Rural Education in 2020:

Reflections and Impacts of Drought, Bushfires, Dust Storms and COVID-19

July 2020

The Country Education Partnership acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

We recognise the impact of the bushfires, drought and COVID-19 pandemic will be significant and enduring for rural and nonrural Indigenous Australians.

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Introduction

Rural Victoria has battled through an enduring drought, cataclysmic bushfires, dust storms and the COVID-19 global pandemic. These events have significantly impacted the provision of education in rural communities.

As the leading voice for rural education in Victoria, the Country Education Partnership (CEP) has extensive access to rural communities across all education sectors. Throughout Term 2, CEP contacted more than 80 education leaders from Victorian rural schools to understand how these challenges have impacted their students, schools and communities, and the opportunities they have provided for framing the future.

These semi-structured interviews focused on the challenges that leaders have faced in 2020, the positive innovations which have emerged in their schools, and their view of what the future of rural education should look like. The data was then coded through NVivo to produce key themes and then analysed.

Additionally, CEP established an ongoing and in-depth communication with the Rural Youth Ambassadors and Alumni across Victoria to obtain their voice on how the last six months has impacted their experiences of learning, and what they would like to see developed moving forward.

From these conversations, CEP has collated the challenges, issues, and opportunities that have arisen as a result of these recent disruptions; and identified possible future directions which align with recent rural education research.

CEP found that the confluence of the drought, bushfires and COVID-19 amplified existing issues in rural education. For over 40 years, governments have been reviewing Australian rural education and have largely converged on these same themes and conclusions. This circuitous pattern has consistently reaffirmed the importance of a rural lens; promoted 'local solutions to local problems'; recognised that every rural community is unique and; acknowledged that partnerships and collaborations between rural schools and their communities are irrefutably beneficial.

The following is a brief summary of key points which emerged from the data. It has been grouped into the following overarching themes:

- Local Solutions to Local Problems
- The Power of Partnerships and Clusters
- Information Technology
- Student Voice

Country Education Partnership will continue to undertake conversations with education leaders, educators, young people, and community members within rural and remote communities throughout 2020 and continually add to the information contained within this initial report.

Theme 1:
Local Solutions to Local Problems

- Rural schools have developed a range of local solutions to local problems which reflect the particular needs of their community. Education leaders, teachers, and support staff have gone above and beyond to support their students' learning during the first six months of 2020. Some examples include:

  - A school in the South Western District has utilised the bus routes as a vehicle to drop-off student learning packages and to communicate with families to support remote learning;

  - A school in the Mallee supported their families on a weekly basis through dust storms and remote learning by having staff rotating to deliver home learning packages (and in many cases food packages) as a result of a significant number of families not having internet connectivity or the capacity to travel;

  - A Gippsland school opened to allow students and families to drop-in one day per week to meet staff, pick up new packs, solve IT issues and drop-off completed learning packs.

  - Many schools allowed small groups of VCE students to attend school in order to complete their work requirements and SACS, overcoming the issue of poor connectivity at home.

  - Many staff have made house calls and set-up wireless internet devices, provided IT support, delivered hard-copy learning packs, had daily connections with students, and conducted learning reflections with students and their families.

- The responses from principals indicated to CEP that education leaders and their staff have the capacity, creativity, local knowledge, and the problem-solving ability to respond to local needs and challenges in these unprecedented and drastic circumstances.

- These consultations told us clearly that rural education leaders are also community leaders. Their skill set and local knowledge is drawn on to provide a broader community leadership role. This has become more evident over the past six months – especially in those communities affected by the bushfires.

- The bushfires, dust storms, drought and COVID-19 has forced schools to innovate and individualise their approach to education. Rural schools have created many initiatives that would not have been utilised previously. They have set a new standard for flexibility of learning.

  - The Far East Gippsland schools contacted every family following the bushfires to check on their well-being, and also to support them in reconnecting with their learning. The principals initiated this by contacting their entire school community to check on the overall wellbeing of the students and their families.

- However, rural communities impacted specifically by bushfire and drought expressedthat these issues continue to have a significant impact on their communities, and the increased emphasis on COVID-19 since its arrival, has seen many of the issues experienced within these communities unresolved.

- Rural schools have developed creative ways to

connect with previously disengaged students, and assisting high-performing students in realising their potential through extended and individualised programs.

This has provided a unique opportunity for staff to rethink how they deliver education especially for these student cohorts. Schools shared that many of these students relished the opportunity to be free from the distractions of a classroom environment.

- Many rural schools appreciated the work that the Department of Education and Training and Catholic Education Offices have provided through information and support; however, they felt that the timing and contextualisation of the information could have been improved. This was especially expressed by smaller school settings who were often left 'on their own' to share this information with their community.

- Several schools highlighted that a change in community demographic has been occuring over the past five or so years. Many of these new community members having been motivated by affordable housing. This shifting demographic has presented schools with a new set of complex issues which have impacted their ability to support remote student learning.

Emerging Question

Do we need to rethink rural and remote education provision to enable a more flexible, local solutions to local challenges approach?

Theme 2:
The Power of Partnerships and Collaborations

- Rural schools that were already working collaboratively with other geographically local schools had an increased sense of wellbeing, confidence and capacity to deal with challenging circumstances.

  - In one cluster of Gippsland schools, education leaders had been meeting via Webex prior to remote learning in order to share experiences, support staff networks, develop joint learning strategies and to support each other and their staff. Because this collaboration was already established, it enabled the cluster to work together during these challenging times. One example of this effective collaboration was the cluster-wide approach to creating mid-year student reports.

- As a result of the strong partnerships that had been developed across such rural education settings, creative and supportive approaches were developed to address the many challenges that they have been facing in the first six months of 2020. The sharing of staff across education settings, the combining of staff resources across schools and the combining of learning programs are areas that were highlighted.

  - A long-standing cluster in East Gippsland was challenged by the bushfires where a number of staff were unable to return from their Melbourne or Regional centre base. Thus leaving the schools short staffed. The cluster facilitated an opportunity for staff from other schools to cover the shortage for a period of time.

  - Another example of this collaboration was a partnership of rural schools who agreed to share the remote learning resources

they had developed individually, released a staff member to collate these resources and upload them onto a Cluster website, and as a result approximately 10,000 curriculum resources were available to all school staff within the partnership.

- Rural schools that were not part of a cluster or partnership, generally expressed concerns about the administration and management demands of remote learning. Concern for these schools was noted, especially in relation to the wellbeing of the education leaders.

- Some rural schools found that collaborative practice was not acknowledged as a valuable strategy for developing remote learning by education systems.

- The conversations highlighted the importance of building place-based leadership teams across rural schools. Schools with strong leadership structures who were partnered with other local schools seemed to adapt to the situation with more speed.

- Many rural education leaders, on returning from remote learning, expressed a real challenge in accessing Casual Relief Teachers (CRTs). The large majority of CRTs are in an older age bracket and have chosen not to be available for schools during this time. This has increased the pressure on rural schools, with many principals now having to take on a significant teaching role as well as their leadership role.
Many indicated a policy which strongly encouraged collaboration between local schools, and the sharing of staff across schools, would alleviate much of this stress. Some also suggested that within the current climate, the re-allocation of Network and Regional staff to

work within clusters of schools could provide this support.

- As a result of these disruptions and challenges, rural schools are beginning to think about how future education provision may look for their community. They are considering creative programs and modelling that would not have occurred before.

  ○ For example, one community in the High Country is exploring the possibility of allowing senior students to have four days in-person attendance at school and one day remote learning. This involves a partnership of government and non-government schools. Such flexibility will enable the schools to customise the remote day to the needs of the students. Potentialities include part-time work, 1:1 tutoring, VCAL opportunities, extension programs, and internships/work placements.

Emerging Question

While there have been some great recent state government initiatives to support regional and rural education, could these be enhanced and extended to enable greater collaboration between staff and students across rural school settings?

Theme 3:
Information Technology (IT)

- The difficulty in successfully using IT as a powerful tool in supporting teaching and learning in rural schools was highlighted by both education leaders and Rural Youth Ambassadors.

- Many principals were encouraged by the speed at which their staff and students adapted to remote learning and embraced IT to support learning. As a result, principals are now more aware of the skill level of their staff in relation to the use of IT.

- Several rural principals were surprised at the lack of connectivity available within their communities more broadly, as well as the poor IT capacity available to families within their homes.

- The state-wide approach to remote learning presented challenges for the more remote schools. Connectivity, bandwidth and access to IT is community specific and a uniform model may not suit.

  ○ For example, some rural schools in North-West Victoria have 80% of their community on satellite internet. Due to low bandwidth plans, in instances where more than one child was connected, and where parents worked from home, the internet connection failed. This significantly impacted on the school's ability to provide remote learning to families with more than one child.

- There is a large variance in the use of IT platforms and packages in schools across the state, generally these are selected on the basis of staff expertise or interest.

- Both education leaders and Rural Youth Ambassadors indicated that IT has primarily been used for communication in rural schools, generally between teachers and students through remote learning i.e. emails, sharing of information and work requirements; and not necessarily in teaching and learning practices. Many rural schools indicated that IT is an area which could be strengthened in future to enhance teaching pedagogy and student learning. There is a significant need to develop a comprehensive, professional development strategy to lift staff expertise in relation to the use of IT in teaching and learning.

- While numerous rural schools had access to IT equipment and resources, students reflected that many staff lacked the knowledge and expertise to effectively use the technology as an engaging learning tool. As one Rural Youth Ambassador reflected:

  ○ 'Half the time the teachers are trying to work and understand the online platforms and how they function, having never taught in this environment before. I know it is hard, but I am having to teach the teacher about the platform before we can get into the learning.'

- Throughout the remote learning period, as a result of connectivity challenges and teaching capacity, schools indicated some teachers had progressively disengaged from using IT and increasingly returned to using print materials.

Emerging Question

How might we put in place strategies to ensure that the recent learnings are maintained and strengthened so that all rural staff can utilise IT as a powerful teaching and learning tool?

Theme 4:
Student Voice

The following issues were illuminated by the Rural Youth Ambassadors (RYA) during Term 2:

- The RYA undertaking a VCE program were concerned that their end of year exams would be delayed into, or beyond, December. If this were to occur, it would significantly impact the ability of these young people to undertake paid work that would allow them take up further education opportunities such as University study. Many rural students plan to use the four to six-week period prior to Christmas to generate a significant amount of income which will allow them to attend university. Without this income, many Rural Youth Ambassadors indicated that they would find it difficult to take up a university offer.
It was pleasing to see the announcement by the Minister for Education, that the Year 12 exams would only be delayed a few days, which was a relief for many rural young people.

- There was a diversity in opinion about Remote Learning. Many RYA enjoyed the flexibility that remote learning enabled to work at their own pace, while others did not.

  - Some young people in rural communities enjoyed the flexibility of remote learning. Many would unterake their learning requirements early in the morning, and then assist their family to complete work required on their family farm (especially when these farms were undertaking key work such as planting crops after great rains) and then, if required, would return to complete their learning later in the day.

  - At the same time, many examples were shared which indicated that some students disengaged from the remote learning

experience, choosing to be involved in activities they enjoyed more.

- Many RYA reported that returning to face-to-face learning provided some challenges. Some students had fallen behind, while others had moved beyond the class expectations. This, then presented a challenge for teachers, who needed to simultaneously accommodate students who were behind and ahead of the curriculum. In several cases, teachers selected to catch-up the students who had fallen behind which led those ahead of the curriculum to lose some itnterest in their learning.

- As a result of the remote learning experience, RYAs questioned whether the current schooling model is relevant for young people's learning today. They would be keen to explore a blended model of learning in the future. The remote learning period allowed autonomy for students to engage in other learning opportunities outside of school, which they felt complimented their academic endeavors.

Emerging Question

How might we best engage and consider the learning experience of rural young people when developing approaches to education provision within their communities, with a particular focus on those communities who have been impacted by multiple interruptions to education?

Conclusion

The themes that have emerged through this project are not new to rural education and have long been recognised by successive rural education inquiries. COVID-19, bushfires, drought and the rapid move to remote learning has further highlighted these preexisting issues. However, the rapid shift to remote learning has also allowed schools to be agile, innovative, and responsive to the needs of their community at a grass-roots level.

Numerous questions and possibilities have emerged from this work. As the leading organisation for rural education, CEP is eager to meet with education sectors, governments and stakeholders to expand on these findings in order to develop creative approaches.

CEP intends to continue the dialogue with rural education communities across Victoria to further document the experiences of these communities in providing a quality education for their young people.

In addition, CEP will continue to work alongside rural communities in developing ongoing approaches to education provision, building on the learnings and experiences of the past six months.