

EDUCATION IN RURAL VICTORIA

"A Case for Action"



**COUNTRY
EDUCATION
PARTNERSHIP**



"A leading voice on rural education"

INTRODUCTION

“Rural and Remote Education - A Case for Action” outlines the critical need for a systemic overhaul of rural and remote education in Victoria.

The paper implores government and all relevant authorities to implement a Blueprint for Victoria’s country education, as a genuine step toward ensuring equitable learning for the more than 50,000 young people who currently attend rural and remote schools and learning institutions across the state.

In 2018, the Commonwealth Government released the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education; a study undertaken by Emeritus Professor Dr John Halsey (The Halsey Report).

The Halsey Report’s core message was abundantly clear - that country pupils had;

“lagged behind urban students for decades”.

And that;

“the key challenge for rural and remote education was ensuring every young person had access to quality learning and schooling opportunities”.

Statistics within the Report, at both a national and state level, clearly defined the significant gap in achievement and opportunities for young people within rural and remote communities compared to their urban peers.

The Country Education Partnership (CEP) affirms the Report’s findings.

We assert that just some of the main challenges faced by country students include:

- ◆ the provision of flexible and broad quality learning;
- ◆ the recruitment and retention of educators and education leaders;
- ◆ raising the aspirations of rural and remote young people and enhancing their transition from school to their desired future.

Concerningly, the areas highlighted within the Commonwealth Review were equally emphasized in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission National Report, published all the way back in 1993. And again, within the Victorian context, these same challenges were identified in an Auditor General’s Report, released in 2014.

Considering the lack of response and progress to address and improve these key concerns, CEP and its rural and remote communities feel forgotten.

It is our view that while consecutive state governments have undertaken substantial work to develop Rural Education Frameworks, there has been minimal resourcing and few specific initiatives to support actual change.

Furthermore, we draw attention to the lack of consistency in the implementation of government policy in support of rural and remote education communities. For example, currently within one part of Victoria, country schools have been encouraged to utilize a “shared principal” in a bid to remain viable - but in another part of the state, similar schools in a very similar situation have been “destaffed”.

In view of this information, CEP believes there is now sufficient evidence to suggest Victoria’s rural and remote education has become an equity crisis for government and education sectors.

Now is the time for action.

Now is the time to step up the pace and ensure the implementation of tangible measures to enhance learning opportunities and lift education outcomes in country Victoria.

Context

Over many years, CEP has undertaken extensive research around rural and remote education, including work with interstate and international education communities. This research has considered the future strategies required to reduce the gap in performance and opportunities currently experienced by young people living rurally.

Through this research, CEP has found many positive aspects of country education. In various instances, these education communities have performed exceptionally across the measurement tools used by education sectors and governments. They’ve also grown people who are key leaders in a wide range of positions and industries across many countries.

However, our research has overwhelmingly revealed the lack of parity within learning provision and outcomes.

We believe this paper (*Rural and Remote Education – A Case for Action*) together with its attached Background Paper and Summary Document, provide a strong base upon which the state government and education sectors can work with key stakeholders to establish and commit to a Blueprint for Rural Education in Victoria.

CEP strongly proposes that any such Blueprint be developed based on the key convictions outlined within the aforementioned Halsey Report.

Such as:

- ◆ That a focus on options to re-think and reframe education in rural and remote areas is likely to be more productive than simply concentrating on “the problems”;

- ◆ That student achievement and beyond-school opportunities are shaped by a diverse blend of in-school, community and home factors, as well as interactions between them;
- ◆ That government and education department/sector policy-settings are very significant in developing possibilities for change, together with the work of parents and communities;
- ◆ That improvement in education is achieved by exploring how existing resources can be used more effectively, as well as strategically allocating more.

CEP believes it is an ideal time for the creation of a responsive and sustainable “Rural Blueprint for Action” that will set-out clear strategies and measures for the provision of quality and consistent education for all rural and remote communities.

It believes that such a Blueprint needs to encompass all levels of education and all education sectors – from our pre-school toddlers right through to our young adults transitioning into the workforce.

CEP’s ambition is to ensure that young people “in the bush” gain equitable access to the level of education opportunities that their urban peers often take for granted.

The facts, the issues and the needs are clear.

IT IS TIME FOR ACTION.

As the leading voice for rural and remote education, we are eager to work alongside any government in the development of this Blueprint.

We are equally committed to work with all education sectors, and in partnership with rural and remote education communities, in the subsequent implementation of specific initiatives to make this Blueprint a genuine success.

The following Background Paper provides, in greater detail, the opportunities and challenges CEP believes are key to addressing the current inequity in Victoria’s country education.



Mike Stephens

Chair



BUILDING ON THE STRENGTHS OF RURAL EDUCATION

The positive forces for change that exist in regional, rural and remote education need to be emphasised prior to a discussion of the challenges and issues facing them.

It is important that we do not approach the need for support for regional, rural and remote education communities with a “deficit mindset” or through a “deficit model”, but rather one which builds on the already positive elements that these communities provide for their students.

The key issue is EQUITY and the right of all children to access the same opportunities for success in life. Positive forces are:

- ◆ There are some regional, rural and remote communities where children and young people gain educational outcomes well above state average, especially where the communities work in strong partnership with their education settings and education settings work collaboratively.
- ◆ Regional, rural and remote communities are resourceful and have taken steps over many years to ensure that young people have access to enhanced opportunities e.g.: school clusters and partnerships, use of technology, school re-organizations.
- ◆ The caring and personalized approach to education in many of our rural schools helps to build strong relationships and accommodates individual learning needs.

- ◆ The high-quality community involvement and support provided in many small towns, including greater involvement in extra-curricular and community activities, helps to build school-community partnerships. This can lead to higher outcomes with young people feeling a sense of belonging.
- ◆ Students often mix with a range of ages and backgrounds, which supports the growth of tolerance and resilience, and the ability to get along with a wider range of demographics.
- ◆ Young people in regional, rural and remote areas often take on leadership roles at an earlier age than their metropolitan peers.
- ◆ Rural Schools (especially smaller schools) act as a “leadership incubator”, where the Principal must exercise skills as an educational, community and resource manager on a daily basis. This is unique and largely under-valued within education sectors.
- ◆ Rural Schools provide a geographical collegiality of practice that accepts and reinforces the communities of practice model and its collaborative processes.
- ◆ Rural Education communities have exemplified the principle of “*local solutions for local problems*” as cultural practices of operation.



THE NEED FOR ACTION

There has been much research undertaken across Australia and within many education jurisdictions globally in relation to rural and remote education provision.

The challenges that are highlighted within this research cover many specific areas that directly affect the learning opportunities and education outcomes in country Victoria.

Student performance

The disadvantage experienced by students in rural and remote communities begins in early childhood. In their first year of formal full-time schooling, children in remote communities are almost *three times* more likely to be developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains of the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), compared to children living in major cities. Of the 40 Local Government areas across Victoria where children are more highly represented on this indicator, the large majority of these are in regional and rural Victoria.

NAPLAN results and two international tests of schools (the PISA and TIMSS) highlight that performance by rural and remote students is lower than their urban peers.

Successful completion of Year 12 or equivalent (by the age of 19), follows a similar pattern to that of the NAPLAN, PISA and TIMSS tests.

The transition of country students to university, and the proportion of people aged 23 to 34 years with a Bachelor Degree or above, is well below the rate of urban students. Significantly, this trend away from higher education escalates with increased remoteness.

For vocational education and training, non-metropolitan participation rates are comparable with urban rates, as well as completion rates for Certificate-level courses. However, at the Diploma level once again there is a clear deficit involving rural and remote young people.

It can not be understated that country students at or near the stage of transitioning from school to employment, training or further study are routinely confronted with issues and costs that simply do not apply to their urban counterparts.

Curriculum Options

The provision of a breadth of curriculum for young people within rural and remote communities is becoming more difficult. Many communities are experiencing declining enrolments. It then goes hand-in-hand that the resources available to those schools become diminished.

With declining enrolments and decreased resources, access to basic programs of extra-curricula is difficult to provide, such as team sports, camps and excursions.

There is little opportunity for access to extension learning for those students within country communities who need or would like it (e.g. talented young people).

If a rural or remote school is unable to provide the desired learning for a student (or students), often the only option is to access virtual learning provision (online), or to leave the local school and access education within a larger population centre.

The use of virtual learning has not been highly promoted by the schools nor is it an expectation of “the system”. The resources support for the hardware, connectivity and teacher training has been patchy and, as a consequence, students are often told to choose another subject.

Access to Quality Support Services

Wellbeing and intervention support services are extremely difficult to access in the majority of country communities in Victoria. The regionalization of these services has forced rural communities to travel long distances in order to gain access or, alternatively, they rely on a periodic visiting program, which is often unreliable.

Recruitment and retention of these specialist staff is a major concern and a barrier to access and equity of such services for rural and remote young people.

Quality Teaching and Education Leadership

Supporting students in rural schools requires access to high-quality and appropriately qualified educators. The research shows:

- ◆ Rural education organizations find it harder to recruit and retain quality teachers and education leaders, and this is a growing area of concern. This is especially the case within curriculum areas, such as science, maths, languages, and arts;
- ◆ Graduate educators recruited to rural and remote communities report a level of uncertainty and isolation;
- ◆ Many rural educators (especially within the secondary sector) are required to teach outside their curriculum area of expertise;
- ◆ Isolation is a challenge for rural and remote educators and education leaders, especially in accessing quality professional development and professional networks;
- ◆ A decreasing number of educators are applying for principal roles within rural and remote education communities.

Education Organization

Regional, rural and remote schools are currently, and in the past, have led the way with attempts to be efficient and expand education provision through partnerships, clusters and online provision.

However, with increased challenges of demographic and geographic isolation, as well as a sense of ‘competition’ due to policies of autonomy from education sectors, we have seen a substantial decrease in partnerships between schools.

Resource support specifically to address rurality has not, and cannot alone, overcome these structural funding inequalities in a modern rural education setting.

EVIDENCE OF WHAT WORKS

The proposed actions in this paper are based on national and international evidence of ‘what works’ in rural and remote schools. They recognise the differences, needs and challenges of rural education and provide the flexibility and support required to allow the delivery of local solutions for local problems. They aim to unlock potential and raise engagement, performance, and aspirations.

Evidence indicates forcing rural education into the same ‘metropolitan approach’ has created many of the inequalities we see.

This means focusing on areas such as:

◆ Accessible and quality early childhood learning and development.

Positive experiences in the early years provides a critical base from which children build and then participate within education throughout their life. This is especially the case for those children from vulnerable backgrounds and locations.

Quality and accessible early-years education, which fully engages young people and their families, builds capacity through their formative years. It is a critical investment that is ‘repaid’ time and again later in life, if we get it right from the start.

◆ Providing students with access to a broad and quality curriculum.

Children and young people within rural and remote communities should be provided with the same broad and rigorous learning as their urban peers, including breadth of curriculum offerings, extension opportunities, vocational education and extensive post-compulsory options.

Supporting locally-determined partnerships, within identified geographic locations (such as clusters and federations) has proven key to this. It has resulted in enhanced learning opportunities for students, as well as improved education outcomes, in many instances.

The enhancement of learning opportunities has been further strengthened in those partnerships where communication technology has been effectively used through blended learning.

Local Solutions to Local Challenges

◆ Access to Quality Education, Leadership and Workforce.

It is essential that there is genuine recognition of the diversity of contexts, challenges and opportunities for educators living and working in rural and remote settings. This is especially important with reference to the way in which education professionals are prepared for and supported in such appointments.

Establishing ways to attract and retain experienced early years educators, school teachers, education leaders and allied health staff must be an absolute priority.

Partnerships that have been forged between teacher education universities and rural and remote schools; with education leadership organisations who have a strong focus on being responsive to rural and remote needs; and local partnerships with health settings have provided great platforms upon which recruitment and retention can be provided.

◆ Enhancing Youth Aspirations

To enhance aspirations among our rural and remote young people we must better emphasise the opportunities available to them.

Students who are fully aware of all pathways to further education and training has a direct impact on their aspirations and education outcomes.

The Rural Inspire initiative, co-ordinated by CEP, was highlighted in the Halsey Report (2018) as ‘best practice’ within this context.

The Review recommended the work of Rural Inspire be expanded.

◆ Education Organisation and Structures

Rural communities who are encouraged and empowered to explore innovative approaches to structure and organisation have developed creative education provision approaches. In the past this has produced outstanding outcomes with programs such as MARC/MACC services, shared specialists, collaborative post-compulsory provision, and the use of ‘communication technology’.

The key to this support has a strong evidence-base in collaborative autonomy. This is one specific action that needs incentives and support.

Collaborative Autonomy:

Education organisations working together with common aims under a common banner while retaining their uniqueness.

IT IS NOW TIME TO STEP UP THE PACE

Vibrant and productive rural communities are integral to our state's sustainability and prosperity.

Education and Training play a critical role in building the social fabric of these communities, and also builds social capital for economic prosperity.

Key Principles

The Country Education Partnership proposes formation of a "Rural Blueprint for Action" that is centred on a set of key principles that include:

◆ **Equity and Access**

Ensuring that children and young people have access to an equitable and high-quality education, regardless of where they live.

◆ **Empowerment, Ownership, Evidence Based Local Solutions**

Rural education communities work best when they are empowered and incentivised to build on their successful, existing collaborative partnerships; partnerships that share resources; and undertake evidence-based actions.

"Local Solutions to Local Problems".

◆ **Creativity, Flexibility and Aspirations**

Encouragement of innovative thinking and approaches with an emphasis on specific initiatives that directly promote sustainable change and lift the aspirations of young people.

A recognition of the high degree of variability and diversity that exists in rural and remote areas, thus the need for flexibility.

◆ **Community Partnerships and Participation**

An acknowledgement that parents, young people, education organisations, and the wider community have a significant impact on quality learning.

Rural and remote education organisations are integral components of their communities. They contribute to the economic and social development of the community.

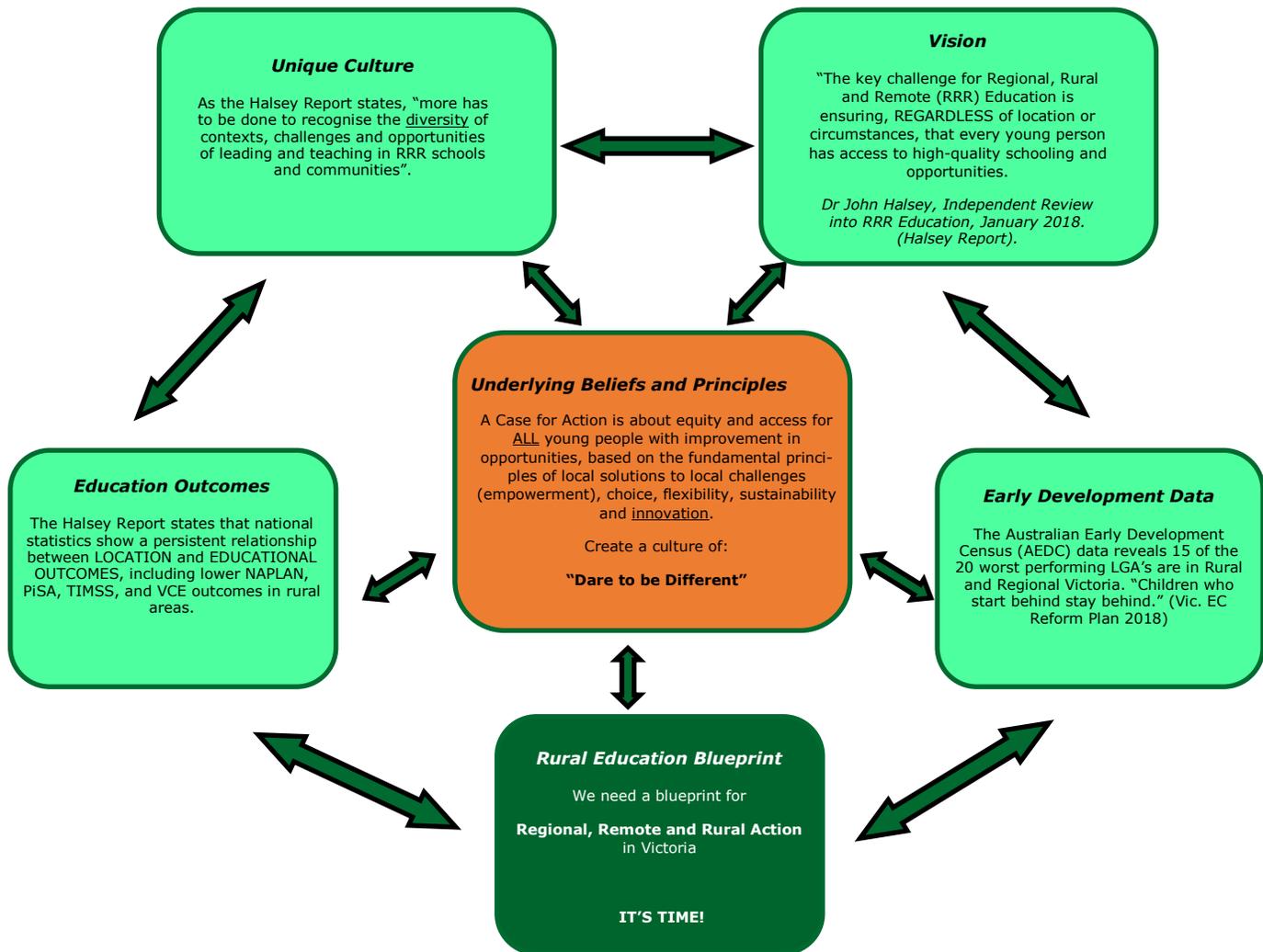
◆ **Recognising Rural Difference and Need**

A recognition that students and families living in rural and remote Victoria have specific needs, which are the direct result of living in particular geographic locations.



DEVELOPMENT OF A RURAL EDUCATION BLUEPRINT

This paper implores government and all relevant authorities to implement a Rural Education Blueprint for Victoria's country education, as a genuine step toward equity in learning for the more than 50,000 young people who currently attend rural and remote schools and learning institutions across the state.



Proposed Action 1:

That the State Government develop a Rural Education Blueprint that outlines a range of specific and targeted initiatives to enhance and improve education provision across all of rural and remote Victoria. This must encompass all education sectors.

Proposed Action 2:

Establish a state-wide Reference Group, comprising early years, schooling and further education sectors to oversee the development and implementation of the Rural Education Blueprint.

Representation from education sectors, rural and remote education communities, and key stakeholders is essential.