



Rural Educators Network

Supporting the recruitment and ongoing development of quality education staff, leaders and managers in rural Victoria



INTRODUCTION

Staff recruitment and retention within rural and remote communities throughout Australia has been an area that has generated a great deal of interest for many years now. Many governments at a national and state level have introduced a number of initiatives aimed at addressing the issue, often with the development of short term, specific and isolated initiatives. For example, scholarships; incentives to teach in rural/remote; support with rent and living costs; etc.

The Country Education Project (CEP) believes that while these initiatives have assisted to some degree, there is now a need to develop a more comprehensive approach to supporting the recruitment; retention and ongoing development of educators within rural Victoria.

In 2007, CEP developed the "Rural Educators Network" as a framework to support the recruitment and ongoing development of rural educators. The Network incorporates four key areas of focus:

- Developing strong links between teacher training universities and rural education clusters.
- Supporting new graduates within rural communities
- Developing staff recruitment and retention approaches specific to rural and remote locations
- Ongoing, relevant and "rural friendly" professional learning opportunities for educators, education leaders and principals.

This information booklet provides an outline of the Rural Educators Network and the specific actions that CEP believes are important to support rural education recruitment and retention.

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BACKGROUND

The Country Education Project has been working in the area of Victorian rural education for over thirty years now. Initially established in 1977 as part of the Commonwealth Schools Commission "Country Area Program", the CEP has maintained a strong commitment to rural education and rural communities. It has operated as an intersystemic project since its inception and sees the various education providers working together as critical for provision of high quality and responsive education in rural communities.

While there are many definitions of rural and remote communities within Australia, the guidelines utilized by CEP within the Victorian context covers the following key areas:

- less than 5,000 population
- located at least an hour and half travel time from Melbourne and at least 20kms from a population centre of at least 10,000.
- limited, or no access, to education, community and health services
- a sense of an identified community.

This represents more than 400 education communities throughout the state.

With its strong commitment to building the capacity of these communities, CEP sees the provision of high quality learning as critical. It also believes that strong links need to be forged/strengthened between rural education and rural economic/community development to ensure the ongoing development and growth of rural communities into the future.

Working together, sharing, co-operation and collaboration remain the cornerstones of the CEP philosophy and approach.

A key element of providing quality education in rural communities is the recruitment and ongoing development of teachers, education leaders and managers.

Over recent years, CEP has undertaken a number of consultations and researches across Victoria aimed at identifying the key challenges facing rural communities to ensure quality learning is provided within these communities well into the 21st century.

Three key areas were identified:

- educations contribution to the sustainability of rural communities
- providing a quality learning program for all young people across 0 years to 18 years (and beyond), and
- recruitment and ongoing development of educators, and education leaders within rural education communities.

Within these key areas, recruitment and retention of educators has been an area of growing concern within Victorian rural communities with a number of challenges being identified. In general these include:

- difficulty recruiting quality teachers to rural communities,
- low numbers of educators applying for education leadership positions,
- difficulty of recruiting teachers in specific curriculum areas – science, maths, LOTE, technology.
- provision of professional development is often located in metropolitan and regional centres, thus making it difficult for rural staff to access.
- leadership development for principals, assistant principals and leading teachers to the uniqueness of a leadership role within a rural community is not strong. For example, the expectation of being a community leaders in addition to being an education leader.

In addition education authorities, and research organisations across Australia and overseas have explored these issues in recent times. A number of reports have resulted, some of which include:

- the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (May 2000)
- the Victorian Rural Education study
- the Rural Professional Education Program (September 1996)
- the Ararat Project (December 2000).
- The Yarrawonga Project (1998)

In 2007, CEP undertook extensive investigation of how a more co-ordinated approach could be developed to support rural communities in recruiting and retaining quality educators and education leaders. This investigation explored:

- approaches operating in other states of Australia
- strategies being developed overseas, and
- approaches being undertaken in other professions that service rural communities – especially in health and local government.

CEP explored in depth the approaches undertaken within the health system to support the employment of doctors, allied health workers and other health professionals within rural and remote communities. While these strategies have been developed on a national level, it believed that the learnings gained from their experiences could be invaluable in the development of strategies and approaches to address similar issues within the rural and remote education sector.

As a result, CEP developed the Rural Educators Network – an approach that aims to provide a comprehensive approach to recruiting and retaining educators within rural Victoria. It identified four key areas of focus within the Network:

- (i) supporting partnerships between teacher training universities and rural education communities
- (ii) promoting the career opportunities that exist within rural communities
- (iii) supporting new graduate teachers within rural communities
- (iv) supporting the provision of ongoing professional development and training.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Aim:

To support the engagement and ongoing involvement of quality education staff in rural communities of Victoria.

Objectives:

- To support and facilitate partnerships between rural clusters of school communities and teacher training organizations that enhance the provision of learning through the provision of practical experiences for student teachers; involves university expertise and knowledge in rural education and rural educators involvement in the training of teachers.
- To support a co-ordinated approach to the promotion of teacher positions within rural education communities to potential employees and to provide a brokerage role between rural school communities and potential employees that compliment "Recruitment on Line".
- To support new graduates within rural schools.
- To facilitate and support the provision of professional development and leadership development that is flexible, rural appropriate and locally determined.

STRATEGIES:

The Rural Educators Network includes four key strategies to support recruitment and retention of quality educators within rural Victoria. While governments and education systems have provided valuable support in some areas, the Network promotes a comprehensive approach across the four areas.

It believes that supporting all four strategies is essential in recruiting and retaining educators within these communities.



1. Rural Cluster University Partnerships:

The development of strong partnership between rural clusters of education organizations and teacher training universities is critical as a first step in encouraging people to consider a career within a rural education community.

While teacher training universities have utilized rural settings in the past for involving pre service teachers, it has generally been to accommodate the study requirements of the specific course.

The Rural Educators Network facilitates the development, and operation, of partnerships between a cluster of rural education organisations and a teacher training university. In general it focuses on an "area of interest/need" identified by the rural cluster and explores how the expertise within the rural cluster and university can assist through the provision of pre service teachers, professional development and research.

The partnership approach comprises a number of key elements to ensure the best outcome is achieved for all partners.

- *Rural Cluster*

A cluster of rural schools work collaboratively together to form a partnership with a teacher training university to expose pre service teachers to a broad professional and rural experience in a variety of learning settings within a rural community.

- *Focus of Partnership*

The development of a focus area for the partnership - identified by the rural cluster. This could include: a curriculum area, school improvement, student support, or cluster area of inquiry.

- *Whole of Community*

This is specific to these partnerships and involvement of pre service teachers, to ensure that they are provided with a true rural education experience, Teams of pre service teachers are housed together within the cluster for the time of their involvement.

Pre Service Teacher's are included and proactively encouraged to participate in the activities of the community.

- *Pre Service Teacher Teams*

Teams of pre service teachers work within the rural cluster.

The team approach allows for peer support, reflection on learning and the opportunity to develop a team approach for involvement within the cluster.

- *Professional Development*

Through the partnership formed, and the identification of a focus area by the rural cluster, opportunities will be explored to provide professional development for university staff, cluster staff, and pre service teachers.

- *Research*

The partnership also allows for the undertaking of research activity around the focus area identified by the rural cluster.



2. Promotion of Career Opportunities within Rural:

The education sectors provide opportunities for schools to advertise the vacancies that exist within schools, generally through an online platform. However, these approaches only outline the vacant position and often don't provide background information on the education setting; the community in which it is located; and the opportunities that this community provides the potential employee.

The Rural Educators Network has facilitated a number of strategies that provide both rural education communities and people interested in teaching within a rural setting to have access to potential careers.

- *Online Platform:*

The provision of a platform within the Country Education Project website that:

- allows rural education settings to promote the teaching opportunities within their community including the teaching position, an outline of the school community, information on the broader community, and details of the opportunities that exist within their education and broader community.
- allows prospective teachers interested to gain employment within a rural education setting to outline their interest, area of expertise and credentials.

- *Cluster Approaches:*

Supporting clusters of rural schools within a geographic location to promote vacancies and opportunities through a cluster approach.

This is achieved through the development of information packages detailing the cluster; details of the teaching opportunities within the cluster; and promoting the opportunities, services and activities within the broader community.



3. Supporting New Graduates:

Within rural communities across Victoria, new professionals often find themselves in a community where there are few other new professionals and support is generally located in metropolitan Melbourne or a regional centre. Many of these new professionals have indicated that while they enjoy the teaching role and the rural community in which they live, they often feel isolated from peers and support services.

The Rural Educators Network has established a number of strategies to support the new professional teachers within their role within a rural community.

- *On Line Support Network:* through the CEP website, an online platform has been developed to provide the opportunity for new graduates across to state to share and gain information. The website provides:
 - A social network page that allows the new graduates to share stories, experiences and gain support and advice from their peers
 - Access to information and resources that are relevant to their teaching role.
 - Access to a "mentor" who can provide support and advice to new graduates.
 - Details of possible professional development activities
- *Annual Research of New Teacher Graduates:* The Network facilitates an online survey of all new graduates within rural communities each year. Within this survey new graduates are asked to reflect on a number of aspects of their first six months of employment including:
 - General experiences of the first six months
 - Induction and orientation approaches
 - Mentoring and support
 - Access to professional development
 - Suggesting areas for improvement.

The online survey results are then collated and analyzed and presented in a report in July of each year.

- *State-wide forum for Key Stakeholders:* a forum involving all education regions and diocese personnel who support new graduates; Victorian Institute for Teaching; and central Education sectors come together with new graduates to explore the issues and ideas outlined in the new graduate survey each year and explore ways in which they can better support new graduate teachers within their region/diocese.

4. Ongoing Professional Development and Training:

The fourth key area of the Rural Educators Network involves the provision of ongoing professional development and learning.

While there are many opportunities for teachers to access professional development provided by a range of providers, rural educators have expressed there is a need in a number of areas specific to rural education.

Some of the professional development and training opportunities that are provided through the Rural Educators Network include:

- Annual Rural Learning Summit
- 0-18 years learning forums and conferences
- Rural education leadership programs
- Overseas education tours to rural communities in other countries
- Education tours to exempla practice in rural communities
- Specific forums and seminars on identified curriculum areas such as science, digital learning provision, etc.



RURAL EDUCATORS NETWORK

Rural Cluster/University Partnerships

Groups of pre service teachers working in Rural Clusters

Building partnership between rural clusters of schools and universities- especially in final years

Explore and pilot new approaches to teacher trainee experiences

Staff Recruitment

Further develop the online promotion of rural education positions within the CEP website linked to Recruitment online

New Graduate Support

Develop an online interactive website for new graduates including resources, chat and mentor support.

Ongoing Professional Development and Leadership

- Rural Education conferences and forums
- P-12 (0-18 years) learning forums and conferences
- Early years in rural Victoria
- Rural Leadership initiative
- Development of an online leadership resources
- Facilitate educational tours focusing on key areas of rural education.

Ongoing Support of a Brokerage role to support the building of partnerships and initiatives

Establishment of a learning development and support role to oversee learning in the partnership areas; support for new graduates; links with regional/diocese offices; supporting leadership development, professional development of rural educators, etc

Supported by a Bank of Expertise providing mentoring, coaching, support and online discussions.

- Establishment of an online site for rural education people covering:*
- *final year trainees to three year new graduates providing access to support from Bank of Expertise; professional development opportunities; sharing experiences, resources, etc.*
 - *educational leaders within rural communities*
 - *professional development activities and resources*
 - *employment opportunities in rural education linked to Recruitment Online*
 - *resources for employees within rural education settings – eq new leaders within rural, etc*