



**NSW SECONDARY PRINCIPALS' COUNCIL
POSITION PAPER**

Author: Rural and Remote Reference Group

Date: February 2018

RURAL EDUCATION POSITION PAPER 2018

1.0 Purpose

To promote improved outcomes for students in rural public schools by identifying actions and initiatives that can be implemented within the framework of public education in NSW.

2.0 Rationale

All students, regardless of their geographic location, are entitled to equitable educational opportunities.

3.0 Preamble

For the purposes of this paper, rural NSW refers to those localities outside the Sydney metropolitan area, the cities of Newcastle and Wollongong, and the NSW Central Coast. Across New South Wales, approximately 40 per cent of government schools, 25 per cent of students and 25 per cent of teachers are in rural and remote locations. (CESE Interim monitoring and evaluation report, December 2016)

Key understandings relating to rural education are:

- a) Communities and schools in Rural NSW have individual and collective needs that are unique. Differences in terms of location, size, composition and issues relating to these school communities are significant and compounded by multiple intersections of disadvantage.
- b) A range of significant changes have occurred in many rural communities in recent decades. Several clear trends are evident.
 - The long-term viability of many smaller rural communities is under threat. Communities are reducing in size, including satellite towns adjacent to large regional centres.
 - Many government, medical, financial, retail, social services (including mental health services) in rural areas have been regionalised to larger centres.
 - The increased cost of travel and decreased availability of services has added to the isolation experienced by a number of rural communities, compounding the economic impact created by other factors.

All of the above factors have in various ways contributed to significant shifts in the social structure of rural communities, and have major implications for education. There are now many rural communities that are significantly marginalized, socially and economically. This has left smaller, rural and remote centres without reasonable access to adequate support structures.



- c) The NSW Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) has adopted a proactive position, and will continue to work in conjunction with senior officers of the NSW Department of Education (the Department), to seek and implement solutions to address the issues relating to equitable educational provision for students in rural communities.
- d) There is a deep connection between rural communities and their local public schools. Schools are often a pivotal part of community life, are significant contributors to local economies, and foster excellent long term relationships within their communities due to the strong commitment of staff to their role and position in local communities.
- e) Competition from the private sector, particularly boarding schools, has a strong impact on the viability of public education in some rural areas.
- f) Despite the significant improvements in communication and technology systems, there remains significant areas where technology still does not operate effectively.
- g) Distance and travel time remain a critical factor in rural education for both students and staff. There is often a lack of understanding of the costs associated with distance.

4.0 Current and Emerging Issues

4.1 Performance of Rural Students

Many rural schools consistently produce young people who are outstanding citizens and who do and will make very significant contributions to their community and the broader society. However, as is the case across the whole range of schools some schools have greater success than others.

The following indicators of the performance of rural schools deserve critical evaluation.

4.1.1 Academic Results

Research clearly demonstrates that, on the whole, rural and remote students do not perform as well on a range of academic measures as students in urban areas.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) lists among the risk factors of poor performance, students attending schools in rural areas. OECD research confirms that students in rural and remote schools are more likely to under-achieve in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) for mathematics, reading and scienceⁱ.



4.1.2 Student Suspension

According to the Department data for 2016, rural and remote areas of the state rank highest in terms of the proportion of both short and long suspensions, per capita student enrolments.

4.1.3 Attendance

Schools in remote and very remote parts of NSW continue to have attendance rates below those of other parts of the state.

4.1.4 Year 12 Completion Rates

The Year 12 completion rates for students in schools in regional, remote and very remote areas continue to be below those of metropolitan schools and consistently below the rate for all schools.

4.1.5 Professional Learning

In an environment of high staff turnover with many inexperienced teachers at all levels, sustained professional learning is critical to driving improvement. The numbers of staff requiring targeted PL, as well as significant distance and travel time, limits opportunities for staff to build their professional capacity. Regional areas have limited access to support structures such as educational service teams. Whilst technology is increasingly used to improve access to PL opportunities, face to face learning remains more effective.

Recommendations

- There must be a continuation of further appropriate relief programs that significantly assist rural schools to provide quality PL.
- Resources must be provided to ensure there are sustainable structures and networks in rural areas to support the development of the large numbers of early career teachers, and the significant numbers of staff in executive positions who have limited experience in such positions.
- Support must be provided for the establishment of secondary KLA consultancy to assist in addressing curriculum and program development, and enhancement of classroom delivery for rural students.
- The SBAR needs to accurately assess the costs of PL in rural and remote areas to cover issues such as travel, accommodation and distance etc.
- On an annual basis, comprehensive data that accurately measures and informs the achievements and growth of rural and remote students compared to like schools should be collected and analysed. The results of these findings must be made available within the Department and strategies developed to improve the achievement of rural students.

4.2 Staffing of Rural Schools



The SPC acknowledges that the *Rural & Remote Human Resources Strategy (2017)* addresses difficulties in recruiting young people into teaching as a career. However, the strategy fails to address the need to provide adequate incentives to attract and retain experienced staff into teaching and leadership positions.

The current staffing model is outdated because the staffing profile has changed over time with many younger teachers not as mobile as in the past. There are also many older teachers not prepared to go through the maintenance of accreditation process and will, therefore, in time be ineligible for casual relief. Whilst acknowledging there are staffing concerns at the entire system level, the issues surrounding the staffing of rural schools are specific, and include:

Compatibility of staff for rural life is a significant factor. The isolation that can be experienced can be difficult for new staff and their families to adjust to, resulting in a higher turnover of staff in their first years of teaching. Many rural communities present situations that are vastly different to the experiences that people have had prior to taking up appointments. In smaller, rural centres new staff are frequently not prepared for, and have no prior experience, of greater public scrutiny of their personal lives.

- Staff Wellbeing issues associated with the uncertainty of school numbers and staffing, which may lead to relocation to an entirely different geographic area. This can result in significant professional and social dislocation for staff and their families.
- Access to casual staff
It is challenging to find casual staff to cover day to day relief for illness, teacher professional learning (TPL) and finding longer term replacements for leave situations or vacancies. Whilst the Department relief schemes have been helpful to many schools, the quality of some staff employed through these schemes has raised separate issues. There needs to be adequate measures in place to ensure that staff employed through these schemes have adequate skills for the position and school.
- Attracting executive staff and senior executive to rural localities
Principals in rural schools frequently report they have limited candidature for executive positions, including at Principal level. The capacity of many candidates across all executive levels is often at a developmental stage.

Executive teachers frequently have responsibility for:

- a range of faculty areas where they have limited or no expertise;
- supervising high numbers of inexperienced staff who are often teaching across a range of faculty areas, where they have little, if any, training and experience;
- providing effective programs in an environment of high staff turnover.
- The rigidity of the staffing formula for teaching and school administrative and support staff positions provides little flexibility to consider local factors that can have a significant effect on enrolments, such as drought.



- Recruitment and retention of staff
Current incentive schemes to attract staff and their families to rural and remote areas are failing to attract and retain candidates.
- Staffing of central schools
The staffing of central schools remains problematic and significantly unresolved despite ongoing discussions with the Department.

Recommendations

- Procedures must be implemented and resources provided to ensure that we attract, and retain, the highest quality teachers and educational leaders in rural schools.
- Enhanced partnerships must be developed with universities to effectively prepare teachers for placement in rural schools, with an advertising campaign to advocate the professional and personal advantages of a teaching career in rural schools.
- There needs to be a separate staffing formula for Central Schools, SSP's and Environmental and Education Training Units.

4.3 Curriculum Guarantee

All schools must provide students with an equitable access to high quality education. The issues surrounding curriculum offerings, especially in small and isolated communities, must be addressed. There are already schools that are facing significant challenges in providing a curriculum guarantee for their students. This will only exacerbate as enrolments decline. There is little alternative other than a rationalisation of the current level of provision. Where there is no other viable alternative at their local school, students must be able, to access a viable curriculum. This should include access to Distance Education, EVET, VET and other online programs such as Access and Aurora College.

Alternate curriculum delivery models offer potential for isolated rural students to access a broad curriculum. The provision of a virtual school, with the ability to deliver curriculum flexibly, is supported by the SPC as it offers additional access to educational opportunities for students. A full evaluation of this mode of delivery and the educational benefits of a more flexible mode of delivery needs to be done on a regular basis.

Access to alternative models of curriculum delivery should be made locally, must support the viability of the local school and must not unnecessarily impact detrimentally on other students or staffing. These provisions must complement and support the delivery of curriculum at a local level and enhance access to the curriculum for both students and staff.

Recommendations

- Enrolment trends must be analysed, within local contexts, for central/high schools, and this data should be the basis of discussions on future school resource structures.



- Initiatives and programs, to maintain a broad curriculum delivery such as the establishment of curriculum learning networks and subject specific mentoring programs, must be established and effectively supported and resourced.
- All rural schools must have appropriate band width, video conferencing facilities, and other new technologies, with appropriate training to support their implementation.
- Rural schools must be supported in accessing all online and distance education services, without incurring a staffing reduction, where there is a clear case of this ensuring a curriculum guarantee.

4.5 Students with Individual Needs

Some rural schools have specialist support classes, but many do not, and many students with special needs are fully integrated. Rural and remote schools at times find it difficult to service students with complex needs.

Many rural schools have achieved outstanding results in this area but there are real issues, including:

- the lack of specialist teachers
- lack of local support services due to distance
- financial constraints on some families;
- the lack of effective professional learning programs for school learning support officers and teaching staff to support the successful integration and inclusion of students where appropriate;
- limited access to behaviour schools and tutorial centres to cater for students with significant behaviour problems. Schools and teachers, many of whom are inexperienced, have to find ways to deal with students with very challenging behaviours, often with limited support.
- the lack of adequate counselling support in many schools in rural and remote localities where counsellors access schools intermittently and principals often face very challenging situations with difficult students and parents on a regular basis.
- medical facilities in rural localities, including mental health services, are significantly less than the quality and accessibility of service available to students in larger urban centres. Access is further limited by excessively long waiting lists.
- the amount of time that itinerant departmental education support staff are “on the road” diminishes their ability to provide adequate support to students and schools. This is further exacerbated when the hours of support provided to students includes travel to and from the school instead of face to face time.

Recommendations

- Training programs must be developed to meet the significant demands placed on teachers who are largely untrained in dealing with the individual needs of students with specific learning needs, and school learning support officers, who in most cases have virtually no training at all.
- An alternative staffing allocation must be initiated that provides rural schools with



the means and resources to support students with significant behaviour and mental health issues.

4.6 Aboriginal students.

The achievement gap for Aboriginal students continues to be of significant concern. In recognition of the complexity of issues in relation to Aboriginal Education, the Aboriginal Education reference group is preparing a separate position paper, which should be read in conjunction with this paper.

5.0 Other Issues/Recommendations

That an Executive Director of Education who can provide high level coordination, advocacy and accountability be made responsible for Rural Education and the implementation of *Rural and Remote Education: A Blueprint for Action*.

That there be an enhancement and greater promotion of the resources that currently exist to support rural schools and students, so that more students have better and more equitable access to a broad curriculum and more teachers have better access to effective professional learning.