

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Submission by Anthony Shaw

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That this House requires the Legal and Social Issues Committee to inquire into, consider and report, by 25 June 2024, on the Victorian education system across government schools, including —

(1) trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, including but not limited to —

(a) the factors, if any, that have contributed to decline;

(b) disparities correlated with geography and socio-economic disadvantage;

As the principal of a one-teacher rural school (since 1994) I will address my response to this inquiry from that perspective.

As to whether rural students are prospering in our system or not, I would say (and the data confirms this) that they are not. There is a gap (and has been since we had access to relevant DET data) between the opportunities and achievement of rural students compared to students from metropolitan students and that gap in some instances is significant.

For this submission I would simply remind this committee to review the 2014 Auditor general's Report into Rural and Regional Education

[Access to Education for Rural Students | Victorian Auditor-General's Office](#)

This report is nearly ten years old, and nothing has changed. Arguably I'd say it is worse.

DET has made various attempts to address this matter starting with the Framework for Rural Education from 2010 to the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students report of 2019. (I have added my initial response to this document that I prepared using the Executive Summary from 2019 for my small school Collegiate Group) **The latter report is nearly 5 years old and still has not been implemented.**

DET has proved recalcitrant, inadequate and incompetent when it comes to closing the gap between rural and metropolitan students. As a committed rural educator and school leader, I find this infuriating.

(2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to —

(a) the adequacy of existing measures to recruit and retain teachers;

(b) training, accreditation and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs;

(c) the adequacy of the Department of Education's measures to support teachers;

(d) the impact of school leadership on student wellbeing, learning outcomes and school culture;

Rural schools are struggling to attract and retain teachers. One way to retain teachers would be to provide suitable housing and to ensure career pathways for rural teachers.

The sell off of teacher housing in the early 90s was short-sighted and has proved disastrous for attracting teachers. I would suggest that DET get back into the business of providing suitable housing for both single and married teachers. (I benefitted from it in Daylesford in 1987-89. Without it I probably would have gone back to Melbourne)

It is essential that teachers see a career pathway leading to Principal appointments (even SEIL appointments) in rural areas. As challenging as it is, I enjoy my full-time teaching/Principal role. Attempts to create 'hubs' without having principal class campus heads would lead to ambitious, experienced teachers going to regional centres and Melbourne for career advancement.

As both a teacher and a principal I can safely say I don't feel DET supports me in either role. Again, I'll draw your attention to another Auditor General's report this one into principal's wellbeing.

[Principal Health and Wellbeing | PDF | Occupational Safety And Health | Occupational Burnout \(scribd.com\)](#)

"The Victorian Auditor-General's report has revealed "the department is not effectively protecting the health and wellbeing of its school principals". It found "numerous strategies and initiatives to address" the challenges facing principals "have not improved principals' health and wellbeing".

(3)the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement;

Mental health and Tutor funding has been a strong contributing factor in engaging students back into schools.

Rural principals have however had issues finding tutors (I will need to find a new one next year – that will be 3 in 3 years) and it is very difficult to find suitable programs to meet the requirements of our Mental health (and Disability Inclusion) funding. DET doesn't seem to understand these problems or help us to find viable solutions.

The lack of support staff (Speech pathologists and psychologists in particular) is also of concern. Although not far out of Ballarat I have struggled to get consistent support for students with speech difficulties and I'm on a very long waiting list for one of my students (being tutored) to be assessed (and diagnosed) by a DET psychologist.

The axing of the shared specialist program for rural schools by the Kennett Government in the early 1990s has had a significant impact on schools providing 'specialist' subjects (Arts, music, PS, LOTE) to students. This has contributed to poor student engagement and performance in rural areas.

I believe the program should be started up again but should also include speech pathologists, psychologists and paediatric nurses in the program. This is the only way these specialist subjects and essential health and well being services will be delivered to rural and particularly remote schools.

It may require an initial financial 'hit' to set it up, but the benefits would be immediate and ongoing for rural school communities.

(4)the administrative burden on teachers and the availability of new technologies to alleviate the burden;

The administrative burden on a full-time teaching principal such as myself is all consuming. (I can't think of a more challenging role)

DET certainly do not make it easy. I recently contributed to a Country Education Partnership professional development day where we prepared a submission for this inquiry. There submission should cover the myriad of onerous expectations placed on rural educators without me repeating them here.

Several observations that came out loud and clear from us all was that:

- The 'one size fits all' approach to administration, particularly in small schools such as mine, is far too time consuming and is becoming too specialised. The administrative burden needs to reflect our needs more rather than the system's needs.
- and that DET needs to trust principals more to do the right thing and manage our schools in a manner that suits our learning community and teaching environment. There is too much needless oversight.

I would also like to draw the inquiries attention to the fact that full-time teaching principals have not been given Professional Practice Days and now I've discovered that we are also not eligible to Time in Lieu. I think these 'oversights' show that either DET doesn't know teaching principals exist or do and don't care.

(5) examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing; and

(6) school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

School funding is certainly a lot better now than it was in rural schools. There are still inequities in the system (These have been well-publicised) but compared to when I started at Mount Wallace PS as a head teacher in 1994, we are much better funded. (But not if compared to private schools. I think we need a parliamentary inquiry into that?)

To help rural schools a great first start would be for DET to implement their own report - Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students report of 2019: [Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students \(cep.org.au\)](http://cep.org.au)

Maybe parliament can inquire into why this report (not perfect, but a good start) appears to be 'dead on arrival'. Five years old and no sign of recommendation 1 being completed. (The development of a five-year Strategic plan to deliver the other 7 recommendations!)

I have made my own inquiries through my Regional Director and local member and hit a brick wall every time. I think, either they no longer have the expertise within DET to support change and improvement in rural schools and/or they are afraid of failure if their five-year plan goals don't work. Whatever the reason, rural education is suffering.

I have included a paper I prepared in 2015 entitled 'Time for Action' on rural school issues (Little has changed since then) which I recently updated for my local member.