But Anthony Shaw, veteran principal of Glen Park Primary School near Ballarat, called for a systematic approach to rectifying the issues holding back rural education.

Among the issues he highlighted were the loss of shared specialist teachers; difficulties attracting and keeping quality teachers; administrative burdens on full-time teaching principals; and limited services for at-risk students.

Shaw said a shared specialist scheme for speech pathologists, psychologists and paediatricians and attractive packages for teaching staff were initiatives that would help bridge the gap.

“The loss of teacher housing may have an impact there,” he said. “Teachers need to have a quality career path in rural [and] remote areas, not just a fist full of cash absorbed by the higher cost of living in rural areas anyway.”

The Grattan Institute has previously called for the rollout of nationwide tutoring to help students who fall behind, and incentives to increase the supply of high-performing teachers.

YEAR 7 STUDENTS ACHIEVING THE NATIONAL MINIMUM STANDARDS IN NAPLAN 2022

	Major city	Inner regional	Outer regional
Reading	96.1%	93.6%	93.8%
Writing	94.9%	89.6%	90%
Spelling	94.5%	89.3%	89.2%
Grammar and Punctuation	94.6%	90.8%	90.7%
Literacy	94.1%	90.4%	91.5%

Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

More than 30 students were tested. In year 9, the data shows remote schools in regional areas and remote, a result possibly driven by a small sample size as fewer than 10 students were classified as remote.

A separate analysis of VCE data showed metropolitan Melbourne schools achieved higher subject results, on average, than their rural and regional counterparts. In Melbourne schools, the average study score was 29.6 for VCE students in 2021, but regionally and rurally the

average study score was 28. However, Melbourne has a much higher percentage of private and selective schools, which are more likely to be attended by advantaged students, and the gap between city and country schools is wider among private schools than state schools.

NATAGE A005 +

Morning

If you're planning a follow-up to your story, can you quiz them on what I happening with their own -
Response to the *Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students 2019*.

2019 was ...pre-pandemic. All the recommendations are there but nothing has been delivered – not
in a strategic way.

STEM camps (whatever they are) sound great but

- what is the 'entering behaviour' for this initiative?
- What does the data say?
- How do we know it's being rolled out properly, to the people who need it, in a way that will demonstrate achievement?
- What is the success factors for this project? Is there scope to extend it...if it is successful?
- Is this just another silo? (Standalone initiative not linked in with other compatible initiatives)

These questions get resolved with a proper Strategic Plan which is recommendation 1.

Tony

15/03/23