

## **Enhancing the Viability of Small Rural Schools**

Small rural schools have been a feature of the Victorian State School system since its beginnings in 1872 and for the first 100 years most teachers, principals and senior officers had been a rural school teacher at some stage during their career.

As Melbourne grew, and transport improved, so the proportion of students receiving an education in rural schools fell. However, rural schools still cater for the educational needs of thousands of students.

The special need for equity to support rural schools was acknowledged for many years by the Department with the appointment of rural school advisers in rural inspectorates to support the many inexperienced headteachers and teachers in these schools.

During the 1980s and 1990s two trends emerged which created real challenges to the viability of small rural schools: the devolution of significant responsibility to each school, and the desire to consolidate which led to the closure of many small rural schools.

The hangover of those two decades is still felt and since that time many Department initiatives have been implemented in a one-size-fits-all approach (the preferred size being a big school) which impacts disproportionately on the work of the staff and leaders in rural schools.

It is a constant and at times impossible challenge for teaching principals to juggle the competing demands of meeting the full suite of Department administration requirements, maintaining their commitment to the students they teach, managing staff and supporting and engaging with parents and community members.

This, alongside some operational policies around principal recruitment in very small schools, which are hangovers from a previous era, is the main reason that teaching principal positions are hard to recruit and are often filled on an acting basis.

To the Department's credit a start has been made to rectify this. The new initiative to reduce the facilities and OHS demands on rural school leaders was announced in the last state budget and is in the early stages of implementation. Much more needs to be done to sustain the viability of small rural schools.

### **CEP would like to see:**

- The implementation of the recommendations of the Expert Panel with respect to the resourcing of rural schools and the way they engage with the VSBA, namely:
  - *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*

- *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*
- Revisions to the Improvement and Accountability Framework to make it less cumbersome and more useful for schools and the Department
- Promotion of clustering and support to maintain the viability of existing cluster arrangements
- Specific leadership development programs run through the Academy's Regional campuses focussed on the skills required to be a teaching principal to build a pipeline of aspirants to rural school principal positions
- CEP input into Academy's regional campus offerings to ensure the needs of small schools are reflected in the professional learning offered
- Consideration of the reality of impact on rural schools when implementation plans for new initiatives are developed

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