



Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

Recommendations for the Minister for Education on improving educational outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria

2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Message From The Chair	3
Executive Summary	4
<u>Findings</u>	4
<u>Recommendations</u>	5
Chapter One: Introduction	7
<u>Our Scope</u>	7
<u>Our Approach</u>	8
Chapter Two: Past Reviews	9
Chapter Three: Data Snapshot	13
Chapter Four: Key Consultation Themes and Recommendations	17
<u>1. Planning and strategy</u>	18
<u>2. Wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices</u>	18
<u>3. School resourcing</u>	24
<u>4. Student support</u>	25
<u>5. Student inclusion</u>	28
<u>6. Curriculum provision</u>	29
<u>7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers and support staff</u>	33
<u>8. Professional development</u>	36
Chapter Five: Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations	37
Appendix 1	39
<u>The Expert Advisory Panel</u>	39
<u>Consultation list</u>	42
Appendix 2	45
<u>Victorian government initiatives supporting rural and regional students and schools</u>	45
References	47

A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

The Expert Advisory Panel was privileged to speak with communities across Victoria to support the preparation of this report. We heard many stories of both the successes and the challenges of education delivery in rural and regional Victoria. These narratives have informed the findings and recommendations in this report.

The panel was consistently impressed by the drive, resilience and determination demonstrated by the communities we spoke with. These communities were committed to providing their local young people with the very best opportunities for learning and future success, despite the barriers they faced.



We heard stories of schools overcoming the challenge of distance and size such as Apollo Bay P-12 College, a small school of approximately 260 students from Prep to Year 12 and the sole provider of education within the Apollo Bay community. We heard about Murrayville Community College in Murrayville, the second most remote school in Victoria.

Schools like these produced students such as one from Tyrrell College, Sea Lake, who was a finalist in the 2018 VCE Leadership Awards and received marks of over 40 for Biology, Physical Education and Studio Arts in VCE. A student from Goroke P-12 College in Victoria's Wimmera received a VCAL Student Achievement Award in 2019 for her project focused on raising mental health awareness amongst the local farming community and another student received the 2019 VCE Season of Excellence VCAA Board Appreciation Award, and was one of only 85 VCE design and media students statewide whose project was selected in the Top Designs exhibition 2019.

These and many of the other stories we heard demonstrate that there is cause to celebrate the many successes for students in rural and regional Victoria. But we also heard that these stories are not universal, and that there are communities and schools in rural and regional Victoria who do not feel they are supported or equipped to meet the aspirations of their students.

The Panel received positive responses and valuable feedback in relation to recent Victorian interventions including the additional Student Resource Package equity adjustments for rural and regional students; subsidies for early childhood learning and kindergarten; increases in virtual school funding; and expansion of the breakfast clubs program.

However, responses from communities demonstrated clearly that more needs to be done.

On behalf of the Expert Advisory Panel members, I welcome the opportunity to present our report and recommendations. We trust the report will not only inform future decision-making and policy and program design, but will also shine a spotlight on the many instances of exceptional and innovative teaching and learning practice having impact for communities across the State. I would like to thank the Expert Advisory Panel for their time, commitment and passion, and to everyone who has contributed to this report.

Dr David Howes

Chair, Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 17 June 2019 the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, the Hon. James Merlino MP, established the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students (the Panel) to examine the critical challenges and barriers that contribute to the current gap in educational attainment between rural and regional students and metropolitan students in both primary and secondary government schools.

The Panel consulted with key stakeholders across Victoria through seven forums in Ballarat, Bendigo, Horsham, Mildura, Morwell, Wangaratta and Warrnambool across July and August 2019. Further consultation discussions were held in Geelong and via video link with school leaders in East Gippsland and from Special Schools in rural and regional Victoria.

Feedback from the consultation forums, coupled with consideration of past reviews and a range of data and other evidence, led the Panel to draw three main findings and make the recommendations set out below.

FINDINGS

Each local challenge requires a local approach and a local solution. There is no 'silver bullet' and no single solution that can be scaled up or applied across the whole state. The challenges faced by schools and students in rural communities and regional centres are in no way homogenous. While rural areas and regional centres experience particular barriers related to their characteristics, challenges also differ from location to location, rural town to rural town and regional centre to regional centre. Communities stressed that local contexts in rural and regional areas can be affected by community size, proximity to major population centres, demographic characteristics and local economies. As a result it was made clear to the Panel that efforts to improve learning outcomes for students must put local context at the forefront of policy and program design.

In many places across rural and regional Victoria, the vast majority of students are being provided with a strong and rich education. The Panel consistently heard accounts of innovative and effective educational practice occurring across Victorian schools in rural and regional Victoria, as well as reports of many schools and broader communities effectively addressing barriers to ensure students are given the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

There are both common and distinct challenges faced by rural and regional government school educators. The distinct challenges are arguably reflected in some recent data, which show that rural schools are performing slightly more strongly on some measures than regional schools. The panel was not able to reach conclusive findings about the causes of these differences, but the evidence pointed to two important factors. The first is the more competitive environment experienced by some regional schools as a result of the greater presence of non-government schools in regional areas, and the competition that can still exist between government sector schools in some regional areas. The second is that while there has been in some rural areas a recent influx of families experiencing trauma and disadvantage, (perhaps as a result of the stock of low cost housing in some rural areas), there is also an increasing level of social disadvantage in some regional areas. Further, while there are a number of protective factors in rural areas that can mitigate or moderate disadvantage to some extent, such as strong relationships between small schools and their communities: these mitigating factors are not necessarily present in all regional areas.



At all forums, participants spoke in detail and with clarity about the challenges faced by students, families and communities. They also spoke at length about potential solutions and success factors. The Panel heard clearly that it was critical to ensure rural and regional students had the foundations and access to support necessary for them to engage productively in education; were provided with learning environments that engaged and inspired them regardless of location; and were surrounded by cultures and attitudes that expanded their career aspirations and expectations for their future rather than limited them.

Communities highlighted what they identify as the essential elements to delivering an inspiring educational environment for students in rural and regional Victoria that promotes and enables success and growth. Eight consistent themes emerged clearly from the discussions and the Panel has used these as the basis for developing recommendations to further strengthen the learning and development outcomes for rural and regional students in Victoria. They are:

1. Planning and strategy
2. Wide aspiration, high expectation and informed choice
3. School resourcing
4. Student support
5. Inclusive communities
6. Curriculum provision
7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers and support staff
8. Professional development

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Planning and strategy

- 1.1. Develop a comprehensive five-year strategic plan for rural and regional education that recognises and addresses the specific opportunities and challenges of rural and regional education and establish a Rural Education Consultative Group and a Regional Education Consultative Group to support the effective implementation of the strategic plan.

2. Wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices

- 2.1. Consider a range of options to support the development of wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices by rural and regional students, their families, schools and communities, including additional support to ensure rural and regional students have access to VCE study resources; the development of a resource hub of case studies of successful programs linking local employer/industry with schools; and the recruitment of international students to rural and regional schools in order to expand the diversity of rural and regional communities and global awareness of rural and regional students.

3. School resourcing

- 3.1. Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the SRP design in relation to rural and regional schools, including the definition of 'rural' and 'regional' schools and other measures such as the introduction of a 'deemed' annual SRP over, for example, a three year cycle to reduce the impact of volatility of enrolments on staffing
- 3.2. Examine the current funding arrangements for rural and regional schools, including maintenance funding and the effectiveness of the current VSBA service delivery model for rural and regional schools
- 3.3. Consider whether the current Camps, Sports and Excursions (CSE) fund should be extended to include all students in rural and regional schools with indexation to reflect greater distance.

4. Student support

- 4.1. Develop a strong culture and clear practice of "soft boundaries" in the delivery of rural and regional services and education provision, both across sectors (for example, health and justice) and across locations, to ensure the interests of every student is placed at the centre of service delivery.

- 4.2. Consider improved models of support for rural and regional schools to address student mental health as part of the response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, including consideration of the following:
 - 4.2.1. Expansion of mental health support services to primary schools;
 - 4.2.2. Provision of trauma-informed training to all teachers in rural schools and regional schools where support services are difficult to access
- 4.3. Review and develop local plans for the provision of alternative settings in regional centres
- 4.4. Examine steps to increase access to support staff, in particular paediatricians/speech therapists, including the provision of facilities to enable the delivery of virtual support services
- 4.5. Consider the development of consistent access practices in special school enrolments in rural and regional special schools.

5. Inclusive communities

- 5.1. Consider further steps that can be taken by rural and regional schools and communities to strengthen the development of inclusive cultures for all students and staff
- 5.2. Develop common teaching and learning programs across clusters/networks of schools focused on Aboriginal knowledge, histories and cultures.

6. Curriculum provision

- 6.1. Examine how the provision of VCAL in rural and regional areas can be strengthened
- 6.2. Support and consider incentives for networks/cluster of secondary schools (all sectors) to develop timetables that enable delivery of VCE subjects across multiple schools
- 6.3. Review the design and delivery of virtual learning
- 6.4. Examine how access to existing digital platforms can be supported.

7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers, and support staff

- 7.1. Consider a range of incentives to attract high quality principals, teachers and support staff in order to provide the most appropriate locally-determined measures
- 7.2. Examine the steps that might be taken to increase the pool of available CRTs for rural and regional schools
- 7.3. Support the development by schools, in collaboration with local communities, of strong induction and welcome programs for potential or actual new appointments, including programs for partners/family members
- 7.4. Consider steps that can be taken to strengthen the support provided to new principals and teachers
- 7.5. Examine the feasibility of the increasing number of administration hubs for clusters/networks of rural and regional schools to reduce principal workload.

8. Professional development

- 8.1. Examine measures to strengthen the delivery of and access to professional learning for rural and regional staff, including access to VCAA virtual VCE Assessor Training and the delivery of Bastow-based programs
- 8.2. Review the role of SEILS/EILS/network chairs to ensure adequate support is available for collaborative professional development.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On 17 June 2019, the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, the Hon. James Merlino MP established the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students (the Panel), to examine the critical challenges and barriers that contribute to the gap in educational attainment between rural and regional students and metropolitan students in both primary and secondary schools.

This report, *Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students: Recommendations for the Minister for Education on improving outcomes for students in Rural and Regional Victoria* sets out the Panel's findings and recommendations.

OUR SCOPE

Terms of Reference

The Expert Advisory Panel was asked to consider the critical challenges and barriers that contribute to the gap in education attainment between rural and regional students and metropolitan students in both primary and secondary schools by reviewing key data sets and research evidence and engaging with communities including students, parents, principals, teachers, local government and industry.

This included:

- analysing data and evidence to identify issues in educational attainment
- examining the causes of the gap in educational attainment, and barriers to overcoming that gap
- analysing the efficacy and impact of past and current policies and programs
- identifying evidence-based examples of innovative initiatives and local solutions that have the potential to inform future policies and programs.

The Panel was asked to consider and make suggestions as to how to address the following key questions:

- What is the evidence saying about rural and regional students' barriers to achieving high growth and what are strategies that are effective in addressing those barriers?
- What is contributing to higher levels of chronic absence in non-metro areas and what can be done to address it?
- How can the proportion of rural and regional Year 12 completers not in further education, training or employment be decreased?

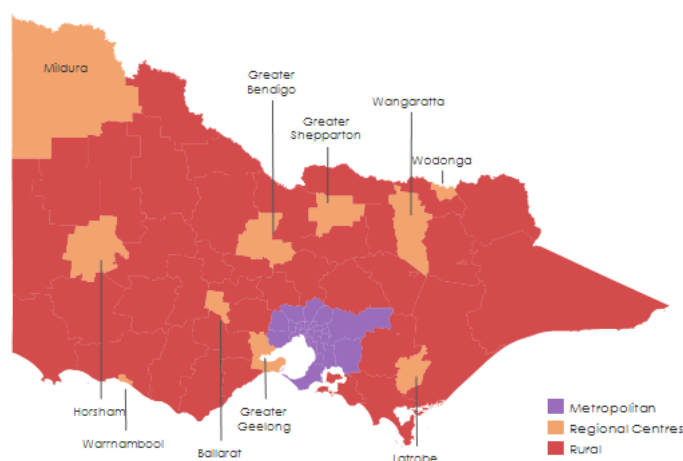
Rural and regional government schools

For the purposes of the Panel's explorations and consultations, three geographies of Metropolitan, Regional Centres and Rural were derived from groupings of the Local Government Areas (LGAs) in which schools are located.

Metropolitan areas comprise the LGAs within greater Melbourne, and align with the eight Department of Education and Training (DET) metropolitan areas. These areas are shown in purple below.

Regional Centres comprise the Local Government Areas of the ten largest regional cities identified by Regional Development Victoria. These areas are shown in orange.

Rural areas comprise all remaining LGAs outside of greater Melbourne and the ten largest regional cities. These areas are shown in red.



The Panel's exploration and consultation focused primarily on the primary and secondary government school sector in rural and regional areas.



OUR APPROACH

The Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students consulted with key stakeholders across Victoria, undertaking seven forums in Ballarat, Bendigo, Horsham, Mildura, Morwell, Wangaratta and Warrnambool across July and August 2019.

Further consultation discussions were held in Geelong and via video link, with school leaders in East Gippsland and from special schools in rural and regional

Victoria. The Chair and at least six members of the panel attended each consultation session. Community members and stakeholders were also invited to make written submissions through *Engage Victoria*.

The Panel was privileged to hear from over 179 students, teachers, principals, parents, local community members and employers to understand their perspectives on how to make sure every rural and regional student is provided with the learning and development opportunities and experiences they need to reach their full potential.

The Panel's findings and recommendations are based on an analysis of:

- key themes from the Panel's consultations and other feedback received
- a wide range of data from the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA)
- relevant past reviews into rural and regional schools and student attainment in Australia
- current and past policies and programs supporting rural and regional students
- descriptions of local practice.

CHAPTER TWO: PAST REVIEWS

The Panel reflected on previous and recent work undertaken across Victoria and Australia exploring the challenges faced by rural and regional students and their impact on learning outcomes and attainment. Many of the observations and themes recurred during the Panel's consultations held during July and August of 2019.

In 2014 the Victorian Auditor General's Office (VAGO) delivered a report into rural and regional Victoria's access to high-quality education.¹ The VAGO review found that students in rural areas were underperforming when compared to their metropolitan peers. The review identified the underperformance as being driven by the additional barriers that rural students faced in accessing high quality education and suggested these barriers related primarily to educational aspiration, proximity to educational institutions, quality of education and financial issues.²

Following the VAGO report, three major reviews have been published in recent years: *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities: a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes*, published by DEECD in October 2014³; *Advancing rural and remote education in Queensland state schools Consultation report*,⁴ released in July 2017 by the Queensland Department of Education and Training; and the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, released in 2018 by Emeritus Professor John Halsey following substantial consultation across Australia.⁵

The following common and consistent themes can be drawn from the three reviews:

Rural and regional communities are integral to Victoria's current and future successes.

Consistent with findings across the reviews, Professor Halsey asserts that 'vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to Australia's sustainability and prosperity: socially, economically and environmentally'.⁶ With around 30% of students attending schools outside of major cities, rural and regional areas will provide a significant proportion of Australia's future workforces and community leaders. Improving the learning opportunities and education outcomes for rural and regional students will not only support individual pathway successes, but will also importantly enhance the capability and productive capacity of future generations on which Victoria and Australia's growth and prosperity is reliant.

It is important to build on the strengths of and successful education practices in rural and regional areas.

The reviews demonstrated that while average rural and regional education outcomes trail those in metropolitan areas, there are many examples of non-metropolitan schools, educators, and communities providing exceptional learning experiences for students, and students in these communities that are thriving. The reviews assert that education reforms should look to build off these successes and the efforts of the talented and dedicated individuals and groups living in rural and regional communities.

Many challenging and interrelated factors contribute to education underperformance in rural and regional areas, and governments need to do more to overcome these factors.

Education outcomes in rural and regional areas are influenced by the interaction of factors such as socioeconomic status, distance from cities and regional centres, the size of communities, community expectations, local economic conditions and future employment and education pathways. As Halsey highlights, much is already being done across Australia to ensure rural and regional students and families have access to high quality education and post-school opportunities.⁷ However, as he also observes 'much remains to be done to bridge the gap between the achievement and opportunities of (rural, regional and remote) students and those commonly associated with their urban counterparts'.⁸

¹ Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2014), *Access to Education for Rural Students – The Victorian Auditor-General's Report*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

² Ibid, p. 23.

³ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014), *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities – a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes*. Victorian Government, Melbourne.

⁴ Queensland Department of Education and Training (2017), *Advancing rural and remote education in Queensland state schools*, Queensland Government, Brisbane.

⁵ Halsey, J. (2018), *The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Australian Government, Canberra.

⁶ Ibid, p.1.

⁷ For more information on current Victorian Government policies and programs supporting Rural and Regional communities see Appendix 2.

⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

Rural and regional communities differ from cities and each other, and education policies must cater to the different needs of those communities.

The educational context, issues and challenges differ between regional centres, rural areas and major cities. Policies and practices that succeed in metropolitan areas will not necessarily work outside of cities, and policies that work in regional centres may not be successful in rural areas. As the 2014 DEECD report explained, 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'.⁹ As a consequence, rural and regional communities often have educational needs that are different and policy makers must focus on, and design policies that cater to the complexity of rural and regional education. Understanding and responding to the diverse education challenges in rural and regional Victoria and Australia requires collaborating with and listening to people living in those communities.

Innovative approaches are crucial for improving education outcomes in rural and regional areas.

Rural and regional communities have developed innovative approaches to overcome the challenges they face in delivering strong education outcomes for their students. As the DEECD report noted, many rural and regional communities 'are highly collaborative, resourceful and resilient in nature and it is these traits that are essential in creating innovative and effective solutions'¹⁰ that suit local educational needs. A sustained and dedicated focus on innovation is needed to find new ways to coordinate education services and resources, and ultimately raise the education performance of students.

Rural and regional students require additional support to engage in positive learning experiences and build aspiration.

The Queensland review noted that making sure students in non-metropolitan areas 'have access to high quality learning opportunities focused on their individual needs was clearly a key priority for all those consulted'.¹¹ However, the challenges of distance and school size can inhibit rural and regional schools from offering subject breadth and opportunities comparable to metropolitan schools. Expanding the learning opportunities available to rural and regional students requires additional forms of support such as:

- **Distributing additional resources so rural and regional schools can offer a broad, relevant and engaging curriculum.** Schools in rural and regional areas 'face a number of challenges when seeking to deliver a broad range of curriculum options for students. They include low enrolments and small class sizes, along with more limited access to experienced teachers, particularly in specialist subject areas in the secondary years of schooling'.¹² These challenges are particularly pronounced in small and isolated schools in rural areas. In such instances, schools or students need additional support to ensure they can access the learning opportunities that are available in cities. Furthermore, each school's teaching and learning program needs to be tailored to the interests and passions of rural and regional students, and be relevant to their lived experiences and community context.
- **Improving access to learning opportunities.** Smaller class sizes and difficulties attracting specialist teachers can mean the schooling and vocational education and training offerings are reduced in more remote areas. In addition, students can often require additional support to travel to other schools or locations to undertake subjects. Digital technologies can enhance access to education opportunities through online and distance learning, and by connecting students and teachers with other people and additional resources.
- **Building and enabling aspiration by targeting additional resources.** Multiple individual, social and community factors influence the future education aspirations of students in rural and regional schools. As described in the DEECD report, these factors can lead to positive outcomes for young people in rural and regional areas, but too often they contribute to poorer education outcomes and school completion rates.¹³ Building and enabling stronger aspiration amongst rural and regional students requires both 'soft' and 'hard' resources. Soft resources include initiatives that provide greater exposure to the post-school education pathways and role models. 'Hard' resources include those such

⁹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014), *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities – a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes*. Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

¹¹ Queensland Department of Education and Training (2017), *Advancing rural and remote education in Queensland state schools*, Queensland Government, Brisbane, p. 9.

¹² Halsey, J. (2018), *The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Australian Government, Canberra, p. 34.

¹³ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014), *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities – a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes*. Victorian Government, Melbourne, p.10.

as financial and accommodation support that make post-school study more accessible for students who need it.

A skilled education workforce is required to improve education outcomes in rural and regional schools.

The Queensland report highlighted the importance of 'a stable, capable and skilled school workforce to deliver high quality education' for regional and remote students.¹⁴ Whilst there are many exceptional educators working in rural and regional areas in Victoria and Australia, to increase the numbers of high quality teachers and school leaders in rural and regional areas, governments should look at:

- **Using incentives to strengthen the education workforce:** As Halsey observes, attracting and retaining teachers and school leaders for rural and regional schools 'continues to be a major challenge for most education systems'.¹⁵ A variety of financial and non-financial incentives are needed to reduce teacher shortages and turnover in rural and regional schools. Other factors, such as alternative pathways into teaching and welcoming local communities, help strengthen and sustain the teacher workforce in non-metropolitan areas. Moreover, Halsey found 'that availability of good quality, affordable housing is essential' to attracting and retaining teachers and school leaders to rural and regional Australia. In addition, as rural and regional schools have a disproportionate share of early-career teachers, education system leaders should consider providing incentives to attract more experienced teachers to those schools. Finally, the Queensland review found that incentive schemes needed to consider 'new ways to provide incentives, and to consult with rural and remote teachers more often to identify what works for them'.¹⁶
- **Preparing teachers and school leaders for rural and regional schools:** The teaching and social context in rural and regional areas can differ markedly to that in metropolitan areas. In addition, the challenges faced when leading rural and regional schools, particularly small ones, are different to those present when overseeing metropolitan schools. As a result, preparatory programs for both teaching and leadership staff need to include content and skill development that caters to the unique experiences rural and regional educators will face.
- **Delivering more high quality professional development opportunities** to build the capabilities of teachers and school leaders was also highlighted as critical to improving learning outcomes for all students.¹⁷ Professional development supports such as mentoring and coaching were seen as especially important for early-career teachers, who are overrepresented in rural and regional areas and still developing their teaching craft.
- **Providing better support for principals:** While all school principals are important to their schools and communities, those in rural and regional areas play a role that is particularly valuable and sometimes underappreciated. This is especially the case for principals in small schools who often take on additional teaching, administration and community responsibilities. When combined with the reporting and compliance responsibilities of schools, rural and regional principals can experience heavy workloads and have insufficient time to provide instructional leadership at their school or pursue their own professional development. Providing more support and reducing the administrative burden for rural and regional principals was seen as being essential to improving their workload, wellbeing and capacity to lead their schools.

Partnerships and collaboration are vital for strengthening rural and regional schools.

The challenges facing rural and regional schools are significant and often require the efforts of the full community to address, including families, community organisations, state, federal and local governments, early childhood educators, tertiary education providers, businesses and industry.

As the DEECD report highlights, 'shared challenges, such as those experienced in rural and regional areas, are better addressed with shared responses'¹⁸. Partnerships help to amplify the impact of individual

¹⁴ Queensland Department of Education and Training (2017), *Advancing rural and remote education in Queensland state schools*, Queensland Government, Brisbane, p. 8.

¹⁵ Halsey, J. (2018), *The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Australian Government, Canberra, p. 18.

¹⁶ Queensland Department of Education and Training (2017), *Advancing rural and remote education in Queensland state schools*, Queensland Government, Brisbane, p. 9.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁸ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014), *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities – a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes*. Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 19.

efforts, combine resources and address more of the factors leading to educational underperformance. Schools and education administrators have an important role in coordinating partnerships. For example, developing networks or clusters of schools are particularly important in rural areas for sharing services, resources and ideas, as well as limiting the sense of professional isolation felt by educators.

CHAPTER THREE: DATA SNAPSHOT

Overview

Available data relating to educational attainment for rural and regional students over the last decade was considered to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the challenges impacting rural and regional student learning outcomes. Consultation with local communities provided the Panel with context and stories behind the data, which helped to unpack the factors having most impact for rural and regional students. Some of the relevant data observations considered by the Panel are summarised below.

In rural areas and regional centres of Victoria:

- students are more likely to come from lower socio economic backgrounds than in metropolitan areas
- Year 12 completion rates are improving however government school enrolments are declining
- a lower proportion of students achieve high NAPLAN relative growth from year 3 to 5 than in metropolitan Melbourne
- VCE results on average are below those of metropolitan Melbourne.

Whilst there are similarities, the data also demonstrates that rural areas and regional centres experience different challenges with varying impacts on education attainment.

In regional centres:

- kindergarten participation rates are higher than in metropolitan and rural areas (2017-18)
- there are a higher proportion of developmentally vulnerable and/or disadvantaged students than in rural areas or metropolitan Melbourne
- there are a significantly higher proportion of disadvantaged schools (SFOE) than in rural or metropolitan schools
- rates of absence are higher than in rural and metropolitan areas
- VCE completion rates are lower than in rural areas or metropolitan Melbourne, however completion rates have increased at a higher rate than in metropolitan Melbourne over the last 6 years.

Whilst in rural areas:

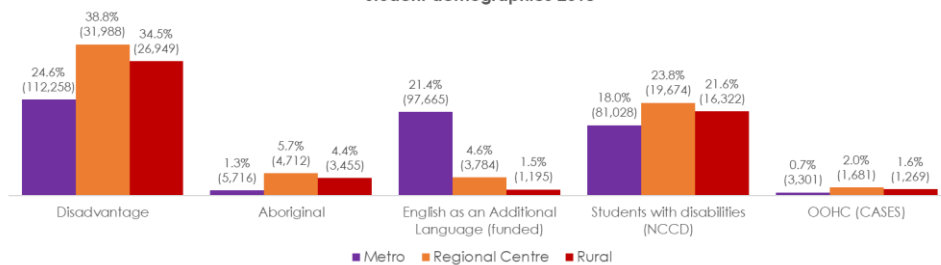
- there is the lowest access to funded kindergarten services that are *Meeting or Exceeding* the National Quality Standard
- VCE completion rates have increased at a higher rate than metropolitan Melbourne or regional centres
- a lower proportion of students exit year 12 into further education or training
- there is a higher proportion of small schools (100 students or under) and schools are much more likely to be combined primary/secondary schools
- there are fewer secondary and special schools.

The section below explores a number of the key data observations in more detail:

Socio economic contexts

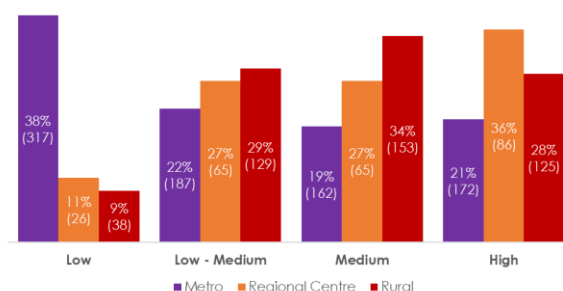
The data shows that rural and regional students are more likely to experience socio economic and educational disadvantages than students in metropolitan schools. The Student Family Occupation and Education (SFOE) index is used by DET as an indication of school level disadvantage. It accounts for parental occupation and education and has been shown to be associated with achievement outcomes.

Student demographics 2018



In 2018 almost two in five students in regional centres were classified as disadvantaged based on parental occupation and education and the proportions of disadvantaged students in regional and rural areas (38.8% and 34.5% respectively) are higher than the metropolitan population. Students in rural Victoria and regional centres are also slightly more likely to grow up in families with no labour force participation.

Proportion of schools by SFOE band

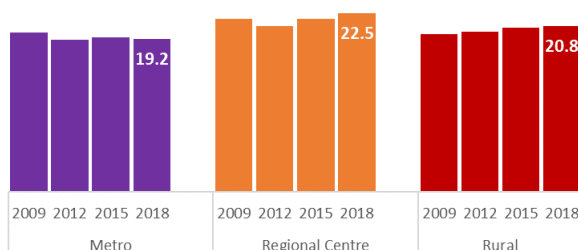


Developmental vulnerability

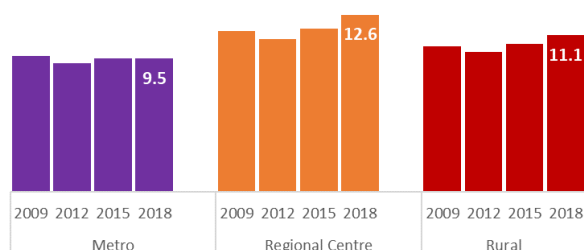
Regional centres have the highest proportions of developmentally vulnerable children on one or more Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains. The Language and Cognition domain is one of the most strongly associated with future reading achievement and regional centres also have the highest proportion of children that were developmentally vulnerable on this domain (8.3% in 2018).

While rural areas also experienced an increase in the proportion of students classified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC domain (19.9% in 2009 to 20.8% in 2018), there was a reduction from 2015 to 2018 of children developmentally vulnerable on the Language and Cognition domain.

Proportion of children that are vulnerable on one or more AEDC* domains



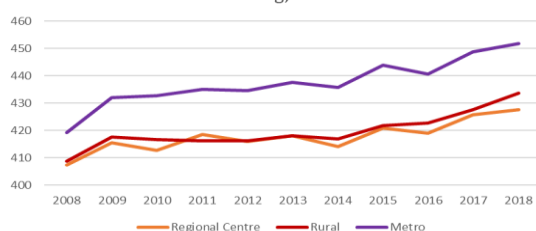
Proportion of children that are vulnerable on two or more AEDC* domains



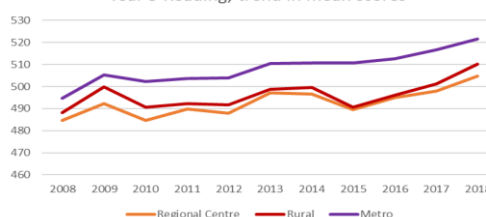
Regional and rural students NAPLAN results

Whilst mean NAPLAN scores are lowest in regional centres, they are improving: and in rural areas there has been strong improvement in recent years for primary levels in government schools. At Year 3, rural schools had a higher rate of improvement than metropolitan and regional centre schools with similar patterns evident at Year 5.

Year 3 NAPLAN Reading, trend in mean scores



Year 5 Reading, trend in mean scores



However, the improvements seen in primary year levels are not as evident in NAPLAN performance at Year 7, with schools in regional centres reporting the lowest mean scores from 2017 to 2018, and declines in mean scores for all groups.

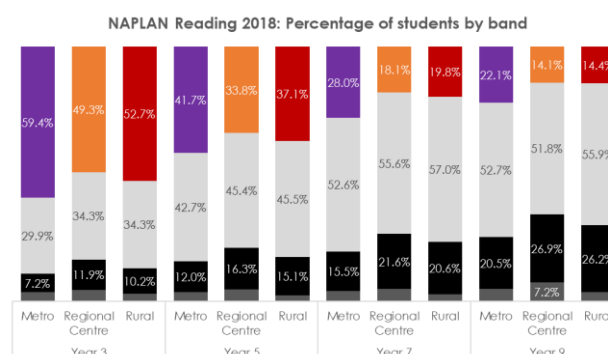
In contrast to the primary year levels, in secondary years rural schools had a higher rate of decline than metropolitan and regional centre schools. At Year 9, performance was again lowest for regional centre schools, however all groups improved from 2017 to 2018 and the rate of improvement was similar across the three groups.

A greater proportion of students in metropolitan schools achieved high growth from Year 3 to 5, compared with students in rural areas and regional centres, with the difference greater for numeracy (4.3 percentage point gap in high growth between metropolitan and regional centre proportions) than reading. The disparity increased at Year 9. For Year 7 to 9 growth, the difference between metropolitan and rural students was greater for reading (6.3 percentage point gap in high growth between metro and rural proportions) than numeracy.

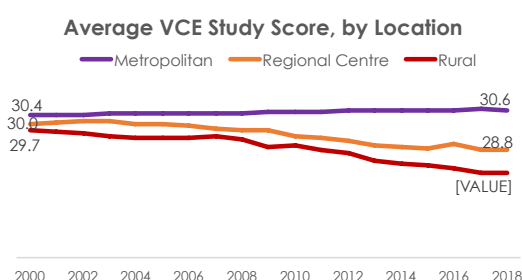
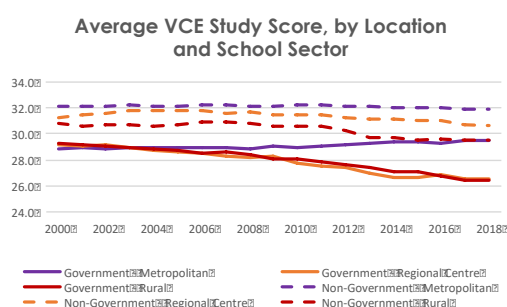
For all NAPLAN year levels, metropolitan areas have higher proportions of students achieving in the top two NAPLAN bands, whereas regional centres and rural areas have higher proportions of students in the bottom two bands and who are exempt.

VCE results and Year 12 completion rates

Rural students had the lowest VCE scores in 2018 and the gap in average VCE Study Score between metropolitan areas, regional centres and rural areas has increased from 2000 to 2018. Whilst the average study score between 2000 and 2018 has marginally increased by 0.2% for metropolitan Melbourne, it has decreased for regional centres (by 1.2%), and rural Victoria (by 1.9%).



Whilst VCE completion is lowest for students in regional centres, the percentage of Year 9 students that completed a senior secondary certificate (VCE, or intermediate or VCAL) within four years has increased in rural Victoria by 7.2% and regional centres by 7%; both higher than metropolitan Melbourne which increased by 5.7%.¹⁹ The gap between metropolitan students and those in rural and regional areas is slowly decreasing.



¹⁹ The Department of Education and Training (July 2019), *Rural and Regional Outcomes – Data Pack – Statewide Outcomes*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 22.

Transitioning from Year 12 into further education or training

Higher proportions of metropolitan Year 12 completers in 2018 continued in education or training than their regional centre or rural peers. 75.3% of metropolitan students continued in education compared to 56.8% for regional centres and 54.2% for rural areas (government students). This is mainly due to the large gap in students entering university to complete bachelor degrees. More regional centre and rural students go into apprenticeships, into the workforce or unemployment.

On Track 2018: Year 12 completers responses by destination						
Destination	Metro		Regional Centre		Rural	
	Government	Non-gov	Government	Non-gov	Government	Non-gov
In Education or Training	75.3%	85.4%	56.8%	69.1%	54.2%	67.1%
Apprenticeship/traineeship	7.5%	5.9%	12.8%	9.5%	13.9%	11.7%
Bachelor degree	53.4%	69.6%	30.3%	52.0%	28.7%	48.1%
Certificates/diplomas	14.5%	9.9%	13.7%	7.6%	11.7%	7.2%
Not in Education or Training	24.6%	14.5%	43.2%	30.8%	45.8%	32.9%
Employed	18.4%	12.1%	34.4%	26.4%	37.8%	30.1%
Looking for work	5.2%	1.9%	7.7%	3.7%	7.2%	2.5%
NILFET	1.1%	0.5%	1.0%	0.8%	0.8%	0.4%

Student attendance and engagement

Secondary students in regional centres and rural areas are chronically absent (absent for 30 days or more) at higher rates than metropolitan students and the proportion of students absent for 30 days or more is highest in primary schools in regional centres.

In the past three years, rural primary school students were absent for 30 days or more at a rate similar to metropolitan students. A similar pattern was observed for the average number of absence days per student.

Government school enrolments

In the last 10 years school enrolments in metropolitan Victoria have increased by 23.4% for government schools and 14.9% for non-government schools. Since 2000, regional centre and rural area government school enrolments have declined (by 5.1% and 13.8% respectively). However, there has been substantial increase in non-government school enrolments in these areas (regional centres 43.1% and 26.4% for rural areas). Over the last 5 years, all areas and sectors have increased in enrolments. Similar to the above trends, metropolitan enrolments have increased more in government than non-government schools, whilst in regional centres and rural areas, non-government school enrolments have increased at a greater rate than government school enrolments.

The number of Year 12 VCE students in government schools has declined dramatically in regional centres and rural areas since 2000. In the same period, Year 12 VCE students in non-government schools in regional/rural areas increased. In 2000, 68.6% of all Year 12 VCE students in regional centres and rural areas were enrolled in government schools, compared with 54.9% in 2018. In metropolitan areas Year 12 VCE students in both sectors increased at similar rates since 2000.

CHAPTER FOUR: KEY CONSULTATION THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The Panel conducted consultations with communities across Victoria during July and August 2019 to explore the issues impacting students and schools in rural and regional Victoria.

Feedback provided consistently throughout the consultation forums led the Panel to draw three key conclusions about the context of delivering education in rural and regional Victorian communities.

Each local challenge requires a local approach and a local solution. There is no 'silver bullet' and no single solution that can be scaled up or applied across the whole state. The challenges faced by schools and students in rural communities and regional centres are in no way homogenous. While rural areas and regional centres experience particular barriers related to their characteristics, challenges also differ from location to location, rural town to rural town and regional centre to regional centre. Communities stressed that local contexts in rural and regional areas can be affected by community size, proximity to major population centres, demographic characteristics and local economies. As a result it was made clear to the Panel that efforts to improve learning outcomes for students must put local context at the forefront of policy and program design.

In many places across rural and regional Victoria, the vast majority of students are being provided with a strong and rich education. The Panel consistently heard accounts of innovative and effective educational practice occurring across Victorian schools in rural and regional Victoria, as well as reports of many schools and broader communities effectively addressing barriers to ensure students are given the best opportunity to reach their full potential.

There are both common and distinct challenges faced by rural and regional government school educators. The distinct challenges are arguably reflected in some recent data, which show that rural schools are performing slightly more strongly on some measures than regional schools. The panel was not able to reach conclusive findings about the causes of these differences, but the evidence pointed to two important factors. The first is the more competitive environment experienced by some regional schools as a result of the greater presence of non-government schools in regional areas, and the competition that can still exist between government sector schools in some regional areas. The second is that while there has been in some rural areas a recent influx of families experiencing trauma and disadvantage, (perhaps as a result of the stock of low cost housing in some rural areas), there is also an increasing level of social disadvantage in some regional areas. Further, while there are a number of protective factors in rural areas that can mitigate or moderate disadvantage to some extent, such as strong relationships between small schools and their communities: these mitigating factors are not necessarily present in all regional areas.



At all forums, participants spoke in detail and with clarity about the challenges faced by students, families and communities. They also spoke at length about potential solutions and success factors. The Panel heard clearly that it was critical to ensure rural and regional students had the foundations and access to support necessary for them to engage productively in education; were provided with learning environments that engaged and inspired them regardless of location; and were surrounded by cultures and attitudes that expanded their career aspirations and expectations for their future rather than limited them.

Communities highlighted what they identify as the essential elements to delivering an inspiring educational environment for students in rural and regional Victoria that promotes and enables success and growth. Eight consistent themes emerged clearly from the discussions and the Panel has used these as the basis for developing recommendations to further strengthen the learning and development outcomes for rural and regional students in Victoria.

They are:

Key Consultation Themes

1. *Planning and strategy*
2. *Wide aspiration, high expectation and informed choice*
3. *School resourcing*
4. *Student support*
5. *Student inclusion*
6. *Curriculum provision*
7. *Attraction and retention of principals, teachers and support staff*
8. *Professional development*

1. PLANNING AND STRATEGY

Through the community consultations, the Panel was able to identify a number of actions that can be taken immediately. However, at each forum it was recognised that the challenges facing rural and regional communities are complex and require further consideration. Communities welcomed the opportunity for further input.

A key recommendation of the Panel is therefore that further consideration be given to strategies that could be best deployed to support rural and regional students and that the Department develop a five year strategy for rural and regional students. Further, to ensure that rural and regional voices continue to be heard, two consultative committees should be established.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Planning and strategy

- 1.1. Develop a comprehensive five-year strategic plan for rural and regional education that recognises and addresses the specific opportunities and challenges of rural and regional education and establish a Rural Education Consultative Group and a Regional Education Consultative Group to support the effective implementation of the strategic plan.

2. WIDE ASPIRATIONS, HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND INFORMED CHOICES

What did communities tell us?

Consultation feedback echoed past review findings that rural and regional students can have lower levels of expectation and aspiration for their future than metropolitan students. The Panel heard that this can

have considerable impacts for learning and development outcomes. Factors that are known to contribute to student aspiration, also highlighted through community consultations include:

- parent and family views on education
- family socio-economic status
- exposure to diverse post school education pathways
- availability of transition support and assistance
- peer influences and views regarding education
- local community attitudes toward education.

Ensuring families and communities have high expectations for local young people

Parental and family views of education were seen to have significant impact on student aspirations in many rural and regional areas. Feedback suggested that in some areas with particularly high concentrations of disadvantage, families do not consistently place high value on continuing education. Participants linked this to a belief amongst some families that their children's future prospects were predetermined by their individual circumstances of disadvantage and the limitations of their local area.

Additionally, for many families in rural and regional Victoria dealing with financial disadvantage, there was often pressure on students to leave education to enter the workforce. Feedback also suggested that aspiration levels for male students were generally worse than for female students. Participants noted the impact that inter-generational negativity toward education has on student aspiration and expectation, and felt dedicated work was needed to break the trend of weaker aspiration in some areas.

An important nuance acknowledged by many of the community discussions was the tension between the student aspirations and the opportunities available to them. Participants highlighted that it was not always necessary for young people to leave their community to find success, but for some rural and regional students, finding success might mean leaving to complete a qualification in metropolitan Melbourne. While there are clear push/pull factors in whether students return to their small community ultimately, young people must be supported to make informed choices about what they want their life to be, to avoid them simply settling for what they might believe is a 'fait accompli' or the only choice available to them.

“We’ve had ten years of drought, we’ve had constant population decline – hope and optimism is being challenged.” Participant

Participants felt that weaker family and community aspirations for young people could be shifted by better educating parents on the broad range of career pathways available and working proactively to debunk local attitudes that placed limits on community expectations of young people. Participants believed accessible and targeted resources for parents providing contemporary information about further study and employment pathways could alter attitudes and beliefs that currently impact aspiration levels and family expectations about their children's future. The *Rural Inspire* initiative was highlighted as a case study that had successfully shifted attitudes and expectations in relation to further training and career opportunities.

Young people daring to dream

Participants felt strongly that the focus on career pathways and aspirations needed to start in primary schools and that solid early foundations to learning impacted on aspirations later in life. In many rural and regional communities, participants reported that young people developed a limited view of their potential education and career pathways early on and this impacted heavily on their future aspirations and attitudes toward learning and achievement throughout their schooling. Feedback also suggested weaker aspirations contributed to the earlier school disengagement particularly prevalent in some regional centres. The Panel heard where groups of schools developed common high quality reading programs in early primary years, students were better positioned to have positive associations with learning which could develop into wider and stronger aspirations for their future.

The panel further heard that proactively broadening student awareness of the multiple pathways options available to them locally and further afield, as well as exposing them to diverse and positive role modelling in their communities, had helped to establish and maintain positive cultures and associations toward education and careers in some areas. Particular emphasis was given to the need for early intervention strategies that could establish positive attitudes toward education and career aspirations before any external or internal influences began to limit them.

CASE STUDY

RURAL INSPIRE Country Education Partnership

Rural Inspire is an initiative of the Rural Youth Ambassadors, supported by the Country Education Partnership and has been running since 2011. It supports young people living in rural communities by developing their leadership skills and knowledge while they explore education challenges and opportunities.

Each year, a new ambassador cohort is established, consisting of young people who are educated in rural Victorian communities. Generally, Year 11 pupils are nominated by their schools to participate in the program, which runs for a period of 12 months.

At the start of each year, the new ambassador cohort works collaboratively to develop specific themes of relevance to rural education. These themes then provide the focus for their discussions and exploration for the year ahead. During the period of their ambassadorship they also undertake training to support their leadership capabilities.

The Rural Youth Ambassadors are involved in a range of facilitated workshops, visit organisations that support leadership development, engage with leaders across many industries, and consult with senior education and government personnel.

The initiative:

- provides online platforms with information and resources for young people
- provides leadership experiences for students in upper primary and junior secondary to inspire them about their future
- broadens exposure to diverse urban and rural learning opportunities and experiences
- links young people with successful mentors in industry and tertiary education
- highlights success stories locally
- provides a leadership program for rural leaders.

Beyond attitudes, the Panel heard that affordability of tertiary education prevented some rural and regional students from aspiring to further education and training opportunities, and particularly those available in metropolitan Melbourne. The more geographically isolated schools felt this issue most acutely. It was reported that beliefs that metropolitan options were beyond their reach financially resulted in weaker aspirations for some students. Participants reported that many students experienced difficulty accessing the financial support that was available and noted the cost of travel, metropolitan accommodation and living costs were prohibitive for many families, even when Commonwealth financial assistance was in place. To help build student aspirations, community members urged the Panel to consider ways to expand access to post secondary financial assistance for students as well as building more flexibility into the assistance programs already available.

Another issue seen to impact on cultures of aspiration and expectation in schools was the increasing trend of high achieving government school students moving to the non-government sector through scholarship or other opportunities in rural and regional Victoria. In line with what is known of the demonstrable peer effects in schools, participants suggested this had the negative effect of weakening aspirations amongst student groups, as they became less exposed to high performance, and models of excellence. Regional centres felt this most acutely given the greater supply of non-government schooling options in regional centres.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, the Panel noted that since 2000, regional centre and rural area government school enrolments have declined, whilst across the same period there has been substantial increase in non-government school enrolments.²⁰ Participants highlighted the need to explore ways to retain high performing students in government schools for the multiple benefits accrued to students, schools and the broader community.

Equipping young people to make informed choices about their future

A consistently strong theme raised throughout the consultations was the particular need to provide young people in rural and regional schools with exposure to the multiplicity of further education and career pathways that are available, to ensure they are equipped to make informed choices about their future. The need was particularly pronounced for students in more remote areas of the State who had limited

²⁰ Ibid, p. 10.

exposure to opportunities beyond their local areas, and less access to experiences or diverse influences offered by metropolitan Melbourne or regional centres.

Participants highlighted that living in smaller communities can limit young people's exposure to the range of business, industry or employment models available in metropolitan Melbourne and this impacted on their awareness of available career options, and had impacts that reverberated through their schooling in relation to subject choices and pathways.

CASE STUDY

STEM SISTERS Baw Baw Latrobe & South Gippsland Bass Coast LLEN

STEM Sisters is a girls only program aimed at encouraging girls in Years 9 and 10 to consider a career in science, technology, engineering and maths.

The program includes industry visits, an Ambassador Program involving women working in a STEM role, STEM Challenge program, networking opportunities and work placement opportunities.

Participants get exposure to pathways and employers in the industries of energy, water, environment, local government, health, parks and forestry and agriculture.

School partnerships with both tertiary providers and local industry were seen as an effective way to broaden student awareness of and attitudes toward local employment opportunities. The Panel heard numerous stories of successful partnerships between schools, tertiary and vocational providers and local industry that had supported students to successfully transition to post secondary training and employment. Feedback suggested concerted and ongoing effort was required in this space.

Furthermore, participants reported in some areas there was stigma associated with particular pathways such as VCAL and VET, as well as local employment opportunities. The stigma and associated attitudes at play in some areas reduced the number of young people considering highly viable local employment options, which has had downstream impacts for local industry and economies. Feedback suggested work was also needed to explore how the benefits of VCAL and VET could be more widely marketed to students and families.

CASE STUDY

STANDING TALL Heywood & District Secondary College (HDSC)

The Standing Tall program trains caring community volunteers to become mentors to students at HDSC. Mentors come from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences.

Mentors visit their allocated student for an hour each week, helping to identify strengths and providing a trusted adult role model. The aim is to provide the encouragement and support that will allow students to reach their full potential and become valuable members of the community.

Students are accepted to the program for various reasons:

- to build on their leadership skills
- to help them grow self-confidence and resilience
- assist them to engage in their education
- give assistance with goal setting and aspiration
- provide them a trusted adult outside the family to talk to.

Students may be referred by parents, staff or even refer themselves. The program values are integrity, trust, respect and shared responsibility. The emphasis on these values along with a solid nurturing relationship with the mentor, help facilitate emotional and social growth in the mentored students.

It was highlighted that in many instances, students had limited avenues to access career information and often relied on advice from a single careers officer at their school, who may have a narrow view of their available options as well. Consultation feedback highlighted the need for regular professional development for careers teachers, so their advice to students is based on the most current and relevant information

about the breadth of choices available locally and further afield and also informed by an understanding of growth industries and emerging vocations.

Further, supporting and encouraging students to develop entrepreneurial skills was seen as essential to prepare students for the 21st Century employment environment and to ensure they can be a driving force in building adaptive local communities that can respond to and capitalise on global economic and commercial trends.

The Panel heard that some Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) are playing a broader cultural change role by delivering targeted initiatives that link schools with industry for work experience. Participants felt this focus should be extended across more LLENs to support both primary and secondary schools to empower students to envisage a wider range of career pathways and direct students towards emerging industries and high employment growth areas.

The Panel noted the benefits of the *Regional Skills Demand Profiles* that were developed for the Mallee and Great South Coast Regions as part of the Victorian Government *Skills First* reforms. The profile developed by the Regional Skills Taskforce provides a way for industries to identify workforce training needs and promote quality training pathways that lead to skills development and jobs across regional and rural Victoria. The region specific profiles identify industry shifts and highlight emerging and future skills and training needs specific to the local regions, providing a reliable evidence base that can inform education provision decisions and help career pathways planning be better tailored to the needs of young people and local economies.

The Panel heard about the impact of the roll out of DET's *Transforming Career Education Initiative*,²¹ which commenced in 2019. Whilst still in the early stages of implementation, the positive impacts of the initiative were highlighted across many of the consultation meetings. The professional career planning service was identified as being particularly well received by students. Other elements of the program include career education funding for schools; career self-exploration workshops for students in years 7 and 8; careers e-portfolio for students in year 9; industry exposure programs for vulnerable students; careers professionals up-skilling program; enhancing careers education across the Victorian Curriculum; and the enhanced work readiness program. The Panel looks forward to continued expeditious implementation of the *Career Education Initiative* and would welcome a priority implementation focus for rural and regional schools.

"We're now seeing more and more Year 9 students see VCE as an option for themselves through the new careers program." Participant

²¹ Department of Education and Training (2019), *Transforming Career Education*. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/transforming-career.aspx>

CASE STUDY

TIMBOON AGRICULTURAL PROJECT (TAP) Timboon P-12, local industries and philanthropists

The Timboon Agriculture Project (TAP) is a partnership between the Timboon P-12 School and the industries, and community around Timboon, resulting in significant improvements in student learning outcomes and engagement.

The initial program goals were:

1. Increase applied learning opportunities for students
2. Increase the uptake of Maths/Science, especially at senior levels
3. Increase community engagement
4. Increase retention rates
5. Increase an awareness of agricultural career opportunities.

The partnership project started by Timboon P-12 School and WestVic Dairy in mid-2012 has grown beyond expectations through the generous sharing of skills and knowledge by local community members and businesses. This has included dairy farmers and other agriculturalists and horticulturalists who work with cattle, ducks, sheep, chickens, lavender, strawberries; agricultural service providers including fencing contractors, vets and agricultural research scientists; major dairy processors and boutique food manufacturers; community service providers, school teachers; and parents.

NAPLAN results have demonstrated that relative gains over 2012-2015, plateaued in 2016 with a trend in growth upwards in Maths/Science/Literacy in 2018. This is particularly evident in our Year 9 cohort with 52% of students scoring in the top two bands of NAPLAN against a state average of 24%.

The 2018 Attitudes to Schools survey demonstrated high connectedness to school especially at senior levels with 71% of Timboon Year 7-9 students positive (compared to state average of 57% - similar rural schools 59%).

Other data show the program having impact on the retention of students from Year 6 into Year 7, which was one of the big drivers for the establishment of the program initially.

At Timboon P-12 School physics, chemistry and biology classes are conducted at VCE level with good numbers, despite being a small school. Stakeholders credit TAP in part for this success.

The panel heard clearly that the task of ensuring that all students have wide aspirations, high career expectations, and are equipped to make informed choices about their future is the job of the whole community collectively. Whilst parents and carers play a major role for their children in instilling positive attitudes towards aspiration and achievement, local industry and employers, higher education providers and schools all have a shared responsibility to inspire students by ensuring they are exposed to a diverse set of experiences, opportunities and role models.

Shifting family, individual and community attitudes towards aspiration and expectation is a substantial challenge, however there are clear case studies of where communities have worked together to raise aspirational standards across their communities. The work that is now needed is to identify what the commonalities were that led to success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices

- 2.1 Consider a range of options to support the development of wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices by rural and regional students, their families, schools and communities, including additional support to ensure rural and regional students have access to VCE study resources; the development of a resource hub of case studies of successful programs linking local employer/industry with schools; and the recruitment of international students to rural and regional schools in order to

expand the diversity of rural and regional communities and global awareness of rural and regional students.

3. SCHOOL RESOURCING

What did communities tell us?

Consultation feedback suggested that delivering high quality learning and development costs more in rural and regional communities. Further, the school resourcing model and other student financial support programs presented particular challenges for rural and regional areas related to:

- staffing small schools with an enrolment based funding model
- costs associated with geographic isolation
- access to maintenance funding and competition with facilities in non-government schools
- program funding boundaries.

The Panel heard aspects of the Student Resource Package (SRP) model needed review to reflect modern geographic boundaries, small school contexts and the complexity of some provision models. Feedback suggested the model does not adequately account for the additional costs of provision in rural and regional areas. One example of this is the impact of travel on school budgets. In order to provide students with access to diverse learning opportunities and experiences, rural schools particularly needed to travel long distances to access basic educational experiences (such as excursions and camps) and incurred rising costs of travel and often accommodation as part of that provision. Whilst financial assistance was available for vulnerable students through the camps, sports and excursions fund (CSEF), a large proportion of rural and regional students did not qualify for this fund, as eligibility is based on SFOE.

The rising cost of bus travel was highlighted as a major prohibitive factor for schools. The Panel notes that whilst the school bus program provides transport funding for eligible students, a number of schools have their own school bus to transport students. However, school leaders who owned school buses highlighted the additional financial burdens associated with bus maintenance and upkeep, as well as driver registration and training, which created additional budget pressure for schools.

“I need three teachers to be registered bus drivers, but that’s a three day course for each person, and my budget can’t afford the relief staff to backfill them, let alone the licence fees.” Rural School Principal

Further, participants reported that teachers in geographically isolated schools were expected to work much longer hours as result of the lengthy travel requirements for excursions and reported that this had impacts for staff health and wellbeing. This was a particular concern for rural schools and staff.

“Even after I completed the four hour round trip to Melbourne, I’ll be driving the bus for another 1.5 hours at night to ensure all the students are returned home.” Rural School Principal

Students participating in the forums consistently remarked on the costs associated with travel and accommodation in Melbourne and reported that these costs routinely prevented them from taking up learning opportunities offered outside their local area. They noted these costs were in addition to the costs that are often attached to the experiences, such as VCE revision lectures.

“We had 1200 students in the area attending VCE revision lectures in Melbourne after the Black Saturday fires, when our students had those experiences funded. Now we are lucky to get 200 kids going.” School Principal

The Panel heard that small schools were particularly impacted by the current SRP model, with participants urging the Panel to consider how more certainty could be built into the model to provide schools with more budget security. A deemed enrolment model was highlighted as one way to provide small schools with

greater budget certainty year to year to enable them to plan more effectively and provide staff with greater employment certainty.

“If I lose one family, I lose a teacher.” Rural School Principal

“I have staff regularly knocking on my door checking that our school budget is okay. They are worried about losing their jobs.” Rural School Principal

Participants also suggested that the maintenance program for rural and regional schools required dedicated attention. Participants felt that rural and regional school maintenance often lagged behind that of metropolitan schools due to issues with service coordination and a shortage of trades locally. The Panel heard in some instances this impacted school enrolments as non-government schools were regarded as having access to more capital funding to maintain and improve upon their facilities, which was attractive to families. A lack of capital program flexibility was also highlighted as problematic for rural schools particularly, noting that school facilities were often highly valued community resources, and as such needed to respond to local contexts and need.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. School resourcing

- 3.1 Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the SRP design in relation to rural and regional schools, including the definition of ‘rural’ and ‘regional’ schools and other measures such as the introduction of a ‘deemed’ annual SRP over, for example, a three year cycle to reduce the impact of volatility of enrolments on staffing
- 3.2 Examine the current funding arrangements for rural and regional schools, including maintenance funding and the effectiveness of the current VSBA service delivery model for rural and regional schools
- 3.3 Consider whether the current Camps, Sports and Excursions (CSE) fund should be extended to include all students in rural and regional schools with indexation to reflect greater distance.

4. STUDENT SUPPORT

What did communities tell us?

The health and wellbeing of students and families was a topic that dominated the Panel’s conversations with communities across Victoria. Many of the issues raised by participants, particularly in relation to access to specialist support services and increasing rates of mental illness, are not unique to rural and regional Victoria. However, rural and regional Victoria undoubtedly face additional challenges and barriers as a result of their distance from high population centres where the majority of services are offered.

The Panel heard frequently that the support services available to students and families in rural and regional areas are inadequate and more services provided at the right time are needed to ensure families and students can thrive. As highlighted in Chapter 3, data shows increasing rates of disadvantage in both rural and regional areas, however the increase has become more pronounced in regional centres over recent years. As a result, the Panel heard that increasingly schools were taking on responsibility for supporting students with more complex health and wellbeing needs in the face of families’ inability to access services in a timely manner.

The Panel heard that factors creating particular challenges for rural and regional school communities included:

- rural and regional communities are often dealing with higher concentrations of disadvantage and are supporting more students with experiences of trauma
- there are fewer quality primary health and specialist support services available in rural and regional Victoria and demand for the services that are available far outweighs supply
- the numbers of students with mental health concerns is increasing and presentations are starting earlier.

- gaps between government and non-government services have made service navigation complex for families, and the result is they often do not receive the care they need.
- Rigid service boundaries can prevent vulnerable families and students accessing services they need.

A number of issues were identified by participants as being particularly prevalent for people in their communities including trauma and family violence, disability and diabetes. However, mental illness was consistently raised as one of the major issues facing students and families.

Mental health problems are the most common health issues facing young people worldwide. According to the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017, three quarters of all mental health problems manifest in people under the age of 25 and one in four Australians aged 16–24 years will experience mental health problems in any given year.²²

Accordingly, participants reported that mental health issues for students had increased significantly over recent years and schools faced substantial challenges in adequately supporting vulnerable young people who were often dealing with complex and multi-faceted risk factors. Participants also felt that untreated or under-treated mental ill health in students was contributing to high absence rates, which were seen to be trending upwards particularly in regional centres.

Secondary students in regional centres and rural areas are chronically absent (missing 30 days or more) at higher rates than metropolitan students, and these rates are driven by unexplained circumstances. The proportion of students chronically absent is highest in primary schools in regional centres.

The Panel acknowledges the work underway through the *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System*, and looks forward to the Commission's recommendations on this important issue, particularly in relation to adolescent mental health. Communities also welcomed the *Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary Schools Initiative* but noted the program would not be fully implemented until 2022. Participants also highlighted the increasing earlier need for dedicated mental health support in primary schools.

*"In rural schools you face these issues (mental health and trauma) almost daily now, whereas five years ago you didn't."
Rural Teacher*

Participants spoke of a number of successful school initiatives such as the *GPs in School Program* and *School Nurses*, however they also highlighted that their impact was often reduced by an inability to attract and retain appropriate health professionals as well as a lack of flexibility in program design. Participants suggested further investigation be undertaken to identify ways to attract high quality candidates to these roles and build more flexibility into provision models to enable local areas to develop solutions that better targeted their communities' specific needs. Some communities that were not included in initial roll out of these programs urged government to consider prioritising rural and regional communities for future program phases.

Adequate access to quality primary health and specialist support services is an issue for communities Australia wide. Participants noted the need for work across government to explore ways to attract and retain quality health professionals in communities outside metropolitan centres. Extending service access via virtual service provision was suggested by some participants as a short-term measure that could address demand. Additionally, participants highlighted instances where collaborative, cross service approaches to allied health resourcing had improved service access for communities.

"We have access to an occupational therapist which we don't rely heavily on, what we desperately need is a family counsellor." Participant

Furthermore, the Panel heard that school staff often felt ill-equipped to deal with the increasing complexity of student health needs and would benefit from training on trauma informed approaches to help them manage high risk and vulnerable young people, including students displaying disruptive or challenging behaviours. The Panel also heard that there was an identified shortage of alternative

²² Victorian Auditor General's Office, (June 2019), *Child and Youth Mental Health*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 17

education settings and flexible learning options for students with higher needs, particularly in regional centres.

Additionally, participants felt higher value could be derived from the Student Support Service Officer (SSSO) program (designed to provide eligible students with a range of allied health services), as in some schools the majority of SSSO time was taken up completing PSD assessments and staffing shortages also limited the support available to schools. Participants suggested further work was needed to explore school access and utilisation trends of the SSS program.

CASE STUDY

Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) Regional Partnership Early Years Project

The Wimmera Southern Mallee (WSM) Regional Partnership Early Years Project aims to streamline and coordinate services supporting young children and their families in the WSM region.

The project aims to explore and provide the very best early years learning experience for children in a regional, rural and remote setting and is aligned to DET's Early Years Reform agenda. The project involves testing new ideas and ways of operating within a place-based context.

Sixteen communities across the Wimmera and Southern Mallee nominated to take part in the initiative. The communities, grouped in six geographic clusters, have a designated Project Coordinator supporting and guiding the project, along with Murdoch Children's Research Institute assisting with the review and redesign of systems and programs informed by parents, practitioners and leaders to better meet the needs of children and families in their communities.

Each cluster has a specific project focus with, for example, the West Wimmera cluster focusing on improvements in school readiness; the Yarriambiack cluster looking at engaging vulnerable families to close the gap; the Horsham cluster looking at teen pregnancy support and engagement; and the Northern Grampians cluster is looking at establishing long day care.

It was also highlighted that system fragmentation resulted in greater complexity for families attempting to navigate the service system and access support. Participants encouraged a more intensive focus on service coordination and system integration across government to address this. Participants highlighted instances where funding has been pooled and collaborative service planning undertaken as models that should inform state wide policy design.

A lack of information sharing between services supporting students from early childhood to adolescence was also seen as a barrier to the provision of quality care for students and families. The Panel acknowledges this is a vexed issue that many governments are grappling with and notes the *Child Information Sharing Scheme* that is being rolled out across workforces including school staff, as part of the Victorian Government's family violence reforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Student support

- 4.1 Develop a strong culture and clear practice of 'soft boundaries' in the delivery of rural and regional services and education provision, both across sectors (for example, health and justice) and across locations, to ensure the interests of every student is placed at the centre of service delivery.
- 4.2 Consider improved models of support for rural and regional schools to address student mental health as part of the response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, including consideration of the following:
 - 4.2.1 Expansion of mental health support services to primary schools;
 - 4.2.2 Provision of trauma-informed training to all teachers in rural schools and regional schools where support services are difficult to access.
- 4.3 Review and develop local plans for the provision of alternative settings in regional centres
- 4.4 Examine steps to increase access to support staff, in particular paediatricians and speech therapists, including the provision of facilities to enable the delivery of virtual support services
- 4.5 Consider the development of consistent access practices in special school enrolments in rural and regional special schools.

5. STUDENT INCLUSION

What did communities tell us?

Rural and regional schools face the same challenges as metropolitan schools in ensuring every student feels safe regardless of their cultural background. Participants felt that negative attitudes towards inclusion were sometimes exacerbated by small populations and suggested further work was required to ensure rural and regional communities had adequate education and training to ensure diversity was embraced as a valuable and essential feature of the local community.

Participants noted the positive impacts of initiatives that actively broadened student exposure to culturally diverse experiences and influences and supported integration, particularly in areas with small populations and relatively homogenous demographic characteristics.

CASE STUDY

Virtual EAL Arrivals Program

A partnership between the Department of Education and Victorian School of Languages has helped EAL students who have recently arrived from other countries to integrate more effectively into their school and broader communities, and enhance their learning and wellbeing outcomes by providing intensive English language training virtually.

Until recently, the program was delivered through face-to-face teaching in schools in metropolitan areas and regional centres. But more and more migrant and refugee families are settling in rural areas of Victoria and often there is no specialist EAL teacher in these areas. The Virtual EAL New Arrivals Program uses technology to connect those isolated EAL students with specialist teachers, to give them the same foundation for their education as any new arrival in the city.

“Mitta Mitta primary school is located in the Mitta Valley which is an hour from the nearest big regional centre. We have eight students. Albert is our only new-arrival student and he is from Nepal. His father came to work at a local pub. He was able to bring members of his family out at different stages and Albert was one of the last ones to come over, just after the earthquake. The virtual conferencing program is vital to assist Albert in developing his English skills and without it, his dad would have to take him somewhere else. And that’s not good for Albert because this is where he wants to be”.
Principal

The Panel noted the work under way as part of the *Respectful Relationships* in schools initiative to support schools and early childhood settings to promote and model respect, positive attitudes and behaviours, with a focus on teaching children how to build healthy relationships, resilience and confidence.

Many participants suggested that inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities should be a particular focus. This could be delivered via an enhanced focus on local Aboriginal histories, cultures, inclusion and belonging in the Victorian curriculum; expanding the Koorie curriculum focus of teacher tertiary education and ongoing professional development; and a continued focus on the work of regional *DET Koorie Education and Support Officers* (KESOs), who were regarded as having high degrees of impact for the communities they worked with.

Feedback received by the Panel highlighted that rural and regional teachers have less access to discipline specific professional networks and professional learning, and this could impact on their ability to regularly modernise and update teaching and curriculum to reflect community contexts. The teaching of history subjects was illustrated as a particular example where some teachers rely on older teaching materials which has had adverse impacts for a particular student group, many of whom had Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

“One teacher cried as she described how isolated she felt, grappling alone with the anxiety of teaching colonial history to a class with Aboriginal students in it.” Professional Learning Coordinator

Participants provided examples of successful partnerships between schools and local Koorie communities that had helped enhance the local cultural relevance of school curriculum around Koorie culture and build more inclusive school environments for all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Student Inclusion

- 5.1 Consider further steps that can be taken by rural and regional schools and communities to strengthen the development of inclusive cultures for all students and staff
- 5.2 Develop common teaching and learning programs across clusters/networks of schools focused on Aboriginal knowledge, histories and cultures.

6. CURRICULUM PROVISION

What did communities tell us?

The Panel was not surprised to hear that schools across rural and regional Victoria faced challenges in providing a broad range of curriculum options for students. Challenges were largely attributed to low enrolments and small class sizes, as well as difficulty accessing and attracting experienced teachers, particularly in specialist subject areas in the secondary years.

It is known that compared to metropolitan schools, rural and regional schools are more likely to be a small school and have associated resource constraints; have fewer teachers and less staffing flexibility; have limited subject and program breadth; and have less capacity to raise additional funding through external sources.²³

In line with these characteristics, forum participants consistently reported to the Panel that rural and regional schools faced great difficulty in providing students with engaging education and training and diverse learning and development opportunities and experiences. Feedback suggested the key factors at play include:

- smaller schools struggle to achieve the enrolment scale needed to offer a broad range of subject choices
- there are barriers to inter-school collaboration, which can prevent joint resourcing of subjects
- rural schools particularly, experience more difficulty attracting staff with specialisations in multiple subject areas, and in particular the harder to staff subjects such as STEM and languages
- the cost of providing quality external learning and development experiences increases in line with a schools' distance from metropolitan Melbourne and regional centres due to costs associated with travel
- home schooling incurs additional costs for each Virtual School enrolment that are not factored into the SRP model.

The impact on curriculum breadth is felt most acutely in the secondary years, where teaching and learning follows a discipline specific structure. In order to achieve the scale to fund a qualified teacher in a particular discipline, schools must have enrolments at numbers, which are often unrealistic for small schools. Strategies such as distance education and inter-school subject collaborations were highlighted as potential ways to overcome enrolment barriers and provide students with subject breadth, however participants highlighted a number of challenges associated with these strategies.

Virtual School enrolments

The disincentives embedded in the SRP model in relation to student utilisation of Virtual School subjects was highlighted as a problem by a number of participants. When a student enrolls in a distance education subject, the pro-rata SRP allocation is transferred from the home school to the distance education budget to facilitate provision of the subject to the student. However, schools reported that success in distance education subjects was heavily reliant on additional face-to-face support and mentoring being provided by the home school, without which many students failed to succeed. Participants went further to report that

²³ Lamb, S., Glover, S. & Walstab, A. (2014), *Educational Disadvantage and Regional and Rural Schools*, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

unless students were highly motivated and exceptionally self-driven, they had little chance at success in distance education, unless support from their home school was in place. As a consequence, the highly valuable learning and development option that distance education presents is seen as less attractive to schools without sufficient discretionary budget, or availability of surplus educator time to supplement the learning of enrolled students. This has a particular impact on small rural schools for which the Virtual School offering is arguably most important.

Participants felt there could be benefits to school clustering or Community of Practice (CoP) arrangements for distance education to allow the demands of home school mentoring and support to be shared across schools with enrolled students. It was noted that this would be reliant on reliable technology and also potentially flexible teaching and learning hours to ensure students didn't have to opt out of timetabled subjects to engage with distance education.

Communities also raised the need to expand access to and integration of interactive digital learning tools such as *Edrolo* and *WebEx* across rural and regional schools. The limitations of poor network access and delayed National Broadband Network rollout were highlighted in some communities.

The element of real-time interaction with teachers and peers was regarded as a potential improvement focus for the Virtual School. Both students and school staff highlighted the learning benefits of collaboration and peer connection for students undertaking distance education, who are often the only student in their school undertaking a particular subject.

"When you're the only student in your school doing a subject, it really helps to be able to talk to students in other schools doing the subject." Student

Collaborative provision

Some participants highlighted the difficulties schools had in developing collaborative arrangements amongst school groups to increase subject offerings. A key issue raised by schools was having adequate time to undertake collaborative planning. Some participants suggested schools would benefit from professional development related to effective collaborative practice as they faced challenges mobilising staff toward genuine collaboration.

Participants also remarked on the impact of the enrolment based funding model and suggested in environments where schools were heavily impacted by enrolment loss, the model encouraged competition between schools and acted as a disincentive to the positive inter-school partnerships that could lead to broader subject choice for students.

Further, the fact that regional students have access to a greater choice of schools is generally seen as a benefit, however in some instances, that benefit is not fully realised because there can be a tendency in some areas for schools to compete with each other rather than collaborate. This means that the potential benefits such as sharing classes is not necessarily delivered in the absence of a collaborative culture.

Consequently, some participants suggested that the protective factors that operate in smaller schools, where the teachers are part of the community and know the students well, might positively counter the potential detriments of not having access to a wide range of subjects. Community forums indicated that this might be a reason for the small difference in outcomes between rural and regional students, and thus potentially a key strategy for regional areas is to find ways to better support collaboration.

Whilst a number of challenges were raised, participants also spoke of many cases where school cluster or Communities of Practice (CoP) arrangements had led successfully to shared timetabling and resource pooling to give students access to a broader range of curriculum choices. Participants felt that actively fostering genuine school partnerships was a critical success factor.

In addition, the panel heard that areas that had education development plans were better placed to implement collaborative practice. Participants highlighted successful regional education development plans, but also noted that intensive support is needed post development to ensure the successful implementation and execution of the plan. Feedback also highlighted that aligning planning cycles for school networks was critical to collaborative planning.

CASE STUDY

Organic Communities of Practice (CoP) in Action

A solid partnership between a group of neighbouring rural schools in Victoria was developed over a number of years. The partnership was instigated by the schools themselves based on an identified need to collaborate to improve learning outcomes for their students. The CoP met regularly, provided professional support to each other and pooled efforts where they could to enhance learning experiences for students.

The extraordinary strength of the partnership was demonstrated in early 2018 when one of the CoP principals sent an email to the group reaching out for help. She had lost four teachers to unplanned leave in a short space of time and was unable to recruit replacement teachers due to her school's location and inability to offer secure contracts to potential candidates.

The response from the group was swift, solutions focused and collegiate.

One principal offered to open her classes to the school in need using a WebEx solution. Another principal supported one of her teachers to travel to the school to deliver the subject...on an ongoing basis.

Another principal opened her classes so that students from the school in need could travel and attend classes in that school. The scenario was an amazing illustration of collaboration in action.

Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)/ Vocational Education and Training (VET)

It was also raised a number of times that small schools struggle to offer VCAL. This was highlighted as a key issue as VCAL was seen as a viable pathway option for many rural and regional students. Schools also reported that even when a school had capacity to offer VCAL, sometimes the reputation of the Certificate was such that students, parents and communities were not willing to engage in the opportunities offered. Participants suggested work was needed to create broader awareness amongst students and families of the multiple vocational pathways that the VCAL qualification could lead to, as well as consideration of ways to enhance the design and delivery of the program to improve its reputation as a highly valued secondary qualification.

“Completing VCAL is sometimes harder than completing VCE, and getting an apprenticeship can be harder than getting into university, but the certificate is not seen in this way.” Teacher

CASE STUDY

Nathalia Learning Community

The Nathalia District has a population of 4,300 with dairy farming, cropping, light manufacturing, grazing, health services and education the main industries. It is located on the banks of the Broken Creek situated approximately 43km north of Shepparton. The Nathalia community has seen a steady change in its demographics over recent times, with an increasing number of transient families moving into the area and an increasing unemployment rate. The Nathalia community is serviced by a number of education organisations that provide learning programs for the community including:

- Nathalia Secondary College
- St Marys of the Angels Catholic Secondary College
- St Francis Primary School
- Nathalia Primary School

In 2017, the Nathalia education community recorded an Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 966, which is significantly lower than the ICSEA of 2010. 35% of families within the Nathalia community are located within the bottom quarter of family background indicators, against a national average of 25%.

The Nathalia Learning Community has been involved in the development and facilitation of a number of education initiatives directed at achieving the Learning Communities' overall vision of enhancing learning opportunities and improved education outcomes. Many of these have had a significant impact on student learning and have built capacity of all teachers across the Learning Community.

The two secondary schools established a common timetable for the provision of programs during the 1990s and five years ago began to plan and develop a comprehensive approach to shared development and delivery. Now the two secondary schools plan, develop and provide one VCE program for all students across the two secondary schools and students are able to attend classes in either school. Students in Nathalia are now able to access a similar VCE subject choice as their peers in Melbourne and larger regional centres. Teachers are shared across the two secondary schools providing learning for students involved in both the VCE and Vocational programs offered at the senior level of the schools.

As a result of their partnership at a VCE level, the two secondary colleges within the Learning Community partnered with a nearby town to develop a Trade Training Centre proposal, which is now fully operational offering in excess of seven vocational programs for young people within their community. As a result there has been a significant increase in the number of students studying vocational programs: from 58 enrolments in 2013 to 120 enrolments in 2017.

An exciting initiative within this network has been the establishment of a whole of community literacy program where local businesses and community members are engaged in regular reading sessions with students in their early years of learning. This program is also supported by the placement of book boxes in the majority of businesses in town.

The Nathalia Learning Community places a high priority on building the capacity of all staff by:

- supporting staff to be involved in International Benchmark education tours
- involvement of international education leaders (for example, Maggie Farrar, Sir John Jones, George Otero) in whole staff professional learning
- the development of a New Graduate network and support approach across the Learning Alliance
- establishment of cross-school teams to address specific learning needs and focus
- the middle leaders from the Learning Alliance being involved in a Bastow Education Change-makers program
- the facilitation of a Learning Community New Graduate network that supports new staff to network with one another and gain mentoring from education leaders from across the Learning Community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. Curriculum provision

- 6.1 Examine how the provision of VCAL in rural and regional areas can be strengthened
- 6.2 Support and consider incentives for networks/cluster of secondary schools (all sectors) to develop timetables that enable delivery of VCE subjects across multiple schools
- 6.3 Review the design and delivery of virtual learning
- 6.4 Examine how access to existing digital platforms can be supported.

7. ATTRACTION AND RETENTION OF PRINCIPALS, TEACHERS AND SUPPORT STAFF

What did communities tell us?

The quality of teaching and leadership staff is widely understood as being an essential ingredient to the provision of high quality education.

Unsurprisingly, attracting and retaining high quality staff was highlighted as one of the major challenges that face both rural and regional schools across each community forum. Whilst it was clear that rural schools felt the issue most acutely due to their characteristics of size and proximity to urban centres, regional centres were not immune, particularly those furthest from Melbourne. Discussions highlighted that the challenges and subsequent levers that influence teacher attraction and retention were much broader than education.

“Schools that are performing well in rural and regional Victoria have had a quality principal leading them for a consistent amount of time.” Participant

The Panel drew a number of key observations from the community discussions including:

- Incentives are needed to attract a greater number of teaching professionals to schools based outside of metropolitan Melbourne.
- Different incentives are needed in different locations, based on the characteristics and challenges of each local area.
- The most highly valued incentives included financial incentives in the form of salary supplements or HECS subsidisation; funded or subsidised accommodation; professional development incentives including sabbatical leave; additional job security or expedited career pathways.
- Securing suitable accommodation is an issue that impacts on teacher attraction for some, but not all, rural and regional areas.
- Candidates can be attracted to rural areas and regional centres if they are made aware of the many benefits of living in those locations. Marketing campaigns are one strategy that can contribute to a shift in attitudes.
- The way in which local communities embrace people moving to their towns is critical to successful integration into the local community and willingness of relocating teachers to stay long term.
- Intensive mentoring and support (from leaders with local experience) can be critical to effectively transitioning new principals into roles, particularly in small and hard to staff schools, and where new principals may have been promoted directly from full time teaching roles.
- Small school principals often carry a significant teaching load (and sometimes the entire teaching load) in addition to their leadership responsibilities in smaller schools, which can create stress for some professionals and act as a barrier to retaining high quality staff in those roles. This barrier can be addressed through the provision of targeted support to small school leaders, particularly in relation to administration and professional development.

- Attracting and retaining education support staff and school based allied health professionals with the requisite skill mix to match evolving student need is becoming increasingly difficult across the State.

Incentives

It is unquestionably harder to attract high quality teachers to areas that are significant distances from Melbourne and the broader metropolitan surrounds. Rural areas find it particularly difficult to attract staff to their schools and the challenge is exacerbated for schools wanting to attract teachers in more specialised or harder to staff disciplines. The Panel heard clearly that incentives are necessary to attract staff to schools in areas that have less access to services and perceived lifestyle features than metropolitan based or born teachers may be used to. Participants also reported that the barriers to attracting and retaining highly skilled educators are different between areas and as a result there is no 'one-size-fits-all' incentive panacea.

*"We want to attract people to our town, not pull them there.
We want them to stay longer term and be part of our
community, not just come for a year and then leave."
Participant*

Access to accommodation and/or rental assistance was regularly raised across the discussions, but it was not universally raised and the Panel believes this relates to a high variance in housing availability across different regions in Victoria. Consultation reports suggested the spread and suitability of DET owned housing stock across Victoria is very mixed. In some areas, DET housing stock was in high demand and of great importance to the attraction and retention of staff, and in other areas the DET stock was underutilised. Other areas that highlighted a shortage of local accommodation options didn't have access to any DET housing stock. Consequently, the Panel concluded that a review of education housing stock across rural and regional Victoria is needed particularly in areas where accommodation is identified as a real barrier to teacher attraction or retention.

The Panel also heard that there is a shortage of Casual Relief Teachers (CRT) available to support staff movement in rural areas particularly. This impacted on schools' ability to provide uninterrupted education provision, as well as support permanent workforces to engage in external professional learning opportunities. Participants suggested that a salary supplement for CRTs in the Victoria/New South Wales border region was particularly important given the current discrepancy in salary benefits between NSW and Victoria. Providing CRTs who travel further than 50 kms to work with a travel allowance was also seen as a strategy that could attract more relief teachers to work outside of Melbourne.

*"At one point last year I had four teachers absent for extended
periods due to unplanned absences. I wasn't able to replace
them." Participant*

Participants urged the Panel to consider a range of financial incentives including salary supplements, full or partial funding of HECS debts or bonded studentships that could attract educators to their areas. Providing schools with access to a suite of potential incentive offerings was seen as critical to ensure they could develop targeted and individualised recruitment packages that responded to local contexts and were reflective of individual candidate priorities.

Marketing, awareness and inclusion

Community members highlighted the need to raise awareness amongst the teaching population of the many benefits of living in rural areas, and advantages of regional centres, in order to attract more teachers to these areas. Participants felt that statewide awareness raising and marketing campaigns are needed to create awareness amongst the broader population of the valuable and alternative lifestyle opportunities that areas outside Melbourne offer. Additionally, targeted area campaigns are essential for locations that are not already well known. Local councils were seen to be particularly critical to local marketing and population attraction campaigns. Participants highlighted the many benefits of working in rural and regional areas such as the slower paced country lifestyle, earlier career advancement opportunities and reduced costs of living, and suggested these aspects should feature in any marketing campaigns.

“We don’t need to convince people of the benefits of living in Echuca or Lorne, but the Wimmera is a harder sell as people aren’t as aware of what we have to offer.” Participant

Some participants highlighted the difficulty families or individuals arriving to new areas sometimes have integrating into tight knit local communities. They urged local civic communities to take a proactive approach to ensure people moving to the area are well supported and connected to the vibrancy of the region. Halsey concluded as part of his 2018 consultations across Australia that ‘very little is apparently done to assist partners and families with making the transition and adapting to different circumstances including finding employment and making education arrangements for children’. The Panel heard similar feedback from its consultations but also heard from local industry employers who had implemented innovative approaches to retain staff, which included strategies focused on supporting the families of relocating workers.

“There is a role for the whole community to play in putting together a complete package to attract workers to the area.” Industry participant

Professional support and mentoring

The Panel heard that strategies to address feelings of professional isolation and disconnection would also assist in supporting and retaining high quality staff in rural locations. This was seen as important to improving job satisfaction for teachers as a retention measure, but critical for school leaders who are often grappling with a set of complex responsibilities alone. As Halsey points out ‘being a country education leader often means taking on an extensive range and diversity of responsibilities in addition to being responsible for the quality of teaching and learning’.²⁴ Supporting new principals and teachers through mentoring arrangements with experienced local educators was seen as an effective way to enhance the capability of teachers and principals in rural and regional schools, and also help to reduce stress and anxiety that can drive professionals away from jobs in rural and smaller schools particularly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers, and support staff

- 7.1 Consider a range of incentives to attract high quality principals, teachers and support staff in order to provide the most appropriate locally-determined measures
- 7.2 Examine the steps that might be taken to increase the pool of available CRTs for rural and regional schools
- 7.3 Support the development by schools, in collaboration with local communities, of strong induction and welcome programs for potential or actual new appointments, including programs for partners/family members
- 7.4 Consider steps that can be taken to strengthen the support provided to new principals and teachers
- 7.5 Examine the feasibility of increasing the number of administration hubs for clusters/networks of rural and regional schools to reduce principal workload.

²⁴ Halsey, J. (2018), *The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Australian Government, Canberra.

8. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What did communities tell us?

The panel heard that teachers and principals in rural and regional schools felt particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to high quality professional development. School staff reported feeling professionally isolated and unable to access relevant or discipline specific networks and communities of practice that helped enhance their teaching and learning methods. School leaders also remarked that a lack of high quality proximate professional development made it difficult for them to maintain high quality teaching and learning standards across their workforce in all curriculum areas.

CASE STUDY

The Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership funds scholarships for Victorian rural leaders to participate in the Master of Education (Rural Leadership and Management) program. The program provides a combination of tailored face-to-face and online learning to assist school leaders to deal with the challenges specific to leading rural and regional schools.

The unique barriers facing rural and regional school staff highlighted by communities included:

- lack of access to high quality local professional development
- lack of adequate funding to facilitate rural and regional teacher access to metropolitan professional development offerings
- lack of professional development time allowance for teaching principals, particularly in small rural schools
- an identified digital learning professional development need that was not being addressed.

Participants felt it was important to be able to offer high quality professional development opportunities for teachers in close proximity to their school. Always having to travel to metropolitan Melbourne for professional development was seen as an insurmountable barrier for many teachers and schools, particularly smaller, geographically isolated schools. Extending the delivery of Bastow network based professional development in rural and regional areas was a suggestion highlighted by a number of participants. The Panel also heard that extending the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority virtual VCE Assessor Training program would be welcomed.

The financial cost of travelling to metropolitan based professional development was identified as a genuine barrier to uptake for some schools, but still necessary to provide a rounded professional development program for staff. Participants felt that financial support (for travel and accommodation) would enhance accessibility for teachers from more remote areas and encourage more educators to engage with the diverse program offerings available in Melbourne.

School twinning arrangements, where a school is partnered with another to communicate, collaborate and share, were also highlighted as an effective and practical way to enhance the richness of professional learning opportunities for rural and regional teachers and encourage organic development of practice communities.

The organisational role undertaken by regional DET staff was highlighted as critical to the mobilisation of network based professional development, particularly when remoteness was a factor. Participants welcomed any opportunity for expansion of this support in order to help rural and regional schools implement a richer professional development program for staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. Professional development

- 8.1 Examine measures to strengthen the delivery of and access to professional learning for rural and regional staff, including access to VCAA virtual VCE Assessor Training and the delivery of Bastow based programs
- 8.2 Review the role of SEILS/EILS/network chairs to ensure adequate support is available for collaborative professional development.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSION

The Expert Advisory Panel found, as this report shows, that whilst there is much to celebrate about education provision in rural and regional Victoria, more is needed to ensure every student, regardless of their background, or location is provided with the environment, influences, and opportunities they need to thrive.

Schools and educators in rural and regional Victoria can deliver world class education for their students if they have access to the resources and supports that are essential to high quality teaching and learning.

This report and the Panel's recommendations encourage a multi-faceted approach to support, acknowledging that each community has different strengths, challenges and needs, and these characteristics should be the key driver in the development of interventions and improvement strategies.

Further, the success of any strategy or intervention is reliant on, and must draw from, the collective strength of communities and the ability of schools, families, government, industry and communities to work together toward the common goal of improving outcomes for their local young people.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Planning and strategy

Develop a comprehensive five-year strategic plan for rural and regional education that recognises and addresses the specific opportunities and challenges of rural and regional education and establish a Rural Education Consultative Group and a Regional Education Consultative Group to support the effective implementation of the strategic plan.

2. Wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices

- 2.1. Consider a range of options to support the development of wide aspirations, high expectations and informed choices by rural and regional students, their families, schools and communities, including additional support to ensure rural and regional students have access to VCE study resources; the development of a resource hub of case studies of successful programs linking local employer/industry with schools; and the recruitment of international students to rural and regional schools in order to expand the diversity of rural and regional communities and global awareness of rural and regional students.

3. School resourcing

- 3.1. Review the effectiveness and efficiency of the SRP design in relation to rural and regional schools, including the definition of 'rural' and 'regional' schools and other measures such as the introduction of a 'deemed' annual SRP over, for example, a three year cycle to reduce the impact of volatility of enrolments on staffing
- 3.2. Examine the current funding arrangements for rural and regional schools, including maintenance funding and the effectiveness of the current VSBA service delivery model for rural and regional schools
- 3.3. Consider whether the current Camps, Sports and Excursions (CSE) fund should be extended to include all students in rural and regional schools with indexation to reflect greater distance.

4. Student support

- 4.1. Develop a strong culture and clear practice of 'soft boundaries' in the delivery of rural and regional services and education provision, both across sectors (for example, health and justice) and across locations, to ensure the interests of every student is placed at the centre of service delivery.
- 4.2. Consider improved models of support for rural and regional schools to address student mental health as part of the response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, including consideration of the following:
 - 4.2.1. Expansion of mental health support services to primary schools
 - 4.2.2. Provision of trauma-informed training to all teachers in rural schools and regional schools where support services are difficult to access
- 4.3. Review and develop local plans for the provision of alternative settings in regional centres

- 4.4. Examine steps to increase access to support staff, in particular paediatricians/speech therapists, including the provision of facilities to enable the delivery of virtual support services
- 4.5. Consider the development of consistent access practices in special school enrolments in rural and regional special schools.

5. Inclusive communities

- 5.1. Consider further steps that can be taken by rural and regional schools and communities to strengthen the development of inclusive cultures for all students and staff
- 5.2. Develop common teaching and learning programs across clusters/networks of schools focused on Aboriginal knowledge, histories and cultures.

6. Curriculum provision

- 6.1. Examine how the provision of VCAL in rural and regional areas can be strengthened
- 6.2. Support and consider incentives for networks/clusters of secondary schools (all sectors) to develop timetables that enable delivery of VCE subjects across multiple schools
- 6.3. Review the design and delivery of virtual learning
- 6.4. Examine how access to existing digital platforms can be supported.

7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers, and support staff

- 7.1. Consider a range of incentives to attract high quality principals, teachers and support staff in order to provide the most appropriate locally-determined measures
- 7.2. Examine the steps that might be taken to increase the pool of available CRTs for rural and regional schools
- 7.3. Support the development by schools, in collaboration with local communities, of strong induction and welcome programs for potential or actual new appointments, including programs for partners/family members
- 7.4. Consider steps that can be taken to strengthen the support provided to new principals and teachers
- 7.5. Examine the feasibility of increasing the number of administration hubs for clusters/networks of rural and regional schools to reduce principal workload.

8. Professional development

- 8.1. Examine measures to strengthen the delivery of and access to professional learning for rural and regional staff, including access to VCAA virtual VCE Assessor Training and the delivery of Bastow-based programs
- 8.2. Review the role of SEILS/EILS/network chairs to ensure adequate support is available for collaborative professional development.

APPENDIX 1

THE EXPERT ADVISORY PANEL

The Panel was chaired by Dr David Howes and supported by 14 panel members comprising principals, students, academics and regional education experts, who all share a commitment to reducing barriers and improving learning outcomes and educational attainment for rural and regional students across Victoria.

David Howes, Chair Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students

Deputy Secretary, Schools and Regional Services DET

David commenced in his role as the Deputy Secretary of Schools and Regional Services, DET, in September 2019. David had been the Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) since July 2017 and undertook to chair this review in that capacity. He was previously VCAA Executive Director, Curriculum from 2008 to 2015. From April 2015 to June 2017 he was the Assistant Deputy Secretary, Schools, in the Early Childhood and School Education Group, DET and has recently been appointed as Deputy Secretary, Schools and Regional Services Group, DET.

David holds a BA (Hons), DipEd, MEd and PhD degrees from the University of Melbourne and an Executive Masters of Public Administration from Monash University. Part of his MEd course of study was completed at the Institute of Education, University of London, after he was awarded the John and Eric Smyth Travelling Scholarship from the University of Melbourne.

David has more than 30 years' experience in education as a teacher and educator in Australia and overseas, including the United Kingdom, the Middle East and Cambodia, where he served as an adviser to the Royal Government of Cambodia from 2003 to 2006 as part of a major reform of school education.

Bruce Armstrong

Special Advisor Teaching and Learning DET

Bruce is a professional executive with unique experience gained over 33 years in roles across all levels of the Victorian public education system. He brings deep expertise that enables him to offer invaluable insights into contemporary educational theory and practice.

Bruce has previously held roles as Deputy Secretary, Regional Services Group, DET and was the inaugural Director of the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership.

Lionel Bamblett

General Manager, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

A Wiradjuri/Yorta Yorta/Bangerang man, Lionel has been involved in Koorie education for over 30 years and was appointed the first General Manager of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated in 1985. Lionel has provided advice to successive governments in Victoria on measures to improve education and training opportunities for Koorie people in Victoria, and has played a prominent role in promoting indigenous education and training issues at a local, state and national level. He was a member of the National Aboriginal Reference Group, which played a key role in the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) in 1989, which is still current today. Lionel has seen VAEAI established as the peak body for Koorie education and training in Victoria, and as an equal partner with the Victorian Government.

Phil Brown

Executive Officer, Country Education Partnership

Phil has had extensive involvement within education spanning over 35 years across all Australian states, but predominantly within Victoria, as well as across a range of education settings and sectors including schools, TAFE and University.

His current role as Executive Officer of the Country Education Partnership has seen him focused on enhancing learning within rural and remote communities and involves advocating for rural and remote education communities; facilitating a range of initiatives that enhance education provision; building the capacity of rural and remote communities to provide quality and equitable education for their young people; and increasing the aspirations of rural young people.

Karen Cain*CEO Latrobe Valley Authority*

Karen has senior experience working across government, leading strategic innovation and developing and implementing policy in the public sector. Karen's direct work with families and the community as a principal in government schools and as regional director in regional areas has led to a strong understanding and commitment to public sector practice that involves and benefits those that it serves. She is Chief Executive Officer at the Latrobe Valley Authority and was awarded the Institute for Public Administration Australia Victorian Top 50 Public Sector Women Award in 2018. For the past 24 years, she has owned and operated a commercial beef farm with her husband at Boolarra South in South Gippsland Victoria.

April Clarke*Marrung Facilitator, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated*

April is a Gunditjmara woman with extensive experience working in Aboriginal Affairs across a wide range of sectors including education, justice, children's services, and health. April has spent her whole working life creating and building programs that deliver change, promote healing and providing opportunities for Aboriginal people to improve their life circumstances and their social and emotional wellbeing. April currently works with VAEAI as the Marrung Community Engagement Team Leader.

Joe Collins*University Student and Former Rural Youth Ambassador*

Joe is from Woomelang in the north-west of Victoria, graduating from Tyrrell College in 2017. He is currently at university studying a Bachelor of Agriculture and Technology through Latrobe and Melbourne Polytechnic. Joe was a former Rural Youth Ambassador and now sits as a committee member for the Country Education Partnership. Joe is very passionate about ensuring the future generations of rural and remote children have the exact, if not better, quality of education and opportunities as those from metropolitan backgrounds.

Di Craig*Principal (retired), Principal of the Year 2017*

As a classroom teacher and primary school principal for 33 years primarily in the Bendigo region, Di's focus has always been on 'every opportunity for every student'. Overcoming the barriers and having high expectations for all, were key to her principal experiences. Di has had experience as an International Teaching Fellow teaching in Colorado, USA and in 2017 was the VEEA Primary Principal of the year recipient. Di is currently involved in improvement initiatives and practice in schools.

Marino D'Ortenzio*Vice President (Secondary) Australian Education Union Victoria*

Marino D'Ortenzio is vice president of the Australian Education Union (Secondary sector), Victorian Branch, and works primarily in the schools sectors. He has worked in public schools in the west and north of Melbourne since 2002 in various roles including student management and as program manager for VCAL. Immediately prior to his role at the union, he was an assistant principal at Epping Secondary College with responsibility for the senior school.

Kayla Fisher*Year 11 student Wangaratta High School*

Kayla is 16 years old and a Year 11 Prefect at Wangaratta High School. She aspires to work in a non-profit organisation in Cambodia, working with children. Kayla loves spending time with her people, eating food, playing music and dancing.

Anita Forsyth*Senior Lecturer, Monash University*

Anita Forsyth began her career as a Victorian secondary teacher before joining the Faculty of Education, Monash University as a teacher educator. She is currently a senior lecturer in the faculty and continues to lead and teach a number of units in the undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs. Anita has held a number of leadership roles, including as the Professional Experience Director and the Director of the Monash University School Review Group. Anita is currently the Chair of the VCAA VCE Economics Examination Setting Panel and Chief Assessor, positions she has held for the past 20 years. Anita is an

accredited Victorian Department of Education school reviewer and leads the Monash University team of 18 reviewers.

Jen Jackson

Education Policy Lead, Mitchell Institute

Jen's key interests are education system improvement and the research–policy interface. Jen has led strategic system policy teams at the Victorian DET and conducted research on education system performance at Victoria University, the University of Melbourne, and the Australian Council for Educational Research. She has a particular interest in early childhood education and care, having worked in early childhood policy and regulation and has completed her PhD on early childhood workforce development.

Kristy Lillyst

Toorong Marnong Project Officer, Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated

Kristy is a proud Gunditjmara woman from the Western Districts of Victoria. She has more than 20 years experience in education, working within the catholic, government and tertiary sectors. Her key work focus is in service provision, with a major focus on Koorie education and student outcomes. Kristy currently works with VAEAI under Toorong Marnong, an Accord between VAEAI and the Victorian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (VCCC), which aims to improve outcomes for Koorie learners and communities.

Rebecca McKenzie

Teacher Lavers Hill K-12 College, Former Rural Youth Ambassador

Rebecca is a young educator based in the Otways region of Victoria. Rebecca has been passionate about promoting rural and regional education since high school, during which time she was a member of the inaugural Rural Youth Ambassador program and other rural youth advocacy programs. Rebecca is currently a kindergarten director, primary school teacher and wellbeing co-ordinator within her school.

Dale Pearce

Principal, Bendigo Senior Secondary College

Dale is the Principal of Bendigo Senior Secondary College and has spent his career in a range of schools across regional Victoria. He is the sponsor of the Victorian Virtual Learning Network and a collaborative language program, which collectively provides support to around 70 schools across the state. He has previously been a member of the VCAA Board and Chair of its Senior Secondary Curriculum and Assessment Committee.

Kylie Warne

Chair, Barwon Regional Partnership

A passionate advocate for regional prosperity, Kylie is Chair of the Barwon Regional Partnership, providing strategic budget, policy and service delivery advice to the Victorian Government on behalf of the community. She is a Fellow of the Australian Marketing Institute, a member of the Regional Development Advisory Committee, Great Ocean Road Coast Committee, the Victorian Chamber of Commerce's Executive Council and is the longest-serving President of the Geelong Chamber of Commerce.

CONSULTATION LIST

The Expert Advisory Panel held ten consultations across Victoria, with a total of 179 participants and also received 37 written submissions. The schools represented throughout the consultation process are outlined below:

Victorian schools and organisations represented at the EAP consultation sessions
Apollo Bay P-12
Ararat College
Ararat Secondary College
Ballarat City Council
Barwon Heads Primary School
Benalla P-12 College
Bendigo Senior Secondary College
Bendigo South East College
Birchip P-12 College
Brauer College
Campbells Creek Primary School
Cathedral College
Catholic Education Sandhurst
Cobram Secondary College
Colac Primary School
Colbinabbin Primary School
Department of Education and Training
Department of Health and Human Services
Dimboola Memorial Secondary College
Drouin Secondary College
Eaglehawk Secondary College
Federation University
G21 Geelong Region Alliance
Gippsland East Local Learning & Employment Network
Goldfields Local Learning & Employment Network
Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Co-operative
Highlands Local Learning & Employment Network
Horsham College
Irymple P-10 College
Irymple Primary School
Kennington Primary School
Kyneton Secondary College
La Trobe University
Lavers Hills P-12
Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups
Longerenong Agricultural College

Lowanna College
Mallacoota P-12
Manangatang P-12 College
Maryborough Education Centre
Mildura Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group
Mildura Rural City Council
Mildura Senior College
Mildura Specialist School
Mount Clear College
Murrayville College
Murtoa College
Nelson Park School
NMV Regional Mallee Area
North East Local Learning & Employment Network
North East Tracks Local Learning & Employment Network
Northeast Health Wangaratta
Northern Mallee Local Learning & Employment Network
Orbost Secondary College
Ouyen College
Principals' Association of Specialist Schools Victoria
Red Cliffs Secondary College
Regional Development Victoria
Sale College
South West Local Learning & Employment Network
South West TAFE
St Arnaud Secondary College
SuniTAFE
Swan Hill College
Swifts Creek P-12
TAFE Gippsland
Teesdale Primary School
The Centre, Wangaratta
Timboon College
Trafalgar High School
Traralgon Secondary College
Victoria Police
Wangaratta High School
Warracknabeal Secondary College
Warrnambool East Primary School
Warrnambool West Primary School
Wedderburn College

Wimmera Southern Mallee Local Learning & Employment Network
Wodonga Senior Secondary/Wodonga Middle Years College
Wodonga TAFE
Woolsthorpe Primary School
Yarram Secondary College
Yarrawonga P-12
Yinnar Primary School
Yuille Park P-8 Community College

APPENDIX 2

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES SUPPORTING RURAL AND REGIONAL STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

Successive Victorian governments, like many others around Australia and internationally, have trialled a range of strategies designed to improve outcomes for students in rural and regional schools across Victoria. Many of these have been highlighted through the report. Further details on current Victorian Government initiatives are provided below:

In Victoria, the Student Resource Package (SRP) school funding formula is used to direct additional assistance to rural and regional schools through specific loadings that are based on school size and location. The Victorian Government boosted funding for rural and regional schools through the 2014 SRP reforms, which saw rural and regional schools receive double the per student funding increase that schools in metropolitan Melbourne did, in acknowledgement of the additional barriers faced by these students.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/management/finance/pages/srp.aspx>

Virtual learning allows students to interact and learn with others outside of their classroom and school using virtual conferencing tools. The Victorian government currently funds virtual learning platforms and resources so students can access online subjects including languages and VCE subjects such as the Victorian School of Languages, the Victorian Virtual Learning Network and Emerging Sciences Victoria.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/digital/Pages/virtual.aspx>

Victorian government strategies to improve digital learning access have included a funding increase for the Virtual School Victoria to enable rural and regional students to undertake a broader range of VCE subjects online and boosting the internet bandwidth and digital connectivity for students in 347 small rural and regional Victorian government schools. <https://www.distance.vic.edu.au>

The Virtual EAL New Arrivals Program has also had specific targeting to remote rural areas to support newly arrived students in these areas with limited or no English language skills.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/diversity/eal/Pages/ealvirtual.aspx>

The Victorian Government currently invests in a number of initiatives designed to attract, retain and develop high quality teachers and leaders to rural and remote schools, including offering incentives valued at up to \$11,000 to support eligible Victorian schools to attract new graduates to hard-to-staff positions in rural and regional areas. Additional financial incentives are available for pre-service teachers to complete practicums in rural and regional Victoria.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/profdev/Pages/scholarship.aspx>

The Victorian Government currently funds three programs, which attract talented individuals to teach at hard-to-staff schools in rural and regional areas through employment-based pathways such as the *Teach For Australia* and *M Teach Internship* and La Trobe's *NEXUS* program.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/targeted-initiative-to-attract-more-teachers.aspx>

School leaders in rural and regional areas in Victoria are currently supported by leadership professional learning opportunities provided through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership. Bastow offers financial support to teaching principals as well as scholarships for study, including the Master of Education (Rural Leadership and Management) program. Bastow also provides a number of courses online or in regional areas that provide easier access to professional learning for teachers and school leaders in rural and regional areas.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/profdev/Pages/institutes.aspx>

The Victorian Government has encouraged collaborative practices in rural and regional areas through different initiatives including offering a *VCE Collaboration Fund* to provide funding for schools across Victoria to form partnerships that broaden current VCE subject offerings for rural and regional students and

supporting the *Country Education Partnership* to develop and coordinate *Rural District Learning Alliances*, which are partnerships between clusters of schools in rural and regional communities to drive improvements in teaching and learning.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/vcecollaborationfund.aspx>

The Victorian Government recognises that rural and regional communities face local challenges, which require a local approach and local solutions. There are a multitude of different place-based project and programs that the Victorian Government funds to improve education outcomes for rural and regional communities at a local level. Some examples of these include projects funded through the Regional Partnerships and Place-Based Education Plans.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/educationplans.aspx>

<https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/regional-partnerships>

The School Bus Program provides travel at no cost to eligible government and non-government students living in rural and regional Victoria. In some locations in rural and regional Victoria where students are unable to access free school buses, schools assist eligible parents/carers to access funding to help with the costs of student travel to and from school.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/transport/Pages/schoolbus.aspx>

REFERENCES

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014), *Aspiring Learners, Thriving Communities – a long-term approach to improving rural and regional learning outcomes*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

Clarke, K and Savage, G. (2014), *Latrobe University's School Partnership Program. Stage 2 Evaluation: A report prepared by the Education Policy & Leadership and the Centre for Evaluation, University of Melbourne*. University of Melbourne, Melbourne p. 4.

Department of Education and Training (2019), *Transforming Career Education*. Retrieved from URL: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/transforming-career.aspx>

Halsey, Dr. J. (2018), *The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, Australian Government, Flinders University, Canberra.

Lamb, S., Glover, S. & Walstab, A. (2014), *Educational Disadvantage and Regional and Rural Schools*, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

Queensland Department of Education and Training (2017), *Advancing rural and remote education in Queensland state schools*, Queensland Government, Brisbane.

Country Education Partnership (2019), *Rural Inspire*. Retrieved from URL: <http://www.ruralinspire.org/>

Victorian Auditor-General's Office (2014), *Access to Education for Rural Students – The Victorian Auditor-General's Report*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

Victorian Auditor-General's Office (June 2019), *Child and Youth Mental Health*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.