

Community connection key to success for teachers at rural and regional public schools: Australian Report

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Research conducted by academics from the University of New South Wales' Gonski Institute for Education, in partnership with the University of Canberra and Social Ventures Australia, has identified pathways to better outcomes for rural and regional schools in NSW.

[The Rural and Regional Education Project](#), whose findings were released today, is one of the most comprehensive looks at rural and regional education in NSW to date.

Lead researcher, Professor Kim Beswick, Head of UNSW's School of Education and Director of the Gonski Institute for Education explains the scope of the project involved taking a deep dive into 17 rural and regional schools and collecting a mountain of data.

"This included surveys and interviews with principals, teachers, students, parents, and [community members](#), along with interviews with non-school-based DoE personnel and other stakeholders, focus groups with students in Years 5–12, a review of research literature, and secondary analysis of DoE data," she says.

"One of the main things that struck us is that teaching or leading a school in a rural or regional community is a very different job. In a rural context, you're a teacher 24/7. You are recognized wherever you go and there are always parents who want to talk about their child when they see you. School principals are seen as leaders in the community, not just in the school."

Key opportunities

One of the key opportunities identified through the project is that teachers and school leaders are provided with induction programs that are ongoing and include learning about the [local community](#), its history and industries, and what it means to be a prominent and important member of a small community.

"The role teachers play outside the classroom needs to be taken into account when considering [teacher](#) workloads," says Prof. Beswick. "To build relationships with the local communities takes time. And the

research showed that having those relationships made schools more effective. Teachers need support to do that, especially if they've moved from a [metropolitan area](#)."

Another opportunity is that a "rural lens" be applied to all [government policy](#) to ensure that initiatives are tested for their applicability in a diversity of rural contexts before they are implemented.

"The department makes some wonderful resources for schools," says Prof. Beswick, "but they can land differently in a metropolitan school compared to a regional school. The report identified in rural contexts, extra support offered by a new program sometimes looked like an extra burden of administration and implementation, where targets, procedures and policies were not matched to local circumstances.

"The report noted some rural and regional areas are staffed by relatively inexperienced principals with relatively inexperienced teachers. Not to mention the impact of drought or floods. It's a very different context to that of urban schools, and a lot of the initiatives don't quite catch that."

Rural and regional areas need a coordinated approach

"We recommended that there needs to be a whole of government review across any new policy that affects regional and rural schools to see what the unintended consequences might be," says Prof. Beswick.

The report suggests a coordinated approach across the NSW and Federal Governments to improve the economic conditions and access to social and health services for rural and regional communities, as these are necessary pre-conditions for improving educational outcomes.

The report also identifies a need to ensure that professional learning for teachers in rural and regional schools is tailored to local needs and

includes developing teachers' confidence to adapt curriculum to the local context.

"Things like adapting curriculum to explore science in agriculture, or reflect local Indigenous knowledge, are all important in engaging students and communities with schooling," says Prof. Beswick. "As is connecting with Aboriginal elders and entering into educational partnerships with Aboriginal organizations."

Providing support for school leaders to develop and cultivate positive relationships with their [local communities](#) is an opportunity that recognizes the central importance of the school to meet the needs of local students. The positive relationships can also develop and promote the unique strengths of the local school, leading to continued engagement.

Some small towns struggle with maintaining enrolments—Prof. Beswick says schools in those places need to be supported to work together to provide the best possible [education](#) for students in the community. "In [small towns](#), if students change schools, a local school can end up without enough students to remain viable. There is a need to work as a community, and have the DoE facilitating that," she says.

Overall Prof. Beswick is hopeful that the findings will be a pathway to improving the situation for schools in rural and regional areas of NSW. "It's a [difficult problem](#)," says Prof. Beswick. "But the Department of Education is genuine about wanting to improve the situation for people working in rural and regional areas. It's not just a problem in NSW, it's an ongoing issue around Australia and, in fact, around the world."

Provided by University of New South Wales

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