

Statement of the outcomes of the Gonski Institute for Education Roundtable on Rural and Regional Education

UNSW Sydney, 16 April 2024

Introduction

Gaps in academic outcomes, as measure by standardised tests such as NAPLAN and PISA, between students learning in rural and regional schools and their metropolitan peers are frequently cited, as are the difficulties in attracting teachers and school leaders to rural schools and then enticing them to stay. Well intentioned efforts to incentivise teaching in these schools have had limited effect and the issues are often characterised as intractable. There is a clear and urgent need for new thinking.

The Gonski Institute for Education brought together experts and stakeholders from across Australia to seek novel approaches to addressing well-known issues associated with rural and regional education. These include teacher shortages that are more acute further from metropolitan locations and achievement gaps between students in rural and regional locations and their metropolitan located peers.

Roundtable participants comprised 25 leaders from several Australian states/territories, representing not-for-profit organisations, professional and parent associations, government entities, education systems,

school principals (national and state), and universities, as well as researchers who led the Rural and Regional Education (RaRE) project.

The roundtable used the [report](#) of RaRE project[1] as a springboard for stimulating new thinking intended to create definitive positive change in rural and regional education. Participants grappled with provocations and exchanged ideas from very different perspectives. The new thinking that emerged and the ideas that underpin it are presented here.

Conversations at the Roundtable centred on three broad themes:

- *The untapped power of rural and regional communities*
- *Better supporting the rural and regional education workforce, and*
- *The role of government.*

They are presented in order of the volume of discussion that related to each, and described in turn in the sections that follow. Questions that were raised in relation to each theme are included in the relevant sections, and five specific initiatives are highlighted in a sidebar.

Discussion theme:

The untapped resource of rural and regional communities

There was strong support for changing the way that rural and regional communities are viewed – changing the narrative. Too much focus on the problems confronting rural and regional communities obscures the fact that these communities have unique resources and strengths, and are committed to their local schools. They can provide the social support, connection, purpose, and sense of belonging that support thriving educational environments, and afford teachers and school principals opportunities for personal and professional growth that surpass those available in urban areas.

Rural and regional communities have the potential to contribute significantly to enhancing the education available to local students by supporting the school workforce. There is scope for community organisations, including not-for-profits, and individuals to be much more involved in the induction of new teachers and principals with a view to integrating them into the fabric of the community, building connections and mutual trust. Community members may have skills in mentoring and coaching, and expertise to help teachers to localise the curriculum.

Industry partnerships were seen as crucial, offering mutually beneficial opportunities including apprenticeships and work integrated learning. The need to support principals to develop partnerships with industry was recognised. This work takes time and is an aspect of the distinct and additional demand of being a principal in a rural or regional community.

Rural and regional communities are keen to share responsibility for creating and maintaining thriving educational environments. They recognise crucial role that local schools and education to their community's growth and development because thriving communities are more likely to attract and retain services that benefit the whole community including teachers. Communities and their schools can thrive together.

Questions to consider:

- What are the 'assets' of the community? What are some ways to uncover and make visible the opportunities for professionals?
- How do we identify and build local capacity?
- What are the specific skillsets that rural and regional learners have and bring?
- How do we connect agencies in the NFP space achieving great things with communities, learn from them, and share and/or test their usefulness in other contexts?
- How do we leverage the strengths of collective responsibility?
- How can we look at different/unexpected 'players' in the context of rural and regional education?
- How can we coordinate efforts to tackle complex problems collectively?
- How do we activate purpose & belonging in the community?
- How can not-for-profit insights be made shared and visible, then design a way to bring things together?
- What limitations might industry partnerships have for students? How can they be mitigated against?

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The Gonski Institute for Education is based in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture at UNSW Sydney.



Discussion theme:

Better supporting the rural and regional education workforce

Tapping into the desire and capacity of rural and regional communities to support the local education workforce is key to making rural and regional areas sought after places to work, and in which teachers and principals can build successful and rewarding careers. Supporting education in these communities contributes to community development.

Teachers and principals in rural and regional locations need access to ongoing professional development. Rural and regional communities can contribute to teacher and principal professional development from induction through to supporting experienced staff. The need for professional development in relation to education for community leaders was also raised. Such mutual professional support was seen as part of building collective responsibility for education in rural and regional communities. It is also important that professional development for rural and regional teachers and principals presents positive, motivating messages consistent with reinforcing a positive narrative around rural and regional education, and empowering them to contextualise curriculum and measures of student success. Online platforms facilitating virtual connections are also an important part of professional development provision.

It is important that all members of the community communicate that they value the teaching profession. There is a need for broader community understanding of the demands of teaching in small communities and the challenges that moving from a metropolitan area can present. Community support for their teachers establishing reasonable boundaries around their work is one way in which valuing of teaching could be conveyed.

Preparation for teaching in rural and regional areas needs to begin before teachers graduate from their initial teacher education (ITE) programs. Prospective teachers in non-metropolitan communities need to learn context-specific pedagogies for teaching in rural and regional schools (e.g., teaching multi-grade classes, contextualising the curriculum). They need to know about the ways in which teaching and living in rural and regional communities differs from teaching and living in urban communities. Encouraging people already living in rural and regional communities to become teachers through various “grow your own” programs, and developing partnerships with local universities could contribute to these ends.

More experienced teachers who have worked for much or all their careers in metropolitan schools may also be able to make important contributions to rural and regional education. Teachers who are curious about teaching in a rural or regional school could be encouraged to try the experience by offering short term flexible contracts, perhaps of less than a year, without relinquishing their existing positions. These teachers could provide mentoring and professional development support for less experienced colleagues as well as filling vacancies.

Questions to consider:

- How can (community/school/education system) leaders understand the role of personal purpose and passion for more impactful recruitment?
- What are the impacts on student wellbeing and pathways if there are broader definitions of success?
- How can job crafting contribute to rural and regional education?

Discussion theme:

Role of government

Government education policy needs to be long term, bi-partisan, and focussed on equity. Whole of government responses that recognise shared needs across departments and leverage synergies were supported. There was also support for applying a rural lens (as described in the RaRE report) to all government initiatives.

There was an emphasis on the need to work across government departments, and for governments to consider how successful practices can be spread and/or scaled while retaining their emphasis on contextual specificity.

Questions to consider:

- How do we PLAN a whole of government approach?

Barriers to success

Obstacles to achieving definitive positive change in rural and regional education related mainly to government and system level responses. These included not taking a whole of government approach but continuing to work in departmental silos, the overwhelming metro-centricity of government and education systems, the distance between kids in rural and regional classroom and policy and decision makers, and unwillingness to think differently about rural and regional education and to take bold transformative action.

Specific Initiatives

"This is not simply an education conversation."

1. Identify Community Education Convenors who can work with community members and organisations, including schools, to establish a shared local vision and agreed priorities for education in their community, and coordinate collective collaborative action to support their local schools.
2. Co-plan long term, locally bespoke induction programs for new school staff.
3. Identify community assets and expertise that can inform and contextualise curriculum.
4. Offer flexible and short term opportunities for experienced teachers to try teaching in rural and regional areas.
5. Develop a Rural Education Guarantee.

A rural and regional research agenda

"What do we know?"

"We don't know what we think we know".

"Biases, hunches and cost efficiencies can be drivers of decision making".

It was acknowledged that there is no shared understanding of what "rural and regional and remote" mean. This is most starkly the case across Australian education jurisdictions. There is also very little available baseline data from which to measure progress, and lack of clarity on what success might mean and hence what should be measured and how.

It was acknowledged that existing data fail to tell the full story of rural and regional education complexity. Rather than looking for cause and effect relationships a focus on enabling factors is likely to be more useful.

The fact that the extent of what is not known or well understood is itself not well understood and can lead to decisions being made based on biases, hunches, and cost efficiencies.

A rural and regional research agenda could address questions that were raised at the roundtable but fitted less clearly with the themes of the discussion. These were:

- What are the impacts of not completing year 12 for RR students?
- How do we repurpose existing resources?
- Parent engagement (bringing them along).
- What are the known principles or 'active ingredients' that make existing ideas work?

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