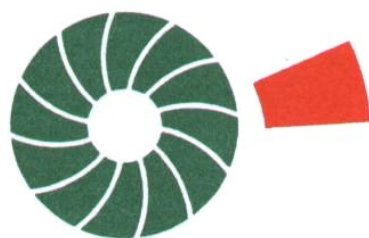


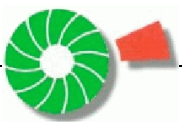
Supporting the Provision of Learning within Rural Victoria into the Future

DISCUSSION PAPER



June 2010

Discussion Paper



Country Education Project

Introduction

Rural communities across Victoria have always faced unique challenges in providing quality learning outcomes for their young people. These communities have often been characterised as close knit, as resilient, as strongly supportive and as creative and innovative.

In the majority of rural communities throughout Victoria, education organisations are deeply embedded within their local communities. They are interwoven into their fabric. While they provide real advantages for both rural communities and their learners, they are often challenged in the provision of quality learning across a number of areas including science; breadth of post compulsory options; LOTE; and the arts.

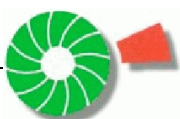
On the other hand a number of these rural education organisations have pride in the close relationships they maintain with students, their families and the broader community and as a result often produce excellent outcomes for their learners. For example VCE results in some rural communities are amongst the best for the state.

This discussion paper has been developed to encourage those involved in, or interested in, the future provision of quality learning within rural Victoria. The issues, challenges and ideas outlined within this paper have been developed as a result of recent discussions with rural communities across the state; the outcomes of a number of research activities; the experiences of other states and countries; and the future potential that a 21st century learning approach provides.

The recent release of the "*Ready for Tomorrow*" blueprint for rural and regional Victoria highlights the important role that rural and regional communities play in the ongoing development and sustainability of Victoria. Within this blueprint there is a specific initiative to support the Rural Councils Network to support research, networking and knowledge transfer across rural communities; enhancing economic development through leadership and management development; and supporting the attraction of people to rural communities. While the blueprint outlined some exciting initiatives focused on vocational and further education within rural and regional areas, there was little detail of initiatives within early years and school learning areas.

With the growing importance of education organisations in contributing to rural development and sustainability it is essential that an approach to ensure quality learning is provided within them, and as a result learning outcomes are enhanced.

CEP Inc hopes that this discussion paper will provide a good basis upon which such an approach can be developed.



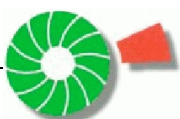
A Paradigm for Rural Education into the Future

In the development of a paradigm for rural education within Victoria into the future, there is a need to reflect on the learnings gained of past experiences while exploring the real potential that rural communities have in providing quality learning well into the 21st century.

In Stephen Heppels paper (Rural Schools: A Blueprint for the New Millennium) he highlighted the real advantage that rural schools have in forging the future learning landscape to cater for the evolving 21st century learner. The growing focus on personalised (or student centred learning); the importance of education and community partnerships; and the developing communication technology field places a real opportunity for rural education communities to have a huge advantage.

There is also a growing interest in the development of local partnerships as the way forward to enhance learning provision within rural and remote communities across the world.

- (i) The development of partnerships between numerous education organisations and the wider community within rural UK is forging a new focus on learning provision within these communities
- (ii) the “collaborative community partnerships” approach within rural Scottish villages focus on a place based approach to learning – education organisations are central to their communities and operated within the broader context that the whole village has responsibility for education.
- (iii) The development of “Learning Communities” within New Zealand, developed in recent times to ensure that the provision of education for rural communities is enhanced and available within their local community through clusters of education organisations working together.
- (iv) The “Group School” approach within the Northern Territory where clusters of schools work together in education planning, staffing, leadership and professional support.
- (v) The Foundation for Young Australians report on the future resourcing of Australian schools developed by Professor Jack Keating highlights a wider and positive resourcing model is required for schooling and community. It suggests two elements of resourcing – one being needs based and the other a community approach which encourages schools to work together within a given community.



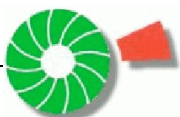
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Such developments, along with the learnings from the experiences within Victoria during the 1980s and early 1990s provide us with a real opportunity to develop a strong and viable learning provision paradigm for our rural communities well into the future.

Historically rural school communities throughout Victoria have developed a range of creative and responsive approaches to learning development and provision for their community. Through the building of partnerships with community organisations, business, community services and local governments, clusters of education organisations within identified rural communities worked collaboratively to develop a range of initiatives which addressed education needs and aspirations of their communities. Areas where these approaches focused included recruitment of staff; provision of learning in areas of curriculum need; using communication technology to support learning; development of shared learning programs across education organisations; development of shared staffing arrangements; shared professional and leadership development, and school community initiatives.

In the development of a paradigm for future learning within rural Victoria, there are a number of key outcomes which need to be achieved to ensure that people within such communities gain equity with their regional and metropolitan counterparts. These include:

- learners, and their communities, have access to the breadth of learning options equivalent to their regional and metropolitan learners – early years learning and development, school education and further education.
- learning outcomes of learners within rural Victoria are similar to, or superior to, their regional and metropolitan counterparts
- learning outcomes of indigenous learners especially in areas such as literacy, numeracy, engagement and retention are equivalent to non indigenous.
- the number of rural young people who successfully undertake further studies is at least at the same level of regional and metropolitan young people
- early years learning and development programs are available to all families within their community.
- strong collaborative approaches to learning provision including education organisations, local government, business and the broader community exist in each rural community.
- quality teachers are recruited to and retained within rural communities
- quality education leaders are engaged within rural communities and are acknowledged as community leaders as well as education leaders.
- digital learning is a viable, and commonly used, approach to providing learning within rural communities.



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To achieve such outcomes, this discussion paper outlines four key principles that could provide the basis for the development of learning strategies and initiatives for the future.

(i) *21st Century Learning.*

The development of learning that is centred on:

- student centred, or personalised learning
- creative and flexible
- a collaboration between learners, education organisations, families and the broader community
- communication technology enriched.

(ii) *Place Based:*

Each rural community is unique and come with their own set of challenges and opportunities.

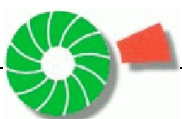
The provision of quality learning within these communities is critical to their future sustainability. The link between learning and community/economic development is essential in any future rural learning paradigm.

(iii) *Clustering:*

The establishment of learning clusters where education providers (across all sectors) work collaboratively, and in partnership with their broader community, to develop and provide learning which cater for the needs and aspirations of all people.

(iv) *0-18+ Learning*

With the need to provide a quality learning and development approach within rural communities, a “seamless” approach to learning from 0-18+ years that allows learners to access a range of learning activities/resources reflective of their needs and aspirations within their own communities



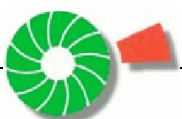
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Such a paradigm supports, and builds on, the three key strategies outlined within the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (2008):

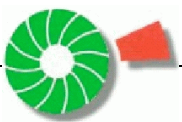
- (i) *school improvement*: ensuring that all children and young people and their families have access to high quality schools and early childhood services,
- (ii) *workforce development*: ensuring that schools and childhood services have skilled and committed staff who are supported to deliver their very best,
- (iii) *school community partnerships*: ensuring that parents and families are valued partners in their children's development and learning.

It also reflects the key actions identified within the National Goals for Australian Education:

- (i) working with all education sectors to engage young people, families, other education organisations, business and the broader community in supporting quality learning
- (ii) attract, recruit and retain quality staff
- (iii) provides quality learning across the early years, middle years and senior years
- (iv) improves education outcomes for indigenous and disadvantaged young people
- (v) support world class education



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Specific Strategies for Supporting the Paradigm

This discussion paper explores four key strategies to underpin the key principles.

These strategies have been developed as a result of a number of researches and activities including:

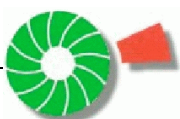
- consideration of current government policies at a state and national level
- research papers internationally focusing on rural and remote education
- exploration of programs in their states of Australia
- the Rural School Governance research project
- conversations with rural specific organisations including Rural Councils Network
- evaluation of recent rural specific leadership programs
- extensive discussions with rural communities throughout rural Victoria
- learnings from the Rural Early Years project
- research undertaken as part of the Rural Educators Network, especially around areas of teacher training, recruitment, and new graduate support.

These four strategies include:

- partnerships to enhance rural sustainability
- learning provision
- workforce, leadership and management
- digital learning.

Within each of these four areas, this discussion paper has:

- highlighted a number of challenges which face rural communities in the development and provision of learning within a 21st century environment and
- proposes a number of strategies and approaches for exploration to support the development and provision of learning within rural communities at a local and state level.

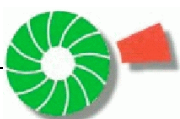


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1. Partnerships to Enhance Rural Sustainability:

Challenges:

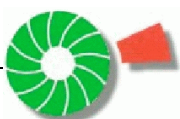
- Regionalisation of a range of public and community services over recent times (e.g. health, local government and vocational education) has seen the rural school being the only public service left within a number of rural communities.
- The growing importance of quality learning provision in the sustainability of rural Victoria.
- The socio economic demographic is changing in a number of rural communities across Victoria with people moving into these communities to access cheaper housing. Such a change is having an impact on the traditional values and ideals of a number of rural communities – resulting in a changing “sense of community”.
- There are a growing number of people moving to rural communities for a lifestyle choice. This is occurring mainly along the coastline; along the Murray River; and in a number of “geographically attractive” locations. A large number of these people transit to their workplace generally in larger regional centres or metropolitan Melbourne and its suburbs.
- There is a changing industry base throughout rural Victoria. This is having a large impact on the makeup of these communities. While this is not consistent across the state, some are experiencing population and economic growth while others are experiencing significant decline.
- Within the majority of rural communities, populations are generally getting older, with older people living longer and more young people having to leave these communities to access learning – especially post school learning including vocational education and tertiary education.



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Strategies for the Future:

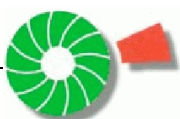
- A place based, whole of community approach to planning, developing, and providing learning from 0-18+ years to accommodate the specific needs of each rural community.
- The development of education facilities as “community learning hubs” providing access to a 0-18+ learning provision.
- The establishment of partnership forums within local rural communities involving leaders of education, local government, health and community support, community agencies, cultural groups, and key stakeholders to support the overall development of the community of which education is a key element.
Such partnerships could also explore how education, business, and community services can work in a collaborative way to developing their community – including recruitment of staff, infrastructure planning, etc.
- Cross industry approaches to supporting the development of young professionals (education, local government, health, business, etc) skills and knowledge to support their role within their rural community – hence providing local community networks to support the retention of young professionals.
- The development of partnerships between local business, further education providers and local schools to support the provision of vocational training so that young people employed as apprentices/traineeships are not required to travel to attend training programs, normally provided within regional and metropolitan centres.
- At a state-wide level, develop partnerships between “peak” bodies focused on supporting and promoting rural sustainability and development – eg Country Education Project Inc, Rural Councils Network, etc.



2. Learning Provision

Challenges

- Capacity of individual rural schools to offer “breadth” of options to cater for all young peoples’ needs and aspirations, especially at a post compulsory level and within specialist learning areas (eg the arts, LOTE, science, maths).
- Student learning outcomes within rural communities are generally lower than their regional and metropolitan counterparts. However there are some specific exceptions in areas such as VCE performance.
- Learning outcomes for indigenous learners within rural Victoria is below non indigenous learners across all key indicators – literacy, numeracy, retention, engagement, post school education.
- Lower number of rural young people who complete year 12 undertaking further studies – either at university or TAFE.
- Growing number of P-12; K-12 or similar education settings within rural communities
- Not all pre school aged children have involvement in pre school learning and children’s services programs. A number of families are required to travel distances to attend pre school and children’s services in regional centres to gain the hours they desire.
- Growing number of young people choosing to bypass their local education provider to attend larger regional centres – also a growing number of young people (especially in primary) choosing to home school).
- A number of education providers in the same rural community with separate curriculum planning and provision structures across sectors drawing on the same limited resources and skills often resulting in duplication of documentation, time and effort and competition for enrolments.
- School Resource model developed in the 1990s, has impacted on rural schools working within clusters to cater for the learning needs of their community – there are minimal clusters operating at a significant level for learning provision compared to the 1980s. There is a greater competition for student enrolments between education organisations.



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- Education provision within rural communities developed and provided with a focus on “school community” rather than “whole of community”

Strategies for the Future:

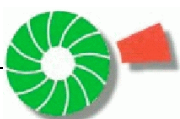
- The development of “Rural Clusters”, as the approach to support rural learning provision, where education providers (from all sectors) work collaboratively together, and in partnership within their “identified community”, in developing and providing learning that is flexible; caters for the needs and aspirations of all people within the identified community; and enhances learning opportunities and outcomes.
- The development of a 0-18+ years learning approach to the provision of learning within the “Rural Clusters”. Such a focus would not only include school based learning, but could also provide access to apprenticeship training, adult education, and early years learning and development. Such an approach could also explore new structures and models that are not based on the early years, primary, secondary and further education paradigm.
- The development of a Learning Plan for the “Rural Clusters” rather than each individual education organisation having to develop their own learning plan.
- A rural education resourcing model that reflects a partnership approach to learning provision within the “Rural Cluster”, while also maintaining the identity of each of the current education organisations. For example, base resourcing to support the operation of each education organisation, supplemented with resourcing allocated to the “Rural Clusters” to enhance and further develop learning provision.



3. Workforce, Leadership and Management

Challenges

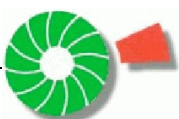
- The difficulty of recruiting quality teachers to rural communities. This is more apparent in specialist areas such as LOTE, science/technology, numeracy, the arts.
- Leadership roles (especially at a principal and assistant principal level) are difficult to fill – often remaining vacant for some time.
- Education leadership roles within a rural environment are a broader role than in regional/urban schools. Their role has a stronger community leadership component.
- There is a lack of perceived career pathway opportunities for teachers within rural communities – historically the experiences gained within a rural setting would be seen as an advantage for a regional/urban location leadership role – not anymore.
- Access to professional development for rural staff is difficult – often based in regional and metropolitan locations, and often at times which are not conducive to rural people.
- The devolution of human and physical resource management to the school level, whilst having advantages, has challenged the historical collaborative nature of many rural clusters.
- The difficulty of rural schools to achieve the required membership on school governance bodies. In a number of rural communities, the same people are involved in a number of governance bodies. Eg, primary school council, pre school committee and secondary school council.
- Lack of consistency of support and professional development for new graduates within rural schools from region/diocese to region/diocese.
- New graduates often feel isolated within a rural community both socially and professionally.



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Strategies for the Future:

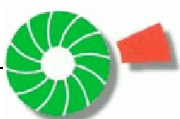
- The further development, and expansion, of the state-wide Rural Educators Network to support all rural communities in the recruitment and ongoing support of staff within learning organisations through:
 - development of partnership between universities and rural clusters of schools
 - supporting recruitment strategies focused on rural communities
 - supporting new graduates within rural education settings
 - supporting “rural friendly” professional learning
- The development of a “Rural Clusters” workforce plan including staff recruitment, staff utilisation, and leadership. For examples shared specialists to cover areas of learning need.
- Development of a “collaborative governance” approach and management/administration arrangements that are determined at a local level.
- The development of a specific 0-18 years leadership program to be developed. – especially in the areas of collegiality and collaboration, community leadership and coaching/mentoring.
- As part of education leadership activities/programs include specific areas focused on community leadership – areas such as collaboration, community leadership, collegiate leadership, etc.
- The development of a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to staff incentives and support mechanisms for rural communities.



4. Digital Learning

Challenges

- The quality and capacity of the infrastructure (eg broadband) currently provided to rural school communities needs improving and is not consistent across the state.
- The digital learning skill and knowledge level of staff within rural communities is low.
- Access to the internet (especially broadband) in rural households is lower than their regional and metropolitan counterparts – some communities have as low as 25% families with broadband access.
- Rural schools are utilising the Distance Education Centre less, preferring to put in place local arrangements.
- Recent developments of the digital education approaches have focused on the provision of learning to individuals rather than facilitating the development of partnerships and collaborative approaches across schools, regions/diocese, and the state.
- Many digital education models are based on a “centralised” model where the expertise and knowledge is located within a central facility and the learning is “delivered out”.
- There is a lack of consistency and co-ordination in relation to the development of delivery platforms and software, thus making it difficult in providing access to a range of digital education opportunities across the state.
- There is a “silo approach” to supporting ICT development across government departments.
- The technical support provided to rural education communities is not consistent across the state.



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Strategies for the Future:

- The development of a State-wide Rural Digital Learning approach that enhances the learning provision and is focused on a decentralised model throughout rural Victoria that:
 - supports professional development
 - enhances learning provision
 - links into Ultranet, FUSE and other relevant resources
 - builds partnership with key partners such as Scienceworks, universities, museum, etc. and business/philanthropic organisations.
 - Includes all education sectors and levels.
- Exploration of a state-wide communication technology support service for rural communities.
- As part of the education organisation being seen as a community resource, exploring the school providing a “Communication Technology Hub” that will facilitate the access to broadband, etc to the households within their community.
- The development of a whole of government approach to the roll out and support of ICT infrastructure. Possible “shared ICT hubs” established in rural communities.
- Ensure that teacher trainees are provided with studies that focus on the use of digital learning approaches and their relevance to rural communities.

