

EXPERT ADVISORY PANEL FOR RURAL AND REGIONAL STUDENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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On 17 June 2019 the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, the Hon. James Merlino MP, established an 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 with school leaders from Special Schools in rural and regional Victoria.

These consultation forums and 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

1. 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, population 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.
2. 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.
3. 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 identified what they identify as the essential elements to delivering an inspiring educational environment for students, staff and communities in rural and regional Victoria that encourages 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. Provision and collaboration
7. Attraction and retention of principals, teachers and support staff
8. Professional development.



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 both a Rural Education Consultative Group and a Regional Education Consultative Group to support the effective implementation of the strategic plan.

Government Response

The Government supports this recommendation. We will develop the plan and establish both consultative groups to assist with its development and implementation.

2. Wide aspirations, high expectations and Informed choices

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 excellent local employer/industry links with schools programs 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.

Government Response

The Government supports this recommendation. Immediate actions include funding to help rural and regional students attend VCE revision lectures in Melbourne, and abolishing enrolment fees for Virtual School Victoria. We will consider other ways to ensure students, their families and teachers have access to resources and programs that will boost aspiration and achievement.

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 more students in rural and regional schools with indexation to reflect greater distance.

Government Response

The Government supports these recommendations in-principle and will examine other options. In the meantime, every Victorian government school is receiving a share of \$515 million in the single largest boost to school maintenance ever undertaken in the State.

4. Student Support

- 4.1. Develop a strong culture and clear practice of "soft boundaries" in the delivery of rural and regions 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.

4.1. Government Response

The Government supports this recommendation. The Government will identify better ways of ensuring area and region boundaries do not impede support provision for regional and rural students.

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.

4.2. Government Response

The Government supports these recommendations in-principle and will consider them in conjunction with the findings of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

4.3. Review and develop local plans for the provision of alternative settings in regional centres.

4.3. Government Response

The Government supports this recommendation in-principle. We will seek further advice regarding its possible implementation.

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.

4.4. Government Response

The Government accepts this recommendation in-principle. Recruitment and retention of school health and wellbeing staff and allied health workers is a constant challenge in regional and rural areas. We will examine further ways of taking action on this recommendation.

4.5. Consider the development of consistent access practices in special school enrolments in rural and regional special schools.

4.5. Government Response

The Government accepts this recommendation and will seek advice regarding implementation from 2021.



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.

Government Response

The Government supports these recommendations and will consider what more can be done to promote inclusive cultures across all schools. The Government has tasked the Koorie Outcomes Division within DET to work with VAEAI to develop options to address these 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.

Government Response

The Government supports these recommendations. Elements of our initial additional investment of \$82.8 million will be directed towards improving outreach and virtual programs for students, professional development for teachers and school leaders, as well as improved internet speeds for schools.



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 the number of administration hubs for clusters/ networks of rural and regional schools to reduce principal workload.

Government Response

The Government supports these recommendations. A strong, engaged and supported teaching workforce are a critical element of ensuring our regional and rural schools and students succeed. Part of our initial investment of \$82.8 million in additional funding will help ensure the best and brightest teachers can build their careers in regional and rural Victoria.

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.

Government Response

The Government supports these recommendations. The Department of Education and Training will incorporate these recommendations in its annual forward plan for professional development.



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