

**Submission to the
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Committee Inquiry into**

**Teaching and Learning - Maximising our
Investment in Australian Schools**

from the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association
of NSW Inc**



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Introduction

ICPA is pleased to contribute to the Senate Committee inquiry into *Teaching and Learning – Maximising Our Investment in Australian Schools*. One of the most important determinants of educational achievement, after the home environment, is the teacher. Most teachers agree that when a child comes from a family that values education, successful outcomes for that child are more likely.

In its submission, ICPA-NSW is focussing on issues of *Teaching and Learning – Maximising Our Investment in Australian Schools* in rural and remote schools. The educational outcomes in these schools lag well behind metropolitan counterparts and questions are often raised as to how to attract and retain great teachers in these areas. ICPA-NSW considers that adoption of its recommendations will go some way towards increasing teacher performance in rural and remote schools which will, in turn, feed into closing the gap in educational outcomes based on location. Therefore the term of reference ICPA- NSW refer to is:

(e) “factors influencing the selection, training, professional development, career progression and retention of teachers in the Australian education system.”

In-service Teachers and Principals

1. Establish Additional Collaborative Practices Between Teachers Within and Across Rural and Remote Schools

There are already many successful collaborative practices that teachers in rural and remote areas use. These could be built on. Teachers could develop practices such as shared development of lessons and teaching resources, even when these teachers are in different towns. Simple tools such as internet “drop boxes” could have greater use in assisting teachers in small rural and remote schools to collaborate and to share documents, resources and tools for teaching, administration and support.

Teachers could be encouraged not only to develop their personal skills, but also to act as coaches and mentors for other teachers. This mentoring and coaching activity should ideally become part of the professional career path of a teacher. New teachers need to be supported in building relationships with other school staff and parents. This is even more important in rural, remote and Distance Education situations.

Inexperienced and poorly performing teachers need additional support from other sources as well as from the principal in their school. A mentoring program for rural teaching and executive positions could build on successful programs that are already in use. Within this system, an allowance could be made for mentors who need to travel to small schools for coaching purposes. While this may require additional funding, the use of modern day communications makes strategies more affordable than they once were.

Coaching should be on a confidential basis and not be reported as part of teaching performance reviews. In this way coaching will be better viewed as an opportunity to better practice, rather than as a threat to careers.

Additional professional development should be available with opportunities to observe great teachers at work, develop model lessons with great teachers and have great teachers observe other teachers in real lessons with a view to providing feedback. Prior to being phased out, the Country Areas Programme (CAP) addressed this issue in many remote schools in NSW, for example.

2. A Responsive Level of Leadership Between Rural and Remote Schools and the Department

School Education Directors and Regional Education Directors (or their equivalents in the various states) must act as effective intermediaries between rural and remote schools and their respective state departments. The availability of staff at regional level to respond when issues arise is crucial. These staff members could be a medium for sharing teaching information and initiatives which, after proving successful in one school, could then be utilised in other schools under the Director's umbrella. These Directors must also provide hands on support for teacher performance and be responsive in identifying problems, such as encouraging the interaction between schools and their communities.

Schools which are performing well could be given more latitude regarding self-determination of teaching performance and community consultation. Those schools can be given more flexibility to exercise their own judgment and make their own decisions. However, where schools encounter problems in teacher performance and community consultation, the Directors need to be ready to respond quickly, stepping in to instigate tight controls over models of teaching and community consultation that are working well in other schools. Problem schools and teachers need tight controls - successful schools and teachers can be afforded more latitude. Leadership needs to be able to determine which regime needs to apply in which situations.

3. Creating Tomorrow's Leadership and Retaining Leaders

Not only do teachers need mentoring and coaching, but also leaders require similar attention. Potential school leaders should be identified early and encouraged to develop leadership skills prior to appointment. Recruitment of rural school candidates could be selected from a purpose run 'talented staff' recruitment drive.

Good leadership needs some time to implement change. Reward structures should encourage Principals in rural and remote schools to retain their leadership postings for five to seven years, a time frame considered necessary to build experience, enable skills to develop and change to be properly implemented.

4. Where Possible, Release Teachers from Administrative Burdens by Engaging Administrative Staff

The most respected doctors and lawyers are most often practitioners supported by administrative staff. Whilst it must be acknowledged that some tasks should remain the responsibility of Principals, such as the Annual School Report, teacher performance reviews and sensitive student issues, more tasks could be carried out by administrative staff. Excellent teachers should be permitted to practise as teachers, and promotions should not necessarily be to administrative postings. A clear and satisfactory career path needs to be developed in which teachers can be promoted to stay practising as teachers rather than be promoted into administrative principal and other positions. Additional funding for administrative staff will better free up great teachers to stay teaching, as teaching may well be the source of their professional satisfaction. Perhaps leaders could be taught to delegate efficiently so as to minimise their burdens.

5. Recognise and Fund Innovation and Sharing of Innovation

The respective state departments could use funding to investigate successful models of great teaching in disadvantaged environments in other states and countries and disseminate that knowledge in a relevant form to principals and teachers in rural and remote schools.

Furthermore, funding should be made available to individual principals and teachers with a view to pioneering innovative programs for rural and remote schools to establish, develop and multiply successful ideas.

Most teachers do not have the time and, in some cases, the skills to conduct that research - they are already burdened with the other demands of their job. In NSW, the former Country Areas Program (CAP) employed consultants who very successfully carried out this task.

6. Give Schools and Teachers Flexibility to Pursue Specialised Programs

Within the confines of curricula and other universal expectations, schools and teachers need the time and flexibility to develop localised educational and social programs.

The national policy shift is towards delivering greater autonomy to schools under the rationale that better outcomes result if each school has the flexibility to focus on the specific needs of its students and community. Encouraging principals and teachers to pioneer methods which are successful in their own locality is an extension of this rationale.

7. Not Accepting Geography to be an Excuse for Educational Failure

Issues of distance and geography should not be permitted to be an acceptable excuse for legitimising lower standards in rural and remote schools. Whilst it is well documented that the home environment and the value parents place on education have a great influence on the achievements of the child, teachers also have a role to play in changing these attitudes. The education system should not allow disadvantage on these grounds to become entrenched or excused, nor should standards be lowered. Rather, the profession must be charged with the task of proving wrong those who accept structural disadvantage based on distance thus proving wrong those who accept the concept of significant, permanent and entrenched disadvantage of rural and remote schooling.

This may require giving front line principals and teachers charged with the above task, preferential access to professional development and innovative technology over their metropolitan counterparts to assist in that task.

8. Instil a Culture Where Every Single Child is on the Agenda

Every student must be firmly on the agenda of the teaching and education system in NSW and each student must be encouraged by teachers to excel with regard to their capabilities and predispositions. Whilst it could be argued that this already happens and is the reason most teachers do what they do, there needs to be staff at regional level who can respond to situations where the local community does not value education and the school staff are having difficulties engaging students.

Teaching practices and emphasis should acknowledge that not all children learn in the same way, nor is a university education the goal for everyone. The emphasis on school league tables and Naplan results risks developing a culture where university education and good academic results are the prime aim which, in turn, results in a critical skills shortage within the trades and agriculture sector. Many rural schools teach to the Naplan test. Trade and vocational based school subjects can re-engage academically challenged pupils with schooling and provide many children with real futures. These children will then continue on to positively contribute to society.

9. Responsive, Supportive Leadership

Studies clearly show that replacing an average principal with an excellent principal in an “average” school leads to a dramatic impact on student performance¹. In order to improve equity, attracting and retaining great principals in some of the most disadvantaged rural and remote schools should be a priority. ICPA-NSW applauds, for example, the Connected Communities initiative in NSW of increasing the salary of principals in participating disadvantaged schools.

Principals need more time for leadership responsibilities. The role of the principal in supporting teachers, observing classes and instituting change requires proper recognition and principals will only have time to concentrate on important leadership tasks if they can be relieved, at least to some extent, from administrative duties.

Poor leadership is in itself a common cause of poor employee retention and so poor principals will often have a high teacher turnover in their schools, costing the system dearly. However, true leadership creates a positive environment within which staff can flourish and this leads to good staff retention and excellent outcomes across the school. Principals need opportunities to develop their leadership capabilities. Were these future leaders identified earlier, mentored and given ideal professional development opportunities, excellent principals could be actively and consciously shaped.

¹ McKinsey Education 2009 p27

10. Technology as an important tool, but not master of the classroom

Technology provides the means, not only to expand access to quality learning, but also to enhance collaborative professional development between teachers. However, technology should be a tool in learning, and not an end in itself.

The use of technology in the classroom has grown at a great rate. This has been a wonderful ‘revolution’ for rural schools. Teachers need to be fully able to utilise the technology or otherwise it will become another barrier to learning. Most teachers are well qualified to use the latest equipment but some allowance must be made for casual and part time teachers in remote areas who may require up-skilling. Once schools have connectivity to broadband type services, the agenda can move on towards training teachers to embed technology into great teaching practices.

Technology has the potential to enhance curriculum delivery, even more so in rural and remote schools than in metropolitan schools, as it expands subjects and curriculums which could not otherwise be taught. Accordingly, rural and remote schools need preferential access to that technology and teachers in those schools need preferential access to professional development in using and embedding that technology in the classroom. With good technology, teachers in schools in different towns can combine to develop lessons and share teaching resources. It must be acknowledged that this already occurs to some degree.

With competence in the use of technology and where there is a wide range of student ability in the classroom as is often the case in smaller rural and remote schools, technology can be combined with great teaching to:

- Provide new or inexperienced teachers with real time evidence of the level of student comprehension which allows teachers to vary their teaching pace; and
- Allow students to progress through units at their own pace, and even customise instruction to the students’ individual needs.

Technology will play a major role for rural, remote and Distance Education when sharing best practice locally. Professional development does not need to be expensive, nor does it need to be long seminars in distant cities when sharing ideas among those in similar circumstances may be more effective, relevant and simple, so long as technology is able to be used easily by those participating.

Finally, greater use could be made of online learning platforms that provide programs for students on either end of the learning spectrum. The Xsel Western Region Virtual Selective Class for talented and gifted children in the Western Schools of NSW is one example. Such programs could be further developed and multiplied across other areas of the state.

11. Pre-service Teachers

Teacher education institutions in NSW alone provide 5,500 graduate teachers annually yet the NSW Department of Education and Communities employs only 300 to 500 new permanent teachers each year. If fewer graduate teachers were trained, then greater resources could be expended on each undergraduate while maintaining revenue neutrality overall. An increase in ATAR requirements for teaching would lead to fewer students enrolling in teacher training courses. In this manner training quality could increase and with more resources per student, certification requirements could be extended. This would ultimately lead to a more highly trained workforce that justifies and commands higher respect, remuneration and rewards.

Strategies might include closer links with rural universities, pre-appointment training to identify suitable candidates, exchange programs with city teachers and the expansion of regional induction programs.

It must be acknowledged that, being trained by a University, does not always guarantee a great teacher. Teachers in rural and remote areas now have incentives in some instances to attract them to certain positions. Budget cuts to these incentives would disadvantage rural schools.

Empathy for the student is a powerful tool and this follows in to an understanding of rural, remote and Distance Education learning situations. Teachers should receive some specialised/specific training during their degree time, or as professional development later, that gives them a knowledge and understanding of teaching in these areas.

Pre-service teacher education regarding rural and remote schools should include a focus on the following:

- a. Exploring successful models of the great teacher in a rural/remote setting;
- b. Pre-service practicum opportunities in rural and remote areas in conjunction with acknowledged great teachers;
- c. Specific funding to assist with practicum expenses in rural areas; and
- d. Teachers supervising practicums or undertaking a mentoring role should have more incentive to do so, as a great deal of work and time is necessary. A supervising teacher can have a great and long lasting effect on a student teacher.

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