



Fact Sheet 13

Rural Schooling

MAY 2009

Education is a significant determinant of an individual's health. As well as providing knowledge and skills, effective rural schooling provides a firm base for further education and career choice. Chief among the challenges in rural education are attracting and retaining qualified staff, improving school transport services, and supporting community development and cohesion.

There are many achievements to celebrate in rural education but a number of issues need to be addressed to ensure that quality schooling remains a reality for children and young people in rural and remote Australia. Rural schools have provided generations of children and young people with knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to become autonomous, responsible and productive citizens. Schools play a vital role in developing and sustaining rural communities and are crucial to Australia's sustainability.

For many families in rural Australia, accessing quality education in the local area is becoming increasingly difficult. There are many reasons for this, including major changes to the demographics of rural Australia, ongoing school consolidations and closures, and a belief that cities and large regional centres are "where you have to go" in order to receive a quality education.



PHOTO: ARTHUR MOSTEAD

In 1999-2000 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia.

Following HREOC's report, the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), Australia's peak education policy body, approved a National Framework for Rural and Remote Education. It sets out the essentials for ensuring quality education is available, accessible, affordable, acceptable and adaptable. Details are at: http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/rural_file.pdf

Given the demographic and economic changes that continue to affect rural and remote areas, communities and governments need to work together to make the investments required to ensure that first class local schools and schooling remain available in those areas. Four of the specific challenges are outlined below.

Attracting and retaining qualified staff

The challenge of attracting and retaining teachers for rural schools is part of the wider issue of attracting and retaining professionals of all kinds for work in non-metropolitan areas (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004).

Teacher education courses and leadership development programs must ensure that teachers and leaders are well prepared for working and living in country areas. There also needs to be regular follow-up to the training and opportunities for reviewing progress.

Research for the Rural Education Forum Australia in 2006 (www.refa.edu.au/projects) shows an individual has to pay \$2,500 to do a rural practicum while studying to become a teacher. There is no national funding to meet this cost; \$10 million annually would make a huge difference to those who undertake a rural placement before graduation.

The research also shows substantial benefits to employers when they can recruit for their schools from a pool of graduates who have first-hand experience of rural contexts.

Transport

A 2008 Commonwealth Grants Commission paper reported in 2006-07 that almost 480,000 primary and secondary rural students travelled 6.3 million kilometres to attend school. State and Territory Governments spent \$800 million in providing these services. The average distance travelled by students (calculated using a straight line between home and school, which can be misleading on ring route services) varied from 6km in the ACT to 27km in the Northern Territory. Nationally, the average distance travelled by a rural student is 13 kilometres.

In recent years there has been considerable pressure to improve school bus services by fitting seatbelts, providing air conditioning in extreme conditions and ensuring fleets are safe.

As rural populations have declined, pressure has increased on



PHOTO: ARTHUR MOSTEAD

many rural communities and families to justify the continuation of a school bus service. There has also been ongoing debate and contention about pre-school children travelling on school buses. Difficulty in ensuring safety and appropriate supervision is often among the reasons why rural pre-school children do not have automatic eligibility for a seat on a school bus.

It is clear, therefore, that there needs to be additional investment in school bus services. Rural families and communities have a natural right to convenient access to a safe, reliable and efficient school bus transport system for school and pre-school students.

In addition, school buses could be used to provide services for families along the routes that most urban families and communities take for granted. Daily deliveries of mail, bread, newspapers and emergency food and spare parts supplies – especially during heavy seasonal work commitments like harvesting and shearing – would do much to enhance the lot of rural residents and primary producers. Such services are often provided through personal and community goodwill. However, political action and collaboration between various public service agencies could formalise and improve such arrangements and help address the service and infrastructure deficits faced by country people.

Drought and other natural disasters

There is ample evidence that education and wellbeing of young people and their families are hard hit by drought and other natural disasters. On the other hand, schools and education can also become rallying points in stressful circumstances. Funding for rural schools and crucial decisions about whether or not to close a school should be made in terms of what is best for the whole of community, not just what is best for the bottom line of a single government department.

Recommendation 23 of the 2008 report by the Expert Social Panel on Dryness, appointed by the Commonwealth Government, provides strong support for this:

“State governments must consider the short to medium term social and economic impacts, when dryness is a contributing factor, when assessing the viability of classes, schools and bus services.”

Youth exodus

It has always been the case that a substantial proportion of young people leave small communities and more isolated areas for education, work and ‘the bright lights’. Youth are fundamentally future-oriented and a critical human resource for re-building and re-energising rural Australia’s role in national development and sustainability.

Major initiatives are therefore needed to ensure that there are educational and employment opportunities for youngsters in rural and remote areas. Such initiatives could include making a greater variety of educational opportunities available via the internet, local vocational training, and an expansion of employment in areas requiring higher skill levels. Distance education could be augmented by small group tutoring via the internet for specialist subjects for which local expertise is missing.

Funding to enable urban students to spend some of their time in a rural school and community as part of gaining a ‘well rounded education’ could also be part of the solution.

Information and communications technology will be both a platform for some of these solutions and the creator of new jobs in its own right.

For further information on this topic:

It's About People: Changing Perspectives. A Report to Government by an Expert Social Panel on Dryness by P Kenny (Chair of Review)

The Attraction and Retention of Professionals to Regional Areas by RL Miles, C Marshall, J Rolfe, and S Noonan. Available at http://www.bowenbasin.cqu.edu.au/pdfs/dotars_colloq.pdf

Transport of Rural School Children, Commonwealth Grants Commission Working Paper, available at http://www.cgc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/10769/10_U2008_Transport_of_Rural_School_Children.pdf

Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA) comprises 21 diverse organisations committed to addressing rural education issues. See www.refa.edu.au for information about REFA including member details and contacts, and publications.

