

## **Alternative Settings and Programs in Rural and Regional Victoria – A second chance for students in the bush**

### **Recommendation 4.3 from 2019 report of the Expert Advisory Panel for Rural and Regional Students:**

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

The Government supported this in principle and commenced a review in 2023/2024. No further information regarding this review is currently available.

#### **Why this infrastructure is so important:**

Dealing with challenging behaviour, poor attendance patterns and early school leaving is a constant but not a new challenge which has been exacerbated by the impact of the response to the COVID pandemic. For students who lose their way, getting a second chance is critical to their successful return to school and their transition to educational pathways/adulthood.

#### **Why its development needs to be a priority in rural and regional Victoria:**

In metropolitan Melbourne, with its extensive public transport system and multitude of schools, getting a second chance can be relatively straightforward – students are generally able to transfer from one mainstream school to another to find a better fit/get a second chance when there are disruptions to their education or issues in their initial school.

Where the mainstream schooling system is not an option there are a myriad of other providers, including the network of community schools and other public and private alternatives which provide those opportunities.

The need for a second chance in metropolitan Melbourne is also mitigated by the availability of other mental health supports within the community, and bigger schools with large and experienced wellbeing teams and better internal school capacity to support students and manage issues.

Rural and regional Victoria is characterised by a thin school infrastructure and limited transport options. In many towns there is a single secondary school and in a significant number of smaller towns the only provider is a P-12 College.

Generally, schools are smaller with smaller and less experienced wellbeing teams, a higher proportion of inexperienced early career teachers and more limited Mental Health support within the community. And while rural Victoria has been prioritised for the Department's Mental Health initiative, schools are finding recruitment of Mental Health practitioners a major challenge.

**CEP would like to see:**

Adequately funded alternative settings and programs that operate as a system:

- With additional places to meet the previous unmet demand and the additional demands post COVID
- Which supports both primary and secondary students (noting that many current providers only support secondary aged students)
- Which are accessible to students in every part of the state either through proximity or through access to the school bus system or other transport arrangements
- Which are connected to each other through formal networking arrangements and which as a network are coordinated through each Area Director
- Which work closely with non-government alternate schools/settings run by the rural Catholic Dioceses and welfare organisations such as Berry Street
- Which have teachers who are experts in working with children and young people to engage them in worthwhile learning
- Which work with mainstream education providers in the area to support re-engagement with education and a positive future pathway
- Which are supported by the Department's regional support workforces
- Which are connected to health services, services such as Headspace, local community service organisations and to the metropolitan hospital schools
- Which have a dedicated careers advice service
- Which has a tailored outcomes and monitoring framework to support accountability for achieving the best outcomes for this cohort of young people.

*Updated April 2026*