

Independent review into regional, rural and remote education

Submission: <https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>

‘Rural Education - Time for Action’



Glen Park Primary School

T. Shaw

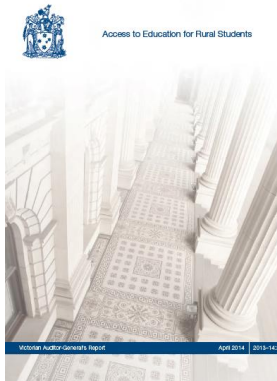
April 2017

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 Victorian Auditor General Report (April 2014) 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. Similar studies undertaken interstate have drawn similar conclusions.



The Auditor General's report

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)

The importance of rural schools

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 state-wide 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.

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 neighbouring 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/D01-2000_with_cover.pdf)

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. (Hence our state motto: *The Education State*) 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 Victorian Auditor General has sounded a warning that the whole government (State and Federal) 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.

Issues/ Recommendations

Below are some issues that I have identified (From over 25 years of experience in leading small rural schools) with proposed recommendations. These issues are mostly but not exclusively related to small rural state schools in Victoria.

Issue 1

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 DET has attempted to alleviate. (The Local Administrative Bureau or *LAB* model, established at Horsham currently services 44 schools across several 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.

Recommendation

1. A **Rural or small school Focus Group** (Referred to as a ‘Small Schools Common in a 2007 recommendation to DET by the Morrabool Collegiate Group. Refer Appendix) could provide the necessary support to DET to ensure that central initiatives are ‘user-friendly’ to implement in small schools.

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

A small school reference group could help choose small schools to pilot initiatives, provide support to those schools and their leaders and liaise with DET on how initiatives should be supported in small rural schools. (More time may be needed for full implementation, more ES (Education Support) or TSI (Technical Support) time may be required, CRT (Casual Relief Teacher) 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)

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.

3. Genuinely consult with stakeholders (embark in a conversation with principals, teachers, parents, children and concerned community members) regarding 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 held in Victoria was in 2005) Using all this feedback to create a workable plan to address the issues at a local level.

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

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. Make it easier for schools to respond to the often destructive influence of social media on small rural school communities.
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 schools in Victoria 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

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.

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.

Past 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 DET to address the wrongs and disinformation used to close down often viable and vibrant 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, Small school expos, highlighting the fantastic performances by small schools in NAPLAN high profile visits to small schools by respective Ministers and Premiers. (Many of our Prime Ministers were educated in small rural schools – Paige, Scullin, Curtin and Rudd)

Advantages of small rural schools

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 school's 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 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 DET.

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 locally (Moorabool Collegiate Group) have discussed staff swapping informally between themselves at a local level. The practice would gain more support between schools if DET would endorse and promote it and make it a seamless and painless exercise.
2. DET 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 online.
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 DET) 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>

Such a proposal would be a win - win situation for DET, 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.)

Issue 6

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)

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.

Recommendation

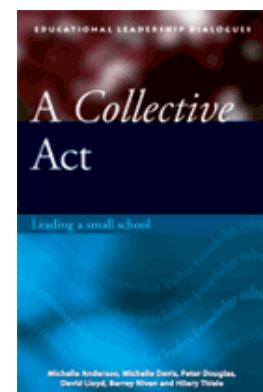
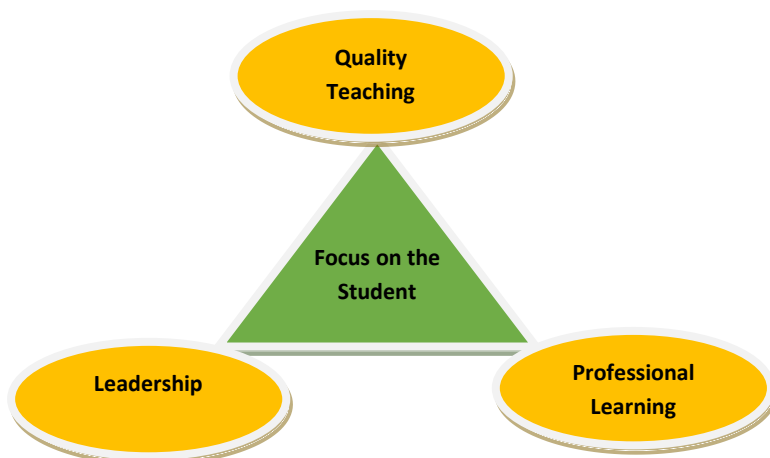
State and Federal Governments should also invest in small school education research that would better inform the system when making decisions that affect rural learning communities. Governments should encourage rural universities with an education faculty to embark on quality research led by school need in rural schools.

Issue 7

Supporting small school Principals

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 impacts 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 DET.

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 (DET 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. 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.

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 head teacher. 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 effecting 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)

'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

What makes an effective small rural school principal?

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

Head teachers 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.

Mentoring as an option to support rural principals

'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

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.*

- *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.

'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

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, Union 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 school's 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 DET 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).

Recommendation

Some professional learning options

1. Many small school principals feel ill-prepared for their new role. Small school leadership specific rural school 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.)

2. 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 PS 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.

3. The Victorian Rural Education Framework 2010, 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 however Ultranet failed miserably in that goal.

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.

Access for all rural schools to state of the art video conferencing equipment and reliable and accessible internet is essential.

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.

A standing reference group of small school leaders (such as the proposed small school reference group) would be a great ‘sounding board’ for the introduction of system wide ICT initiatives in small school settings. An efficient and fast broadband network can; help to utilise existing networks and clusters to pool resources and development collaborative and shared programs, use video-conferencing and new technologies, such as mobile phone technology, to enhance learning opportunities and outcomes, further develop the ‘e-literacy’ of teachers in rural schools and examining and trial the range of existing virtual learning models, including cost and efficacy.

4. 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. Such a program should be put in place following the NSW model.

Issues related to Professional learning in rural schools

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.

Principals are expected to attend four Regional Directors meetings, two Network meetings per term, the annual regional conference (this may vary between regions) accounting for at least twelve 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. (It would cost Glen Park \$3000+ in CRT replacement costs alone for me to attend all those meetings. That is the equivalent of one quarterly cash grant for our school)

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 Teacher Education Network or TEN in Ballarat performed this function by providing schools with affordable professional learning opportunities locally at the cost of a membership levy based on school enrolments. It was de-funded in 2012 although some limited attempts have been made to restore it recently.) 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 if available such as Quality Teaching Program Grants. (QTPG)

Professional learning providers should also be encouraged to develop abridged versions of their programs for rural schools constrained by distance and cost. For example, South Western Region 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 proved very successful.

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. (This already occurs amongst some historically strong and dynamic rural school clusters such as the Moorabool Collegiate Group.)

Local Professional Learning Communities will need to:

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

Conclusion

DET 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 current inquiry lead by Professor Halsey) 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 (Refer Appendix for the original submission)

- 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 only to be belatedly replaced by an inferior document which in turn disappeared without trace.) Let's not re-invent the wheel.

About the author

I have been a head-teacher / principal of one teacher schools in the Grampians South-western Region for the last 23 years. I am currently principal of Glen Park Primary school. I have been Secretary of the Moorabool Collegiate Group / PLC for 15 years. I was small school's 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 DET endorsed state-wide small school 'association' for 5 years. I was also part of the DET Focus group developing the Rural Education framework in 2009-10. 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.

Tony Shaw Principal Glen Park Primary School (1997-2017)

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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*. DET has developed a Rural Education Framework which was 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. It was replaced by an inferior document (no targets, no budget or timeline) released in 2015 which also subsequently disappeared with another change of government.

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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.

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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/

Notes about 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 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.

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*Changing pre-service teacher's attitudes to teaching in small rural

schools. <http://ajte.education.ecu.edu.au/issues/PDF/334/Hudson.pdf>

*Small rural schools performing well <http://blogs.abc.net.au/queensland/2009/10/small-rural-schools-performing-well.html>



A view from Glen Park Primary School sunrise March 2017

Appendix

Small school reference group Proposal. Submission to DET 2007.

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 school’s 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 school's 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)