



THE LEADING VOICE *on* RURAL EDUCATION

**RURAL AND REMOTE CLUSTER
AND
PARTNERSHIPS**

Case Study : Myrtleford Learning Cluster

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INTRODUCTION

Myrtleford is located on the North East of Victoria and is the gateway to the popular High Country and the towns of Bright and Harrietville.

The Myrtleford District has a population of 3,800 with farming, timber, tourism, health services and education the main industries.

The township of Myrtleford is located on the banks of the Ovens River situated approximately 50 km east of Wangaratta, and on the highway to Bright.

It was known as one of the largest producer of hops that supplied the tobacco industry, but with changes to government policy a few years ago, many of these farms are not in existence. The impact of the changes in the tobacco industry was significant initially with the unemployment rate in Myrtleford being one of the highest in the nation.

The community has a rich history in the Italian community, with many Italian families settling within the community to establish tobacco, hop and general farming enterprises.

Over recent times, the Myrtleford community has re-ignited itself with a strong wine, horticulture and tourism focus now being the major industries within the community.

The Nathalia community has seen a steady change in its demographics over recent times, with an increasing number transient families moving into the area and an increasing unemployment rate.

Myrtleford Learning Cluster

The Myrtleford Learning Cluster is serviced by a number of education organisations that provide learning programs for the community:

- Marian Secondary College;
- Myrtleford College;
- St Marys Primary School;
- Myrtleford Early Years Centre.

The Myrtleford Learning Cluster services a geographic radius of approximately 100 kms where the large percentage of students of the education community come from.

A significant number of students who attend the schools within Myrtleford travel into Myrtleford by school bus.

The four education settings that comprise the Myrtleford Learning Cluster are located within an “education precinct” where the four school sites are within walking distance from one another and the pre school and early years services being close by also. The Barmah Pre School is located a short 15 minute drive away.

The schools within the Myrtleford Learning Cluster have a total of 702 students from Foundation to Year 12 - 2017 data.

One of the challenges facing the education settings within Myrtleford is that a number of secondary age young people attend schooling in a regional centre around 30 minutes bus travel away - hence the desire of the schools (especially secondary schools) within Myrtleford to work collaboratively to provide a comprehensive education program.

The key reason highlighted by these young people in attending school outside their community is that they can't get the learning programs they would like to have in Myrtleford.

The two secondary colleges within Myrtleford have worked together for some time to provide post compulsory learning, but during 2017 and 2018, with the support of Country Education Partnership, have begun building on this arrangement to strengthen the partnership to enhance learning opportunities for the young people of Myrtleford.

	2011	2018	Percentage Difference
Primary School Students	381	377	-0.01%
Secondary College Students	318	325	+2%

In 2018, the Myrtleford education community recorded an Index of Community Socio Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of 995 which is slightly lower than the ICSEA of 2010 – below the national average. A deeper look at their figures indicates that 29% of families within the Myrtleford community are located within the “bottom quarter” of family background indicators – above the national average of 25% .





CURRENT AREAS OF WORK

The Myrtleford Learning Cluster has been involved in the development and facilitation of a number of education initiatives directed at achieving the Learning Clusters overall vision of improving learning opportunities for young people within their community, and generate a pride within the broader community that a quality education can be provided locally, thus reducing the number of young people who leave the community for their education.

Many of these have already had an impact on attracting a number of young people back to Myrtleford to undertake their studies, and as a result the performance of the schools across many of the measurement tools has improved.

Not only has the Clusters had an impact on student learning, it has also built the capacity of teachers across the Learning Cluster.

Post Compulsory Provision:

While the two secondary colleges within the Myrtleford area have worked together in providing a joint VCE program, built predominantly on the wish of young people within the community to have a breadth of learning opportunities.

Over the past couple of years, the two colleges have strengthened their alliance to ensure that not only a broader choice of VCE units are provided for students of Myrtleford, it has also meant that the numbers of students required to undertake Distance Education has diminished.

In addition, the VCE staff have also strengthened their relationship across the two schools, with staff coming together on a regular basis to moderate, share resources, and contribute to each others subject development.

Myrtleford Performing Arts

A key area of learning focus for the Myrtleford Learning community has been the area of The Arts.

With a strong community involvement in the arts, along with the schools finding it difficult to find staff to teach in these areas, the cluster came together to put together a collaborative arts program for all schools to be involved.

The exciting result of this partnership was the gaining of resources to build a "Performing Arts Centre" within Myrtleford that not only is utilised by the secondary college for their arts programs, but also the primary schools and the pre school.

In addition, the community utilises this great facility for a range of community based activities.

Early Years Provision:

The Myrtleford Learning Cluster in the past two years has developed a strong focus on early years learning.

Focused on 0 to 8 years, the primary schools and early years program have come together to develop a more co-ordinate approach to learning across these years, and also ensure that children, once they leave pre school are ready for the school environment.

To assist in the capacity building staff across the three education organisations, a small group of educators were involved in the Bastow facilitate Early Years program which operates over a number of months. Their involvement within this professional development program has seen a greater collaboration occur across the education settings, and also a more co-ordinated approach to the transition from early years to school.

While the schools were keen to involve all their early years educators, due to the Bastow funding policy within this program, only the government schools could gain full funding for the project, and the Catholic school was required to pay full rates - this meant that only one staff member from the catholic school was able to attend..



Staff Networks;

At the beginning of 2018, a number of staff from the Myrtleford Learning Cluster were involved in a workshop facilitated by Marie Claire Bretherton from the UK, where she shared her experiences as a Head Teacher of the value of working collaboratively.

As a result of this workshop, the schools within Myrtleford have developed a number of teacher networks aimed at building their capacity and to strengthen peer to peer support and review.

Within the primary schools, year level networks have been formed to support staff in observing each others classes, share what they saw, and be involved in providing feedback to each other as a key strategy in improving teaching and learning.

Within the secondary area, staff have come together in curriculum areas with an initial focus on development of curriculum and also moderating student work.



ENHANCED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES:

- Today, student had a far greater breadth of VCE subjects to choose from, mainly driven by the sharing of staff across the two schools. In practice this means that they have around 23 VCE Unit 3 and 4 sequences to choose from, whereas if they remained as individual schools, this would more likely be about 15 VCE Unit 3 and 4 sequences.
- At a VET level, the same approach has occurred, except with the addition of the Bright College, a further half an hour away. A total of 5 VET programs are offered within the local community through the sharing of resources and teacher expertise - without this partnerships students would be required to travel into Wangaratta a 30 minute drive away.
- Nathalia Learning Community has established collaborative approaches focused on improving literacy learning - such an approach as embraced the whole community in supporting literacy especially focused on the early years of a students life.



EDUCATION LEADERSHIP:

- The principals of the Myrtleford Learning Cluster meet on a regular basis to provide a strong leadership role in supporting and ongoing developing the partnership.
- At a specific area, middle leaders are involved in working together in developing and providing learning for their students. This is especially the case within the VCE and Early Years area.



WORKFORCE UTILISATION:

- VCE staff share their expertise across the two secondary colleges to deliver VCE units, with the majority of them teaching classes where there students from both schools involved.
- Staff with expertise within VET related areas are shared across the schools, plus Bright College, to provide local provision of vocational programs. Engineering, hospitality, sport and recreation are three of the programs that local staff provided learning for students from the three schools.
- There is a strong early years educators network that operates within the cluster providing a collaborative approach to the provision of learning from 0 through to 8 years.
- The primary school staff from the schools are involved in professional learning communities focused on their specific year levels.
- The secondary college educators are involved in professional learning communities focused on curriculum areas with a focus on curriculum development, moderation and professional support.

The Myrtleford Learning Cluster would like to engage staff on a partnership level, but due to the human resource management issues that arise with cross sector employment this has proven to be very difficult.

For example, the cluster would like to engage a performing arts teachers between them.



GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS:

- The two secondary colleges within the Cluster have developed a signed agreement for the joint delivery of VCE units across the two schools - providing a governance and funding agreement to support the program.
- The Myrtleford Education Cluster has also developed a governance approach to the ongoing management, operation and development of the Myrtleford Performing Arts Centre.