

9. RURAL EDUCATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

9.1 WHERE TO FROM HERE FOR RURAL EDUCATION?

The review of the literature identified some of the endemic problems facing rural and regional education and highlighted significant studies we believe provided guidance on directions but which have not received due recognition from those formulating policy. These reports have presented a fairly consistent picture of rural education: lower schooling outcomes, problematic teacher retention and a lack of access to professional development and resources. While differing in focus and offering fresh insights, the recommendations of the SiMERR National Survey are clearly in the spirit of these reports. The findings above add significantly to the evidence from other reports that we are still falling a long way short of the principle of equity of educational access established by the *Adelaide Declaration* (MCEETYA, 1999).

Through the process of conducting the National Survey and, in particular, the focus group interviews, the various research teams became keenly aware that principals, teachers and parents expect remedial action to be taken in response to the findings. We therefore feel obligated to do our best to ensure that this report leads to significant and effective action.

In all such endeavours there comes a point at which research must give way to action, and we believe that the time is now. The pertinent question is ‘Where to from here for rural education?’ The following sections discuss the catalysts for our principal recommendation that a National Rural School Education Strategy be established, and outline the proposed scope and aims of the Strategy.

Principal Recommendation

It is recommended that a whole-of-government approach to addressing the issues of rural and regional school education be developed and implemented in the form of a National Rural School Education Strategy. The aim of the strategy would be:

- To map a coordinated approach across all government and non-government education jurisdictions to addressing the disparities in rural and regional school education.
- To foster the development of strategic partnerships between stakeholders involved in rural and regional education.
- To deliver a coordinated, collaboratively-designed and research-supported package of programs to address the needs of rural teachers and students, rather than a collection of separate initiatives.

9.2 CATALYSTS FOR A NATIONAL RURAL SCHOOL EDUCATION STRATEGY

The National Survey is one of a number of recent catalysts for the idea of a coordinated national approach. The most significant of these include a national summit on rural education convened by SiMERR Australia in 2005 and a framework for rural education initiated by MCEETYA in 2001. The outcomes of these initiatives present a unique opportunity to achieve something significant for rural and regional education in general, and science, ICT and mathematics education in particular.

The SiMERR National Summit

In November 2005, the first SiMERR National Summit was held at the Australian Science and Mathematics School in Adelaide. It was attended by key academics, including many associated with SiMERR Australia, executives from Australia's leading education bodies (and in particular those concerned with science, ICT and mathematics) and senior representatives of federal, state and territory education jurisdictions. The purpose of the summit was to discuss the initial findings of the SiMERR National Survey, the underperformance of students in rural and regional Australia, and an agenda for further action.

The keynote presentations and workshop sessions focused on inequities in the educational provision for, and outcomes of, rural students compared with their metropolitan peers. Emerging from the summit were several themes, some of which went beyond science, ICT and mathematics education:

- Education authorities across Australia should be deeply concerned about the disparities in achievement between rural and metropolitan students in science, ICT and mathematics.
- Rural schools face barriers to providing quality education, such as distances to major centres, problematic staffing and difficulties establishing and maintaining infrastructure.
- Rural education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as fluctuating populations, economic influences, seasonal conditions and climate.
- The need for students in rural and remote areas to have access to quality education services within a reasonable distance from the family home.

Summit participants were in general agreement that potential solutions which considered these concerns in isolation from one another would not be successful. In addition, it was recognised that attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education would not be effective unless broader economic and social issues are also considered. Broader issues of rural and regional development, infrastructure, health and social services are all related to, and affect, rural education. A coherent and coordinated approach across all of these areas is needed to address rural and regional education concerns in a sustainable way.

MCEETYA Framework for Rural and Remote Education

In 2001, the MCEETYA Taskforce on Rural and Remote Education, Training, Employment and Children's Services produced a *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* (MCEETYA Task Force, 2001). The Framework was the product of collaborative work undertaken in response to Recommendation 4.5 of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 1999) National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education, and was designed to:

- provide a framework for the development of nationally agreed policies and support services
- promote consistency in the delivery of high quality education services to rural and remote students and their families
- provide reference points and guidance for non-government providers of services and support for education in rural and remote areas
- facilitate partnership building between government and non-government providers of services and support related to the provision of education in regional, rural and remote locations.

These aims are clearly consistent with the resolve emerging from the National Summit and encompass many of the recommendations of the National Survey. The framework offers the vision for rural education ‘that, by age 18, each young person residing in rural and remote Australia will receive the education required to develop their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the nation’ (MCEETYA, 2001).

The framework provided an underlying philosophical position, drawn from extensive research findings and arguing for the type of inter-governmental and inter-agency collaboration identified above. Despite an agreement that practical action follow to ensure ‘improvement for children and students in rural and remote Australia in the quality of provision of education available to them and to which they are inherently entitled’, little seems to have resulted from this initiative.

One reason for this may be that the National Framework for Rural and Remote Education was positioned as a supplementary framework rather than a priority area. According to MCEETYA (2001), the framework:

... nests within the broader work of MCEETYA through its various taskforces and working groups. It will inform the work of taskforces that have a specific link to rural and remote issues. Used in conjunction with existing policies and practices, it will ensure that children and students in rural and remote Australia receive the quality of education provision to which they are inherently entitled.

The framework was not positioned to generate action, but to inform other MCEETYA Taskforces. As a consequence, rural and regional school education became a peripheral area for policy. The MCEETYA Taskforce on Rural and Remote Education, Training, Employment and Children’s Services has since been disbanded, as has its successor, the Taskforce on Targeted Initiatives of National Significance, which also had responsibility for rural and remote education issues.

It is our belief that the proposed National Rural School Education Strategy should fulfill the mandate initiated by this Taskforce and mapped by the Framework, while avoiding the same fate. The National Strategy would be the most effective mechanism whereby consensus views could be turned into coordinated and focused actions.

9.4 DEVELOPING A NATIONAL RURAL SCHOOL EDUCATION STRATEGY

While the *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* established a sound blueprint, the National Rural Health Strategy provides a working model with greater potential for effective action. In many ways the rural education situation is similar to that faced by rural communities in terms of health services. Both need to deal with small population sizes, low population densities, and difficulties in achieving economies of scale in both infrastructure support and human resourcing. Furthermore, there is a similar relationship in terms of federal, state and territory responsibilities.

The National Survey findings of inequity of access in this study have marked similarities to those facing the health sector. One could even replace students with patients, teachers with medical practitioners, and schools with hospitals. While the comparison should not be pushed too far, it does mean that successful initiatives arising from the health sector might provide valuable insights into how to address rural and regional education issues. For example, rural health investigations have noted that approaches that work for health improvement for

Metropolitan Areas, do not necessarily work in rural and regional areas. The implication is that problems in rural education might not be best served by a metro-centric mind-set.

To address health concerns in rural Australia, the Federal, State and Territory governments agreed that the best way forward was to develop an integrated national approach to rural health. In 2000 they established the Rural Health Strategy to improve access to health and aged-care services for rural and regional communities. Like the proposed National Rural School Education Strategy, the Rural Health Strategy emerged after many reports highlighting concerns about health in rural and regional areas.

There are many similarities between the actions taken under the auspices of the Rural Health Strategy and the recommendations of the SiMERR National Survey. Both advocate:

- a flexible approach which considers the wider rural and regional context
- measures to ‘address the gap in outcomes between rural and urban Australians’ (Department of Health and Aging (DoHA), 2004)
- ‘programs to support the recruitment and retention of ... professionals in rural areas’ including bonded scholarships (DoHA, 2004)
- ‘rural-based and rural-focused training for ... professionals’ (DoHA, 2004)
- ‘programs to support existing service providers’ (DoHA, 2004)
- increased access to ‘services in hundreds of smaller rural communities’ (DoHA, 2004).

Modeling the National Rural School Education Strategy along the lines of the Rural Health Strategy would be consistent with current government policy. Furthermore, the process of implementing elements of the education strategy would be informed by the experiences of those involved in the Rural Health Strategy, avoiding many of the obstacles and pitfalls faced by new programs. Significantly for rural communities, gains have already been made through actions flowing from the Rural Health Strategy. At the same time, the needs in health and education are not identical and care must be taken to develop a unique strategy relevant to, and designed for, education initiatives. Hence, it would be important to identify the contextual differences between health and education circumstances.

The National Rural School Education Strategy would be expected to address service delivery to rural and regional communities in a cost effective way, recognising that such communities have many differences and that this will require solutions tailored to the community and the context. It will also be important that the National Rural School Education Strategy builds on existing programs and services and ensures appropriate linkages between stakeholders.

We consider the following to be initial steps in formulating the National Rural School Education Strategy:

1. Establishing a coordination mechanism, possibly an inter-governmental Taskforce under the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) or the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).
2. Developing the details of the strategy with reference to the *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* developed by MCEETYA, the findings and recommendations from the SiMERR National Survey, and other relevant studies.
3. Identifying roles, responsibilities and accountabilities associated with various aspects of the strategy.
4. Facilitating communication and strengthening collaboration between governments, agencies and communities.

5. Establishing an integrated research agenda to monitor the outcomes of the National Rural School Education Strategy with regard to students, teachers, schools and communities, and to guide its development using evidence-based research in rural and regional areas.

Recommendation 21, restated below is aimed at facilitating steps 1 to 4:

21. It is recommended that a National Rural School Education Taskforce be established by MCEETYA or COAG to coordinate the development of the National Rural School Education Strategy. The Taskforce would facilitate ongoing cooperation between federal and state/territory governments and other stakeholders, encourage active commitment to coordinate and jointly plan activities and initiatives aimed at achieving equitable access to education by teachers and students.

It is envisaged that the Taskforce be a dedicated national body, having an operational arm in DEST and given high level direction through COAG or MCEETYA. This would give the National Strategy unequivocal support from peak political bodies reporting to federal, state and territory governments and their instrumentalities. There should also be input from other relevant government departments, such as the Department of Transport and Regional Services, the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, and the Department of Health and Ageing.

Research support for the activities of the National Strategy

Step 5 above is considered crucial for providing evidence-based support for the initiatives of the National Strategy and accountability in terms of monitoring outcomes. Recommendation 22, restated below, suggests some guidelines for a research network to support the National Rural School Education Strategy:

22. It is recommended that a national rural education research network be established and funded over the life of the National Strategy. Consistent with the National Strategy, the research would need to be conducted through a body or bodies having a coordinated national focus, a presence at universities in each state and territory with strong links to local education agencies and organizations, and expertise in rural and regional education, particularly though not exclusively in science, ICT and mathematics education.

The Rural Education Research Network would have a strategic focus as well as a coordinating and initiating role. Members of the network would undertake high-quality research, synthesise research findings so they are made available through the network, add to our knowledge of how to teach in rural and regional areas, provide guidance to governments and other education authorities on policy, disseminate research and good practice through conferences, publications, media releases and network websites. The research network would also constitute a national forum for addressing issues in rural and regional education, including those relating to science, ICT and mathematics, and student diversity.

Participant universities should be located in regional areas, or where this is not possible, have a demonstrated commitment to rural education. Preferably, the universities should also be

Centres of Excellence in rural and regional pre-service education. The Centres would build upon the significant infrastructure already in place in regional universities.

Possible domains of a National Rural School Education Strategy

Several recommendations of the National Survey, such as the establishment of an Association of Rural Educators and the Rural School Leadership Program, could be incorporated under the National Rural School Education Strategy. However, the scope of the Strategy could extend beyond these to consider broader domains relating to rural school education. The suggestions below show how different ideas that move beyond, but are inclusive of, our recommendations might cluster under a National Rural School Education Strategy. Actions for consideration might include the development of programs that:

- seek ways to integrate current initiatives within the National Strategy so that they are more complementary, and identify how recommendations from the SiMERR National Survey might be incorporated within the Strategy
- help revitalise rural and regional schools. For example, schools may be given the option of restructuring their facilities to make them more viable and relevant to community needs, such as becoming multi-purpose centres
- encourage flexibility so that a wide range of services can be subsumed and supported under the Strategy. Frequently schools in a rural area are the largest employer in the community and play an integral role in sustaining the local economy
- allow or encourage flexibility of rules and regulations at a local level to enable local responses to emerge. Linking recommendations with regional development may assist the development of customised strategic plans to improve the viability of each school
- develop a communication strategy that informs rural and regional communities of current and future rural education initiatives. Encourage work with key rural and regional groups/communities to identify and structure local priorities
- review regional access and undertake an audit to determine broad areas of need for different education facilities. It may be that adjustment grants for rural schools could create a more balanced system across institutions with additional flexible funding in more remote areas. Viability funding should recognise the higher day-to-day operating costs of education services in rural areas
- support the recruitment of more teachers to rural and regional centres, as recommended by this and other reports. Considerations could be given to scholarships or employer arrangements with regard to Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) payments for students willing to teach in rural and regional areas
- develop positive long-term incentives to increase and strengthen the rural education workforce and especially to encourage teachers to remain in rural areas. At the same time, programs are needed to enhance the skills of rural teaching professionals, reduce professional isolation and encourage teachers into small communities
- create a senior teacher outreach program to enhance education and training for rural education professionals and to provide for rural leadership support and development
- address rural and regional issues concerning preschool and tertiary education
- link through Teaching Australia to various state/territory Teacher Institutes.

We recognise that there are tensions here in providing elaboration of our ideas with various degrees of detail. We have tried to highlight ideas and actions to explicate possibilities that a

National Rural School Education Strategy would open up. However, in doing so we caution against getting caught up in details at this stage, and losing sight of the overall picture.

9.5 CONCLUSION

We believe that a National Rural School Education Strategy is the only viable and sustainable way for Australia to address rural and urban inequities in education. We are convinced that this initiative will help position all stakeholders to work together effectively to introduce local solutions that meet the needs of rural and regional communities in the provision of quality education across Australia.

Clearly, the long-term mission of the National Rural School Education Strategy is to improve the performance of students in rural and regional Australia. The driving forces for addressing this mission are government and non-government education authorities in the main, but also rural communities that will become involved because they recognise the needs of their students and teachers, and because they will have some ownership of actions and will see the positive results of these actions.

In this concluding chapter we have tried to highlight an important tension that has plagued past attempts to address educational inequities. It concerns the tendency to maintain ownership of the issues within education without establishing a broader role for rural and regional communities and other areas of government responsibility. Too often education is seen as the panacea for social ills. Australian society as a whole has a responsibility for, and a stake in, the education of students in rural and regional areas. While we believe that those responsible for coordinating and implementing the proposed National Rural School Education Strategy should be drawn primarily from education, it needs to be a truly national agenda.

Importantly, the ideas in this final chapter are not about working from a deficit model of teaching and learning in rural and regional Australia. Rather, the ideas and illustrative actions are offered as positive steps towards harnessing the strengths of rural and regional communities in meeting the challenges facing their schools, and ensuring equity of access for their students. The recommendations in this report, and in particular the proposal for a National Rural School Education Strategy, are aimed squarely at reducing the educational divide between rural and urban Australia, and therefore at creating a fairer and healthier Australia.