Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities
A long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes
Ministers’ message

Rural and regional Victoria provides rich and varied natural assets and cultural and lifestyle opportunities that are embraced by many. It is home to about a quarter of all Victorians, and accounts for about 25 percent of the state’s economic output. The productivity, prosperity and wellbeing of rural and regional Victoria is vital to our state – we know that when our regions and rural areas do well, Victoria does well.

Many of our rural and regional communities are thriving and provide positive and supportive environments in which Victorian families lead happy and productive lives. We want to build on these strengths and the many positive features of rural and regional life, such as the high levels of social connection and strong participation in community, cultural and recreational activities.

Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities – a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes builds on the significant funding currently provided for early childhood, education and training services in rural and regional communities. Each year the Victorian Government is providing rural and regional communities with $1.65 billion for government schools, $167 million to non-government schools, a further $34 million for kindergarten programs, over $300 million in subsidies for vocational training delivery and approximately $27 million a year to assist students travelling to and from schools in rural and regional areas.

Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities also outlines the range of activities and supports available to rural and regional learners, providers, families and communities. This includes initiatives such as the $20 million Regional Partnership Facilitation Fund and the $5 million Local Solutions Year 12 Retention Fund, which support rural and regional communities to pursue a range of learning pathways. Rural and regional providers also benefit from a range of statewide efforts to support high-quality education, such as the Primary Maths and Science Specialists, the School Specialisation grants and the range of courses provided by the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership.

This range of investment, activities and support helps ensure that all Victorians have access to broad, high-quality education and training services from the early years through to adulthood that nurture and support their aspirations to achieve successful learning and development outcomes, irrespective of where they live.

We know that we can do more to support rural and regional Victorians to achieve strong education and development outcomes. Today, rural and regional Victorians do not achieve education and development outcomes equal to their metropolitan peers and they have fewer opportunities to pursue further education and training. There are high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage in some areas, and challenges presented by distance and smaller populations in some rural areas. These factors impact on the diversity of providers, the breadth and flexibility of provision, and the attraction and retention of a consistently high-quality education workforce.

To build on the strengths of our rural and regional communities and to address these challenges, we need to support collaboration and partnerships that involve: families; the early childhood sector; schools from all sectors; higher education and vocational education and training providers; business; and community organisations.

Through Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities, together with broader system reforms across Victoria, rural and regional learners will be supported to gain the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in a complex and rapidly changing global society.

We look forward to working with you to continue to support rural and regional learners and their communities to thrive and prosper for decades to come.
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Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities covers

- learners of all ages
- early childhood services through schooling to further education and training, and government and non-government providers
- the 48 non-metropolitan Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Victoria.

Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities - a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes spans a 5-year period from 2014 to 2019. It aims to provide policy makers, providers and communities with a clear understanding of the Government’s commitment to improving outcomes in rural and regional Victoria and the actions that will support this.

The provision of world-class education and training in rural and regional Victoria is central for building a strong society with social mobility. Strong economic growth, high educational aspirations and quality education and training provision are mutually reinforcing and self-sustaining. In concert, they create a cohesive cycle of growth and achievement.

Why do we need a rural and regional plan?

Rural and regional Victoria accounts for about a quarter of the state’s population and economic output. For Victoria to continue to grow and prosper, ensuring the ongoing vitality and success of rural and regional communities is critical.

There are many benefits of living in rural and regional Victoria, particularly in relation to lifestyle, environment and community. Community connections and networks are strong in many rural and regional areas, along with high levels of participation in community, cultural and recreational activities.

Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities seeks to build on the positive attributes and features of rural and regional Victoria.

It also seeks to address the gaps in learning and development outcomes of children, young people, adults and families in rural and regional Victoria compared to metropolitan Melbourne. This difference in learning outcomes represents a long-term trend that is not unique to Victoria; rather, it is commonly experienced across Australia and internationally (OECD 2013, Thompson, Hillman & Wernert 2012).

1 Introduction

‘Working in a rural or regional location provides you with an opportunity to learn and develop skills as a teacher and leader that are so integral to the success of young people in education. The opportunity to work in close-knit communities that work collaboratively to enhance the opportunities for their young people is incredibly rewarding.’

Rural Primary School Principal

![Figure 1: Percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable upon entry to school, by location, 2012](chart)

Source: Australian Early Development Index, 2012

Level of development vulnerability

- Metropolitan
- Regional centres
- Rural
There is significant variation within rural and regional Victoria but, in summary, when compared to metropolitan Melbourne, there are differences in relation to the following.

- **Early childhood education and care:** Participation in maternal and child health services and 4-year-old kindergarten is high, but rural and regional children are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at the point of starting school compared to children in metropolitan areas.

- **School education:** Differences in learning outcomes are most apparent in the middle and senior years of secondary school, when statewide issues regarding student engagement and absenteeism in the middle years are exacerbated in rural and regional areas. There are also consistently lower levels of Year 12 or equivalent attainment (Figure 2), and lower literacy and numeracy performance on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in rural and regional Victoria.

‘The strength of rural education is that students stay connected, and they have a sense of belonging within their community – it’s not just about the school – they have a sense of value and they make a difference – they are not just a number. They are expected to take on leadership responsibilities, often feeling uncomfortable, which extends them and keeps them learning.’

- **Parent of a Rural Youth Ambassador**

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**Figure 2: Victorian Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates at age 19, by location and year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
<th>Rural and Regional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DEECD and VCAA administrative data, 2012

Further information on learning outcomes in rural and regional Victoria is provided in the Appendix.

**Figure 3: Education attainment of Victorian population aged 25 years and over, by location and qualification level, 2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification Level</th>
<th>Major city</th>
<th>Inner regional</th>
<th>Outer regional</th>
<th>Remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No post-school qualification</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree or higher</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed Year 12</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest schooling Year 9 or below</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing 2011
• Further education and training:
Pathways to further education and training are different in rural and regional areas. There is a stronger preference for, and uptake of, entry-level vocational education, apprenticeships and traineeships compared with metropolitan students. Participation in upper-level vocational education and higher education is growing, but remains lower among rural and regional learners. Young people from rural regions defer university at twice the rate of young people in metropolitan locations (Klatt & Polesel 2013). Adults also participate less in lifelong learning, which is consistent with lower school completion and post-school attainment.

Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities is Victoria’s first consolidated effort to improve learning and development outcomes in rural and regional areas of Victoria by addressing the challenges across all school sectors and all ages and stages of learning and development. It is founded on the knowledge that good education and training outcomes are crucial to the social and economic success of rural and regional Victoria.

Understanding which factors influence learning outcomes in rural and regional Victoria

The context of different communities varies significantly and is affected by factors such as community size, proximity to major population centres, population characteristics and the local economy. Rural communities face particular barriers regarding access to services, professional isolation and the viability of smaller education providers. Regional centres often have a high concentration of disadvantaged populations that require particular services and support.

These factors can influence educational outcomes; for example, analysis of government school data shows variation across Victoria, including high performance in some rural and remote secondary schools alongside some larger gaps in performance in regional cities and larger towns.

A closer examination reveals a number of complexities that underpin the differences in learning outcomes:

1. Rural and regional Victoria has higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, and when this fact is taken into account, the gap in learning outcomes is significantly reduced. This suggests that rurality in itself is not the major influence on lower educational achievement; rather, it is socioeconomic disadvantage that drives lower outcomes in rural and regional areas.

2. Gippsland and the Central Highlands areas have the highest level of structural change in Victoria, reflecting the decline in manufacturing and utilities services (Deloitte Access Economics 2014). This structural change leads to a shift in economic activity and a change in the composition of the workforce and the skills required.

3. Urban migration, shifting populations and changes within and across industry in rural and regional Victoria are limiting opportunities for economic growth and diversity in education, training and employment pathways. Urban migration reduces the diversity and availability of employment in rural locations (Pegg & Panizzon 2007).

Figure 4: Distribution of Victorian LGAs by Quintiles of Socioeconomic Disadvantage, 2011

Source: ABS Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEIFA Quintiles of Socioeconomic Disadvantage</th>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
<th>Regional centres</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 1 (Most disadvantaged)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quintile 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintile 5 (Least disadvantaged)</td>
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</table>

Source: ABS Socioeconomic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), 2011

1 Structural change refers to a long-term shift in the composition of the economy. It can be understood in terms of changes in the value-added share of industry sectors in the economy; as a redistribution of employment across industries; or as a shift in capital investment.
4. Distance and the size of rural populations can affect the viability of early childhood education and care services, and limit the breadth of learning that can be provided in small schools, as well as access to health and allied health support services, alternative education programs and higher education. This reduced access to services can directly affect the capacity of rural communities to take up employment, education or training opportunities.

The consequences of socioeconomic disadvantage, changing industry structures and community size and isolation are shown in Figure 5 as part of a self-perpetuating cycle that links to learning aspirations, educational attainment and limited employment opportunities.

**Focusing on the areas that can make the biggest difference to rural and regional learners, families and communities**

Planning for economic development, addressing disadvantage, providing high-quality education services and building community attitudes to learning are closely interrelated and require long-term efforts on multiple fronts to create sustained change. Figure 6 outlines the key areas of government reform required to address these challenges. It is these reform strategies that underpin *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities*.

The key to implementing the reform strategies is supporting local communities to influence education and training so that they align with the local economic and social context, and learners’ needs. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s role is to continue to support providers and communities to make effective local decisions, only intervening where a specific need is identified that cannot reasonably be met through our universal systems and managed at the local level.

*Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities* is not intended to duplicate system-wide reforms already underway or efforts that focus on specific groups of learners through identified strategies. 
Figure 6 Summary of challenges, reforms and desired outcomes

**Current Challenges**

**Learning aspirations**
- Influenced by high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage affecting engagement in learning and post-compulsory pathways

**Learning outcomes**
- Lower learning outcomes than metropolitan learners
- Significant variation in outcomes across rural and regional areas

**Access to services**
- Viability is a challenge for some small rural early childhood providers
- Challenges for small schools in providing a broad curriculum
- VET providers adjusting to changing VET market
- Areas of persistent workforce shortages: specialist educators and education leaders

**Connecting locally**
- Limited effective whole-of-community approaches to learning and provision
- Limited alignment between regional economic planning and training provision

**Reform Strategies**

**Build and realise learning aspirations**
- Develop effective strategies for communities, families, service leaders and educators to support learners’ aspirations

**Improve provision**
- Provide better targeted needs-based funding arrangements, and ensure effective use of assets and resources
- Develop and implement effective education workforce strategies
- Support communities and providers to collaborate and make effective local decisions to deliver a broad range of learning opportunities
- Facilitate connections between industry and education and training

**End Result**

**Learning aspirations**
- Learners, their families, educators and communities have high educational aspirations and support a range of learning opportunities

**Learning outcomes**
- Learning outcomes on par with metropolitan areas
- Reduced variation in outcomes across and within rural and regional areas

**Access to services**
- Reasonable access to a range of high-quality early childhood, school and further education and training options
- Providers use the best knowledge of effective workforce attraction and retention strategies to ensure a high-quality workforce

**Connecting locally**
- Best practice models are shared and adapted to different settings
- Whole-of-community approaches to learning and development for all learners are the norm
# A plan for action – at a glance

## Objective
Improve the learning and development outcomes of children, young people and adults in rural and regional Victoria

## Reform strategies

### Build and realise learning aspirations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Develop effective strategies for communities, families, service leaders and educators to support learners' aspirations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Improve parents' and carers' awareness and understanding of evidence-based ways to support their children's learning and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Develop a regional online hub that provides information about local training options available in one place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identify and implement effective strategies to improve educational engagement and aspirations for learners in rural and regional communities</td>
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### Improve provision

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provide better targeted needs-based funding arrangements, and ensure effective use of assets and resources</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Review the eligibility requirements for kindergartens accessing funding through rural and small rural per capita grants</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Assess the impact of current rural loadings in school funding models</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify ways to align the eligibility criteria for rural loadings provided to kindergartens and schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensure that funding for regional and rural VET is targeted and effectively addresses learner needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Continue to support regional TAFEs to be competitive, financially sustainable and to build their capability to contribute to regional economic development</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Increase the innovative use of assets by schools and the wider community, including co-location and shared facilities, by developing incentives and removing barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Better understand the provision of early childhood education and care in rural and regional Victoria</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Develop and implement effective education workforce strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Research the factors that influence recruitment and retention strategies in rural schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Test and disseminate effective approaches to improving the recruitment and retention of educators and leaders in rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collect qualitative and quantitative workforce data that can be used to monitor improvements over time</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Improve access to customised professional development opportunities through regional and virtual delivery of Bastow courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide new e-learning professional development program for all vocational training providers</td>
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<tr>
<th>Support communities and providers to collaborate and make effective local decisions to deliver a broad range of learning opportunities</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Increase the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships through pre-apprenticeship training</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop and implement a coordinated approach to virtual learning in Victorian schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop the skills of leaders and educators to use digital technologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Document and share models of collaborative practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Implement the Linking Learning Birth to 12 Years project to improve collaboration between schools and early childhood services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work with Area Partnerships to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Support the development of Community Learning and Development Plans</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitate connections between industry and education and training</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Support whole-of-community responses to changing industry structures and training needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Support retrenched workers to access State Government subsidised training</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Create greater alignment between education and training and the regional economic context through Regional Management Forums and Regional Development Australia</td>
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### System-wide reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bring a rural and regional perspective to system-wide reform agendas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Early Years Strategic Plan: Improving outcomes for all Victorian children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Towards Victoria as a Learning Community and From New Directions to Action: World Class Teaching and School Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Refocussing Vocational Training in Victoria and Victoria's New Industry Participation Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn Local: Focusing on the Future</td>
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</table>
Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities identifies reform strategies and supporting actions that the Department will undertake from 2014 to 2019 to address the identified challenges of rural and regional Victorians and improve learning outcomes.

Build and realise learning aspirations

Aspirations begin forming at the age of 3 years. From the age of 9, most children begin to eliminate choices, and by age 14, aspirations are significantly influenced by social circumstances and identified barriers (Gottfredson 2002).

Understanding and influencing an individual's learning aspirations is complex, as they are shaped by many factors. Figure 7 provides an example of the factors that influence the aspirations of students. While these factors influence all learners, some are particularly challenging in rural and regional areas.

Children, young people and families in rural and regional Victoria have aspirations for learning, and some of those aspirations lead to positive outcomes, such as the strong uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships in rural and regional areas. However, too often the factors shaping aspirations contribute to unacceptable levels of absenteeism from school, learners narrowing their education and career opportunities too early, and fewer students completing Year 12, or its equivalent, and higher-level VET and university courses.

Figure 7: Factors influencing student aspirations

Source: Adapted from Regional Policy Advisory Committee 2013
Choice can be limited by what is available in the local area and the costs associated with relocation or travelling long distances to access further education and training. These limitations result in reduced access to a broad range of subjects at school, further education and training or higher education courses, as well as less exposure to information about university life, career options, or role-models in a variety of post-school education and training fields (Ollerenshaw & Murphy 2011).

In addition, more young people in rural and regional areas are deferring university study, usually for financial reasons (Klatt & Polesel 2013). Several studies have also documented the anxiety that many rural young people feel about relocation to larger urban areas due to the lack of positive encouragement and advice available to them within their communities (Ollerenshaw & Murphy 2011).

Regional Schools Outreach Program – raising aspirations

Federation University is raising aspirations through its intensive Regional Schools Outreach Program (RSOP). The University is working with 49 schools in western Victoria to improve participation in higher education among students from low socioeconomic, regional and remote backgrounds by:

- building aspirations for VCE and higher education for students and the community
- improving student retention and completion rates, particularly in VCE
- developing and strengthening collaborative relationships between schools, families and universities.

All schools in the RSOP are provided with in-school workshops for senior students and their parents and a one-on-one Going Places advisory service for Year 12 students.

In addition, the University has established partnerships with eight school communities in the Wimmera and Mallee regions to provide:

- in-school activities for primary and secondary students
- information sessions for parents of primary and secondary students
- a two-day funded University Experience camp for Year 8 students.

Annual evaluations from 2008 to 2013 indicate consistent effectiveness of the program, as it contributes to a significant increase in the proportion of students with intentions to pursue higher education.

Reform Strategy 1: Develop effective strategies for communities, families, service leaders and educators to support learners’ aspirations

Efforts are already underway to support learners, families and communities to access a range of experiences and realise their aspirations so that they can actively engage in learning and become productive members of the workforce. These include:

- smalltalk, a structured early intervention program that assists parents to support their children’s learning and development at home
- connecting families who have young children with playgroups and peer-support networks to strengthen parenting skills and improve child development in low socioeconomic communities in rural Victoria
- the Local Solutions Year 12 Retention Fund, which has provided $5 million in grants to support government, Catholic and independent schools in rural and regional areas to design and deliver programs or initiatives to increase Year 12 retention, improve student wellbeing and increase and expand pathway options for senior students

Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities

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• the rollout of the Victorian Curriculum Careers Framework to all Victorian schools to support educators to provide a localised and customised, quality career development program for young people at different stages of learning in schools, VET and Learn Local settings. This includes the Engaging Parents in Career Conversations resource, which ensures that parents and carers play an integral and informed role in a young person’s career development discussions
• piloting family learning partnerships that aim to raise the attainment and learning aspirations of children, while creating pathways for parents to progress to formal training and employment themselves
• developing the Victorian Skills Gateway, which provides comprehensive information for learners, their families and providers about the range of VET courses available in Victoria and who delivers them
• Victorian universities broadening their scope to provide opportunities for rural and regional students to study closer to home. Examples of this are Deakin University’s Deakin at Your Doorstep, Melbourne University Rural Clinical School, Swinburne Online and Monash University Rural Health School
• the Victorian Government taking active measures to support improved higher education opportunities for regional Victorians. These include:
  – contributing funding to university-led initiatives to expand student accommodation in major regional centres
  – supporting the development and delivery of new, innovative higher education courses and pathway programs through the $20 million Regional Partnerships Facilitation Fund.

However, as highlighted by the recent report from the Regional Policy Advisory Committee (2013), more needs to be done to build the aspirations of rural and regional learners at an early age and support their participation in lifelong learning.

The Victorian Skills Gateway

The Victorian Skills Gateway was launched in December 2012 as a one-stop shop for vocational training information. In that time the website has had more than 250,000 visitors and there have been over 1,300,000 page views.

The Victorian Skills Gateway makes it easy to find local courses and training providers. Rural and regional students can search for training options delivered in their area or online.

Occupations that are likely to be in demand within the next five years are also identified to help students make informed decisions that will lead to stronger job outcomes.

For further information visit: www.education.vic.gov.au/victorianskillsgateway
Shared use of infrastructure at the Wimmera Trade Training Centre

Over 330 students are currently accessing high quality infrastructure, through the Wimmera Trade Training Centre to complete their Certificate 2 and 3 qualifications. This is infrastructure that would otherwise not be available for students from small rural schools.

The Wimmera Trade Training Centre project involves a cluster of 11 government and independent Wimmera schools, covering 23,500 square kilometres, working cooperatively with local agencies and the Federation University to deliver innovative vocational training opportunities to rural students. This helps to address the significant geographic disadvantage and major retention and employment challenges confronting Wimmera schools.

The Trade Training Centre partners agree to share newly constructed infrastructure at Horsham College, Federation University and Longemong College, to promote and deliver training in identified local skill shortage areas and to facilitate ‘on the job’ training.

The Trade Training Centre also provides online curriculum, webcasting and video conferencing facilities.

To further build and realise the aspirations of rural and regional learners, the Victorian Government will:

Work with families
- Improve parents’ and carers’ awareness and understanding of evidence-based ways to support their children’s learning and development through the Victorian Parenting Support Strategy (0–8) and the Engaging Families in Learning project.

Improve information about further education and training pathway options
- Build on the success of the Victorian Skills Gateway to develop regional online hubs that will, for the first time, provide information about all local training options in one place.

Build a stronger evidence base for interventions
- Work with educators, service leaders and communities to identify and implement effective strategies to improve educational engagement, increase exposure to a range of pathways, and strengthen and realise aspirations for learners in rural and regional communities. This will draw on the current best practice and the available evidence of what works.

Improve provision

Provision is not limited to the delivery of early childhood education and care, school education or further education and training. It involves the delivery of all services required to ensure that children, young people and adults are able to realise their potential.

Addressing the long-term differences in the learning outcomes of rural and regional Victorians compared with metropolitan Victorians sits alongside the challenge of providing engaging 21st-century education and training. Government, communities and providers need to think differently about how to ensure that all rural and regional learners have access to high-quality learning opportunities within their local communities and beyond.

The four strategies described below focus on improving provision in rural and regional Victoria.
Reform Strategy 2: Provide better targeted needs-based funding arrangements, and ensure effective use of assets and resources

Every learner in Victoria should have access to high-quality learning and development across all ages and stages in world-class facilities, regardless of where they live. In rural and regional Victoria, a reliable core Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure is essential for providing a broad range of learning opportunities.

The Victorian Government is committed to providing increasingly targeted, needs-based funding, assets and infrastructure to ensure that all providers can meet the needs of their learners. This involves recognising that the higher proportion of small providers in rural areas can increase resource pressures, through fewer economies of scale, less flexibility in allocating resources, and less capacity to raise funds to supplement government funding in communities with a small population base. This is why the Victorian Government provides:

• additional rural funding allocations to early childhood education and care, school and vocational education providers in rural areas
• funding allocations that specifically support learners from disadvantaged backgrounds
• targeted capital investment – for example infrastructure grants to support small kindergartens and the refurbishment of rural and regional schools
• transport provision – the School Bus program provides free bus transport for eligible primary and secondary school students. Parents of preschool students who have turned 4 years of age may also seek approval for them to travel at no cost on a school bus service to their preschool provider on approval from the coordinating principal.

The Victorian Government works with local government to support the most effective use of resources in a local area, particularly in relation to early childhood education services such as maternal and child health and kindergarten.

To provide more targeted resources, the Victorian Government will:

Provide better targeted, needs-based funding

• Review and provide options to improve eligibility requirements for kindergartens accessing rural and small rural per capita grants to ensure they target the services that need it most.
• Assess the impact of current rural loadings in school funding models to ensure that loadings are targeted to the needs of learners.
• Identify opportunities to align the eligibility criteria for rural loadings provided to kindergartens and schools, to make sure that the communities in greatest need are being supported.
• As part of the ongoing review of VET expenditure and delivery provide options for better targeted and more effective funding for regional and rural learner needs

Ensure better use of government assets and resources

• Continue to support regional TAFEs to be competitive, financially sustainable and to build their capability to contribute to regional economic development.
• Increase the innovative use of assets by schools and the wider community, including co-location and shared facilities, by developing incentives and removing barriers.

“We all know that good quality, enthusiastic teachers are fundamental to a great education – we believe if teachers work together their quality, knowledge and skills will be improved.”

Rural Youth Ambassador
• Explore the availability of early childhood education and care in rural and regional Victoria to understand how the needs of communities are being met.

Reform Strategy 3: Develop and implement effective education workforce strategies

An essential element of improving learning and development outcomes and the quality of provision is high-quality leadership and professional practice across all services. This is a key focus of the national quality reforms in the early childhood education and care sector, state reforms articulated in Towards Victoria as a Learning Community and From New Directions to Action in the school sector, and Victoria’s ongoing efforts to improve quality in the vocational training sector.

Analysis of Department data (DEECD 2012) and discussions with stakeholders demonstrate ongoing challenges in attracting and retaining quality leaders and specialist staff in some rural areas. These challenges are often related to limited access to networks and professional development, and a sense of professional and social isolation.

Nathalia Learning Community (NLC)

• The NLC includes Nathalia Primary School, Nathalia Secondary College, St Francis Catholic Primary school and St Mary of Angels College.

• Outcomes from the NLC have included a shared approach to the development and provision of senior school programs (including VCE, VET, Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning).

• By coordinating their timetables and sharing access to VCE and VCAL subjects, the two secondary schools have been able to offer over fifty VCE Unit 1&2 or 3&4 sequences as well as offerings in VCAL literacy, numeracy and personal development. They have also formed a partnership with St Augustine’s in Kyabram to form a Trade Trading Centre Consortium, which offers six VET subjects across the three schools.

• The two primary schools have also worked together to develop a strong partnership between early years services, kindergartens and schools.

‘I am studying VCE in a town of 1000 people and there is this great maths teacher and great English teacher in the school down the road, and a great chem teacher in the other school down the other road.

I asked myself, why can’t these schools work together, sharing teachers across these schools so that I can get the best teachers, which then helps me get the best results so that I can realise my dreams.’

Rural Youth Ambassador
Victoria has a long history of providing specific support to rural and regional workforces to help overcome these challenges. Current efforts include:

- employment incentives to attract early childhood educators to hard-to-staff areas
- the model of Kindergarten Cluster Management, which provides a stable basis of employment that is important for attracting and retaining educators and enables sustainable work arrangements such as staff deployment across a number of kindergartens within an area. The model also creates a community of practice within the cluster that drives and supports professional development
- delivery of professional development for emerging leaders in regional areas through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership
- support for student teachers to undertake practicum placements in Victorian government rural schools
- access to travel and accommodation allowances for those accessing professional learning who have to travel for more than two hours
- scholarships to attract maths and science teachers to rural and regional areas.

However, the factors that influence educators and education leaders to relocate and remain in different rural areas are not fully understood, and the impact of different types of support needs to be regularly monitored and adjusted to reflect the latest evidence of what works.

‘Working in a school in a rural location means that you are an integral part of the community. Many people of all ages feel a close connection and want to be involved in many different ways. There is a lot to live up to but the support is amazing!’

Rural Principal
Virtual learning in regional Victoria

Small rural schools across Victoria are working together to deliver, broaden and sustain their curriculum offerings through the use of video conferencing.

In 2014, there are 30 schools actively involved in providing 32 classes for over 260 students.

Originally, 11 small rural colleges from across the Wimmera were involved. However, due to its success, the Wimmera Virtual School model has now broadened to involve a number of small primary schools clustering to provide language programs and four video conferencing networks across Victoria, including in the Grampians, South-West, North-Central and North-West regions.

Small school language networks continue to grow, with the aid of video conferencing technology, to provide Japanese, Chinese, Italian, German, Korean and Indonesian to students.

For example, Trawalla Primary School is now providing Japanese language classes as part of an agreement with six other small schools.

The programs are now becoming self-sustaining due to the professionalism, and cooperation of principals, teachers and parents, who have come to accept and support the virtual learning approach.

To further support the rural and regional workforce, the Victorian Government will:

Support attraction and retention of the workforce

• Research the factors that positively influence recruitment and retention in rural schools.
• Test and disseminate effective approaches to improving the recruitment and retention of educators and leaders in rural areas.
• Collect qualitative and quantitative workforce data that can be used to monitor improvements over time.

Bring more training to rural and regional areas

• Improve access to a range of customised professional development opportunities and support through more local and virtual delivery of Bastow courses to meet the needs of emerging leaders in rural and regional locations.
• Provide a new e-learning professional development program for all vocational training providers through the VET Development Centre.

Reform Strategy 4: Support communities and providers to collaborate and make effective local decisions to deliver a broad range of learning opportunities

Delivering broad learning experiences that respond to the needs of the learner is an important component of encouraging a sustained, active engagement in learning.

Communities have different needs, some of which can be identified and managed by an individual provider. However, in communities that experience complex challenges, collaboration among providers is the most effective way to respond to the needs of both the provider and the learner.
Collaboration at a community level is often referred to as a ‘place-based approach’ and working across different types of providers looks different in each location. Collaboration can be informal or formal, and range from sharing information to establishing a partnership for a specific purpose or event, integrating services provided or implementing shared governance models (e.g. federation).

Maximising the potential of technology

Place-based approaches in rural and regional areas can improve the learning opportunities that children and young people are exposed to through technology.

There are a number of initiatives already in place to maximise the potential of technology in rural and regional areas, including:

- Technology Enabled Learning Centres in Gippsland, which are providing access to video conferencing and collaboration tools to support the virtual delivery of vocational learning programs in regional TAFEs
- investment in ICT infrastructure to ensure that all learners have access to high-quality 21st-century learning environments, including the distribution of 900 videoconference facilities and the rollout of the VicSmart network and eduSTAR suite of services in schools
- Distance Education Centre of Victoria (DECV) school subjects at all year levels for students who cannot access a particular subject, or whose circumstances prevent them from accessing regular schools
- support for virtual learning programs such as:
  - the Country Education Project that runs the VCE ebiology and ephysics projects, and the upper primary science initiative
  - Bendigo Senior Secondary College, which offers 10 VCE subjects through the Victorian Virtual Learning Network
  - Wimmera Virtual School, which offers almost 30 VCE subjects across its cluster network of schools
  - Gippsland Virtual network, which delivers 10 VCE subjects as well as other secondary and upper primary subjects.
Supporting collaborative practice

While technology is a tool that can deliver broader learning opportunities and go some way to addressing the challenges of provider size and distance, it is just one of the mechanisms available.

Partnerships, collaboration, interdependence and shared decision-making acknowledge that shared challenges, such as those experienced in rural and regional areas, are better addressed with shared responses.

‘There is a role of significant leadership for the Department in formulating whole-of-community responses to the needs of rural and regional communities. Education must be at the heart of any community improvement plan but it cannot achieve without working collaboratively with key community stakeholders.’

Rural Principal

Developing the relationships and partnerships that enable effective collaboration takes time, resources and strong leadership. There are many examples of collaborative efforts to improve provision through clusters, networks, alliances and more structured models of federated school governance or co-location. They include shared workforce arrangements that can broaden access to specialist educators, groups of schools and vocational providers working together to offer a broader range of subjects for students and adult learners, improved support to leaders, and delivery of health and allied health services on school sites.

Through the reform agendas outlined in *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community* and *Refocusing Vocational Training in Victoria*, the Victorian Government has demonstrated its commitment to providing communities and providers with the authority they need to implement the best provision for their circumstances, while improving the quality of governance and accountability arrangements to ensure that high-level outcomes are achieved.
The Passions and Pathways Career Education Grade Six Pilot Project is a partnership involving the Goldfields Local Learning and Employment Network, Lightning Reef and Eaglehawk Primary Schools, the Economic Development Unit from the City of Greater Bendigo, the Bendigo Manufacturing Group and a number of manufacturing industries and other business sectors.

The aim of the project is to make connections between school and real life, and open students’ eyes to job and career possibilities by helping them to:

- develop an appreciation that there are intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to be gained from following a career path
- explore what a career is and the associated skills, knowledge and attitudes required to sustain a career
- learn that links can be made with different communities, locally and globally, to create opportunities to support or source career pathways.

“We developed a plan to address a community need and I’m amazed at the impact it has had.”

CEO of Keech Australia, Bendigo Manufacturing Group member

In addition, the Government has:

- supported a range of partnership approaches among providers to meet local needs, such as Best Start and Partnerships for School Improvement
- provided approximately $3 million to organisations and local government through the Kindergarten Cluster Managers Program to drive and support the delivery of over 350 kindergarten services in rural and regional Victoria
- supported approximately 150 Learn Local organisations in regional areas of Victoria. Learn Local organisations provide more than 70 per cent of all Victorian government-funded training in nine regional Local Government Areas
- supported the expansion of the Local Administration Bureau, which provides high-quality administration support for small Victorian schools on an opt-in, fee-for-service basis
- established the TAFE Structural Adjustment Fund to support innovation, collaboration, structural reform and business transformation for improving financial sustainability and responsiveness to local skills needs
- provided $20 million in grants through the Regional Partnership Facilitation Fund to support training and higher education providers to extend existing course provision in regional Victoria, in collaboration with other providers and industry and community partners

“We already have clusters in place, but what we want is to go to the next level in working together. Schools working together within a local area where they have common timetables and share staff across the schools.”

Rural Youth Ambassador

To support providers to work together to deliver a broad range of learning opportunities, the Victorian Government will:

**Broaden learning opportunities**

- Design and deliver innovative models of pre-apprenticeship training to increase the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships, particularly by women and learners who face barriers to engagement.
- Build on current initiatives to develop and implement a framework that will deliver a planned, strategic and coordinated approach to virtual learning in Victorian schools.
- Develop the skills of leaders and educators in using digital technologies and digital learning approaches that can enhance learning.
Share models of good practice
- Document and share models of collaborative practice that will support learning communities to initiate, develop and maintain partnerships across school sectors, early childhood education and care, and higher education and training providers, with industry, philanthropic organisations and the community.

Improve opportunities to collaborate
- Improve collaboration between schools and early childhood education and care services, including identifying and addressing (as appropriate) systemic barriers to seamless integrated learning, through the Linking Learning Birth to 12 Years project.
- Work with the Department of Human Services and across government through the Children and Youth Area Partnerships model. This focuses on a whole-of-community approach to tackling child and youth vulnerability in Victoria.
- Support the development of Community Learning and Development Plans, focusing on a partnership approach to the improvement of learning and development outcomes in rural and regional Victoria.

Reform Strategy 5: Facilitate connections between industry and education and training
It is essential that educators place curriculum content within the context of real-world experiences (Ehiyazaryan & Barraclough 2009). Linking curriculum areas such as maths and science to the work of local industry can strengthen student engagement in learning as well as support students to pursue a range of career pathways in those industries. To achieve this, schools and industry must work effectively together to create meaningful learning opportunities for students.

The Victorian Government encourages vocational training providers to establish and strengthen educational linkages with the secondary and higher education sectors. This is consistent with the Government’s focus on educational pathways and lifelong learning, and its emphasis on employment pathways and greater industry connections.
Connections between schools and industry primarily focus on strengthening students’ awareness of pathways to local employment opportunities. Many of these connections have been facilitated through Workplace Learning Coordinators and Local Learning and Employment Networks.

Next steps for refocusing vocational training in Victoria outlines the Victorian Government’s commitment to providing communities and providers with the authority they need to implement the best education provision for their circumstances, while embedding stronger governance and accountability arrangements to ensure that high-quality outcomes are achieved.

In addition, the Government has:
- implemented models that support collaboration between schools and industry to drive local innovation, such as Skilling the Bay in Geelong.
- established the Industry Participation Model, a new partnership approach between State Government, industry, regions and training providers that is aimed at increasing industry influence in the training market by supporting more direct relationships between industry and training providers and direct consultation with government.
- tripled its investment in the Local Learning and Employment Networks to $8 million from 2015 to support the participation, engagement, attainment and transition outcomes of students aged 10 – 19 years.
- facilitated the effective operation of the vocational training system within regions through the Regional Market Facilitation Managers.
- delivered the Victorian Vocational Education and Training in Schools (VETiS) program, which provides the opportunity for senior secondary students to undertake nationally recognised vocational certificates.

To further build strong connections between industry and education and training, the Victorian Government will:

Respond to industry changes
- Continue to support whole-of-community responses to changing industry structures and training needs, such as in the Goulburn Valley initiative (see text box).
- Support initiatives that address training market issues and barriers, and support retrenched workers to access State Government subsidised training through the Industry Transition and Specialist Training initiative.

Create opportunities to connect education and economic needs
- Support greater alignment between education and training and the regional economic context by facilitating regional conversations through Regional Management Forums and Regional Development Australia Committees in Victoria.
- Implement the Learn Local: Focusing on the Future strategy, which affirms the place of Learn Locals in the Victorian vocational training system and recognises the valuable role it plays. The strategy refocuses and refines the role of Learn Locals, which promote durable networks and co-location of services to strengthen pathways and sustainability for delivering high-quality education services.
3 Setting the expectations

The Victorian Government has developed a plan for action and is committed to working with families, communities, educators and educational leaders to successfully deliver its reform agenda. While there are specific challenges in providing high-quality education services in rural and regional Victoria, they do not apply consistently to all locations and in all circumstances. Many rural communities are highly collaborative, resourceful and resilient in nature and it is these traits that are essential in creating innovative and effective solutions at a local level that suits their particular education needs. There are good examples of early childhood education and care providers, schools and higher education and training providers driving successful local solutions and there must be high expectations of every provider and community that they can do the same, regardless of their geographical location.

To fulfil these expectations, everyone has particular roles and responsibilities in ensuring that all rural and regional learners have access to high-quality education that helps them reach their potential and lead happy, healthy and productive lives.

Parents, carers and families have a responsibility to:

- acknowledge the value of learning and have high expectations of their child’s learning
- engage regularly with their child’s early childhood setting or school about their child’s learning and development
- provide guidance to their child about opportunities to engage in a range of learning and development pathways
- create opportunities to learn at home and in other settings outside early childhood or school settings.

Rural and regional communities, including businesses, community sector organisations and community members, have a responsibility to:

- acknowledge the value of learning at all stages of life and set examples of learning as a positive experience
- recognise that education provision and improving learning outcomes are the responsibility of the whole community and actively work together to support educators and providers in rural and regional communities
- develop local partnerships in order to provide children, young people and adults with effective learning and wellbeing support.

Local government has a responsibility to:

- plan with its community to ensure provision of educational services from birth through to further education and training
- work in collaboration with education providers and other key partners to develop Community Learning and Development Plans
- work in partnership to plan and share the use of infrastructure.
Educators of children, young people and adults have a responsibility to:

- have high expectations of all children and young people’s ability to learn and achieve positive transitions within and beyond learning environments and pursue a range of learning and employment opportunities
- collaborate across all sectors to strengthen the capacity to address local needs and improve outcomes
- work closely with the parents and carers of children and young people to build positive learning environments both within and outside early childhood education and care and school settings
- plan and document personalised learning plans for children and young people when necessary and ensure that these are linked to transition documents
- assess children and young people regularly to establish what they know and how their learning has progressed over time
- build their own capacity, undertake professional development and create partnerships with other providers as appropriate
- reflect on and evaluate their own teaching practice for children and young people
- provide leadership for building community-based partnerships, including linkages with the Department and local government, to more broadly address the learning and development needs of children and young people.

Service leaders have a responsibility to:

- convey the importance of establishing high expectations to their staff and celebrate high achievement
- effectively use their resources to address rural issues such as curriculum breadth and access to support services
- work with their staff to develop skills that will enable innovative opportunities for broadening provision and expanding the experiences of children, young people and adults
- develop appropriate local partnerships and shared workforce models, and use virtual/blended delivery in order to provide their learners with a broad and engaging curriculum and the appropriate learning and wellbeing support.

The Department has a responsibility to:

- use the Regional Development Victoria Thinking regional and rural tool, which is designed to assist government to identify, monitor and assess the potential impacts of policy and legislative proposals on regional and rural Victoria. It addresses five high-level considerations: economy, accessibility, social and community, environment and equity
- hold all education providers to account for the quality of the learning experiences they deliver, including developing an accountability structure that supports providers to effectively monitor and report on learning and development outcomes in rural and regional Victoria, detailing strategies put in place to improve outcomes
- provide increasingly targeted, needs-based funding arrangements and infrastructure investment that supports providers to use their resources to meet the specific needs of their learners
- support structures that facilitate communities to make effective local decisions, and remove unnecessary barriers to this collaboration and integration
- provide targeted support to improve access to high-quality learning when evidence indicates that intervention is required
- develop and support appropriate structures and processes for the recruitment and retention of high-quality leaders and staff in rural and regional Victoria
- identify evidence-based strategies to build the learning aspirations of children, young people, adults, families and communities
- work with other state and federal government departments and local government to ensure that they are supportive of, and contributing to, the reform agenda.
4 Continuing the conversation

Where to from here?

*Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities* marks the beginning of a new focus on improving learning and development outcomes for rural and regional Victoria.

Discussions have been held throughout the development of this plan with young people, educators and peak bodies from rural and regional areas (see the Appendix for further details). These conversations do not end with the release of the Plan; they will now focus on informing the implementation of the key reform strategies, identifying the most effective solutions and embedding them in everyday practice to create long-term change.

The Rural Education Reference Group will continue to be a key voice in these conversations with stakeholders, providing expert advice to the Department throughout the life of this plan. Established by the Minister of Education to provide advice on the implementation of the Government’s reform agenda, the Group involves representatives of early childhood education and care services; government, Catholic and independent schools; and higher education and training services from across rural and regional Victoria.

The Group will provide expert advice to the Department on how to:

- implement the actions of *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities*
- capture and disseminate information about innovative best-practice approaches to improving outcomes in a rural and regional context.
## Measuring Outcomes in Rural and Regional Victoria

### Early years
- Children who are developmentally ‘on track’ on the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) language and cognitive skills domains
- Participation in a kindergarten service in the year before school
- Participation in a maternal and child health service
- Children who have no development or behavioural issues on entry to Prep
- Children developmentally ‘on track’ on the AEDI social competence and emotional maturity domains
- The proportion of parents reading to their children
- Early identification of child health needs
- Improved quality of early education and care experiences available
- Increased number of children developmentally prepared to begin school

### Schooling
- Students meeting the expected standard in national and international literacy and numeracy assessment
- Students meeting the expected standards in other key learning areas, such as Science, Arts, History and ICT
- Year 12 or equivalent completion rates of young people
- Students with acceptable levels of school attendance
- Students with a positive opinion of their school teachers providing a stimulating learning environment, as measured by the Attitudes to School Survey
- Students feeling connected to their school, as measured by the Attitudes to School Survey
- Increased number of children and young people achieving expected standards or above in literacy and numeracy
- Increase in numbers of children attending and enjoying school
- Increased number of children completing Year 12 or equivalent
- Reduced absenteeism

### Further education and training
- VET course completions
- Certificate III or above course completions
- VET enrolments by age
- VET participation by learners facing barriers
- VET participation by unemployed learners
- Level of satisfaction with VET
- Increased number of positive exits from school to further study or training
- Increased numbers of adults engaged in further education and training (VET plus Adult, Community and Further Education participation)
The Department has undertaken significant consultation with rural and regional stakeholders throughout the development of Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities. This has included discussions with:

- peak bodies: including principals associations, unions, Catholic and independent schools associations, Municipal Association of Victoria, parents associations and Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board
- rural and regional stakeholders, including the Victorian Government’s Regional Policy Advisory Committee, the Department’s Rural Education Reference Group, the Country Education Project, and their Youth Ambassadors
- educators and educational leaders. These discussions included regional workshops as part of the release of The state of Victoria’s children report 2011: A report on how children and young people in rural and regional Victoria are faring (DEECD 2013), as well as the Victoria as a Learning Community Principals’ Reference Group, the Department’s Early Childhood Advisory Group and TAFE Chief Executive Officers.

These discussions highlighted the many benefits of living in rural and regional Victoria and the strengths of rural and regional communities: their resilience, social connection, strong local knowledge and understanding, sense of place and community ownership.

Stakeholders also raised a number of issues for rural and regional learners and education and training providers:

- access to services: the impact of distance and isolation and transportation difficulties on the availability and accessibility of a range of services and the need for more flexible models of provision
- integrating and coordinating services: the need for greater integration and joined-up approaches to early childhood education and care, school and further education and training provision
- recruiting, retaining and developing qualified staff: including lack of professional development opportunities, limited mobility and high demands on educators and leaders
- engaging parents and families: including the need to build awareness of the importance of the early years, address the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage and support high educational aspirations
- aspirations and pathways of young people: building their aspirations, supporting transitions from secondary school to higher education and/or employment, and increasing exposure to different experiences and careers
- higher education participation and achievement: the need for improved information for students to understand how they can access the higher education options available to them, and support to address the high rates of deferral.
These findings build on and support other recent public inquiries into these issues, such as the Victorian Parliamentary inquiries into addressing rural and regional disadvantage (Rural and Regional Committee 2010) and geographical differences in participation in higher education (Education and Training Committee 2009), as well as the report from the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (2014).

In developing this plan, these issues have been carefully documented and assessed in order to better understand:

- what evidence exists to validate these issues
- whether individual providers can address the issues using their existing resources, or whether additional action is required
- whether the issues should be addressed through statewide reforms or through specific responses targeted at rural and regional areas.

The reform strategies outlined in *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities* have been developed as a result of this analysis.

Learning and development outcomes in rural and regional Victoria

There is substantial variation within and across rural and regional Victoria. Some rural and remote areas have made great gains in overcoming the barriers of distance and isolation to raise student achievement and increase participation of young people in further education and training. However, there remain a number of unacceptable disparities between rural and regional and metropolitan Victoria relating to the wellbeing, development and learning outcomes of children, young people and adults.

Early childhood

Rural and regional Victorians enjoy high levels of participation in learning and development services, such as in maternal and child health services and kindergarten. However, children in rural and regional Victoria are more likely to be vulnerable on two or more AEDI domains upon entry to school, particularly relating to physical wellbeing, emotional wellbeing and language and cognitive ability. Parents in rural and regional Victoria are also more likely to report concerns about their child’s speech, language and behaviour; and report lower levels of frequency of reading to their children under one year of age.

School education

Overall, children and young people in rural and regional Victoria perform at a lower level than their metropolitan peers on NAPLAN throughout their schooling. Students in rural and regional Victoria are less likely to meet national minimum standards for the three NAPLAN domains (reading, writing, numeracy) across all assessed year levels. In addition, fewer rural and regional students are performing at the highest levels of NAPLAN assessments than in metropolitan areas (ACARA 2013).

There are significant and persistent disparities in Year 12 or equivalent attainment between young people in rural and regional Victoria, and metropolitan Victoria. A number of factors appear to contribute to lower levels of Year 12 attainment, including lower levels of Year 10 to 12 retention; higher levels of absenteeism (Figure 8), particularly in the middle secondary years; and lower levels of reported student enjoyment of their subjects and engagement with schooling.

![Figure 8: Average absence days per student by location, 2013](image)

Source: DEECD administrative data, 2013
However, analysis of government school data shows that the regional centres and their surrounding areas account for most of the achievement gap between rural and regional areas and metropolitan locations, while in rural and remote areas, secondary school students tend to have higher outcomes than students in major city schools for Year 9 reading, Year 9 numeracy (Figure 9) and Year 12 attainment. Primary school students in large rural towns also tend to have stronger results for connectedness to school than students in major city school (Lamb & Walstab 2014).

Further education and training
Rural and regional Victorians have a higher uptake of entry-level vocational education, apprenticeships and traineeships compared with metropolitan students (Figure 10). Participation in upper-level vocational education (Certificate IV and above) and higher education is growing, but remains lower among rural and regional learners; and young people from rural regions defer university at twice the rate of young people in metropolitan locations (Klatt & Poesel 2013). Figure 11 shows the recent growth in vocational education and training in rural and regional areas.

Adults report lower levels of participation in lifelong learning in rural and regional Victoria, and overall have lower levels of school completion and post-school qualifications.
Factors that influence lower educational outcomes in rural and regional Victoria

Analysis of the evidence to determine what contributes to lower outcomes in rural and regional Victoria has indicated that it is primarily the size of the population and the proportion of socioeconomic disadvantage in a location that have the highest negative impact.

**Socioeconomic disadvantage**

The state of Victoria’s children report 2011: A report on how children and young people in rural and regional Victoria are faring (DEECD 2013) found that rural and regional Victoria experiences relatively higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage in comparison with metropolitan Victoria. Rural and regional Victoria also has a higher representation of population groups that are known to experience disadvantage, such as Aboriginal people, single-parent families and people with a disability.

A key predictor of income and employment is parental education levels. Parents in rural and regional Victoria are also less likely than parents from metropolitan Victoria to have completed Year 12 or to have attained a post-school qualification.

**Changing and highly variable population**

The 48 rural and regional Victorian LGAs constitute just over a quarter of Victoria’s total population (25.8 per cent). Overall, the population of rural and regional Victoria is growing; however, this growth is highly variable and in some areas is in decline (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Percentage change in estimated resident population of regional Victoria, by LGAs, 2012–13**

The fastest growing areas in rural and regional Victoria are generally located in urban growth areas located close to Melbourne and Geelong, and the LGAs of Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo. Largely because of their size, these three LGAs together accounted for 48 per cent of the population growth of rural and regional Victoria in the 12 months to June 2012. Areas of low population growth or decline are predominantly located in the dry agricultural farming areas of western Victoria, reflecting patterns of economic restructuring.

**Structural change and labour market trends**

There has been considerable variability in the level of structural change experienced across various regions in Victoria. Although some regions (such as Inner Melbourne and Inner Eastern Melbourne) have experienced an increase in the level of structural change across the time periods examined, this is not the case for the majority of regions. In many cases, regions have experienced higher levels of structural change in times past than is currently being observed.

While the pace of structural change may not be slowing for Australia as a whole, Figure 13 indicates that it has slowed in the past three years for Victoria, as well as several regions within the state.

The education and training system is key to facilitating this economic transition for communities in rural and regional Victoria, as it has a role in building stronger communities better placed to adapt to change. Adapting to change will entail increasing the education and training attainment of children and young people, together with providing support to reskill the existing workforce.

**Figure 13 Rate of structural change in areas of Victoria, by location and year**

![Figure 13 Rate of structural change in areas of Victoria, by location and year](image)

Source: Deloitte Access Economics, 2014
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