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*Rural Connections: Celebrating Schools and Communities*

## **Equity, Access & Quality Education in Rural Australia: A Survey of SPERA Members & Supporters**

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### **Abstract**

In 2017, SPERA members and supporters were surveyed on their views of rural education. Forty-two participants responded to the online survey through targeted and snowball recruitment. Participants shared their opinions of the main issues in rural education, the challenges facing rural communities and schools, and what they would like to see change to improve the futures of rural youth. There were two consistent themes: concern about access to quality education for all learners and the survival of rural communities. This included worries about isolation, the attraction and retention of teachers, the availability of opportunities for different types of learners and knowledge, insufficient infrastructure, and post-school options for youth. It is noted that these findings are similar to those in other key reports such as the recent Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, 2000 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Report and the 1987 Schooling in Rural Australia Report, with their persistence a disappointing concern for education in Australia.

### **Rural Education Advocacy in Australia**

Rural education in Australia has been subject to national attention and advocacy from several perspectives over the years. There have been national reviews and enquiries such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) enquiry in 2000 and the recent Independent Review into Regional, Rural, and Remote Education (IRRRRE). State and Territory Governments have focused on rural education with programs and initiatives around improving resources and improving staffing of rural schools. There is also great interest in rural education from stakeholder advocacy groups such as the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA), the Country Women's Association (CWA), the Australian Association for Research in Education's Rural Education Special Interest Group (AARE), and The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). With this attention, it is evident that there is a shared interest and concern about education in rural Australia.

One of these stakeholder groups, SPERA, conducted a survey of its members and supporters in 2017 on their views of rural education. Participants shared their opinions on the main issues in rural education, the challenges facing rural communities and schools, and what they would like to see change to improve the futures of rural youth. This article describes the results of this survey and considers what they mean for rural education in Australia.

### **About SPERA**

SPERA was established in 1984 and consists of members who have an interest in, and commitment to, education in rural Australia. According to their website, SPERA describes its mission to be:

- “advocating for and supporting the provision of quality education and training in rural contexts;

- promoting a positive view of education in rural areas and encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural education services;
- providing a forum for the sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training in rural areas; and
- collaborating with universities to support the recruitment and retention of educators for careers in rural education contexts.”

(“Mission and goals,” 2015)

Additionally, SPERA holds an annual research conference, grants the Australian Rural Education Awards, and hosts the journal *The Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* (formerly *Education in Rural Australia*). Members have a variety of backgrounds such as education academics, educators, and members of community organisations, providing a wide range of perspectives on rural education issues.

### **The Survey**

In 2017, SPERA members and supporters were surveyed about their views of rural education. This was done to revise its mission and aims and help direct SPERA’s future work. It was an online survey, with SPERA members initially contacted via email. Members were invited to share the invitation with anyone with an interest in rural education. Additionally, the survey was promoted on the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook in rural education groups. As such, the forty-two responses are a mix of members and other interested parties. Importantly, this is a survey of people *on the ground* and did not rely on submissions, so adds to its authenticity.

Participants were asked to respond to a number of questions, however, this article focuses on the following:

- What do you feel the main issues in rural education are?
- What are the main challenges schools in rural areas face?
- What are the main challenges communities in rural areas face?
- What would you like to see change to improve the futures of rural youth?

### **Survey Responses**

A clear theme throughout the survey was importance of quality education for all children. Most responses involved descriptions and elaborations of what participants considered to be access to quality education. These included concerns about isolation, the attraction and retention of teachers, the availability of opportunities for different types of learners and knowledge, and insufficient infrastructure and technology. Additionally, it was clear these issues were linked to concerns about the future of rural communities. The importance of each issue varied from question to question.

#### **1. The main issues in rural education**

The main challenges respondents identified for rural schools related to access and equity. Chiefly, this included issues around access to resources, curriculum, and opportunities for rural students and schools. Some responses were also concerned about the lack of financial resources available, and the higher cost of accessing resources in rural schools and communities. Of interest with these responses, is that many of the issues identified focused on what rural education was perceived to be lacking compared to metropolitan schools.

Issues about the staffing of rural schools closely followed concerns about equity and access. Respondents identified issues such as the attraction and retention of staff, teacher quality, the preparation of teachers, qualifications of teachers, housing availability, and further mentoring/training opportunities for teachers. This category of responses is not surprising, given the persistence of these issues over time.

Participants also voiced concerns about the influence of metro-centric policies and the resultant lack of relevance of decisions and policies to rural schools and students. This included concerns about the relevance of the curriculum to rural communities and problems with standardised testing. They also stressed the need to advocate for the strengths of rural education and communities and to better prepare teachers for rural placements.

Other issues identified were:

- Technological challenges: including issues accessing distance education and a lack of working, up-to-date technology
- Diverse needs: challenges with multi-age learning and meeting the needs of Indigenous students
- Post-school support: including the challenges associated with moving away from home and accessing tertiary providers
- Geographical and social isolation: including issues of sustaining the community and rural schools as a result of isolation

## **2. The challenges of rural schools**

This question elicited very similar responses to the first about issues in rural education. However, the focus was more narrowed, with a larger number of responses focused on the staffing of rural schools, equity and access issues, and the effects of having a metro-centric education system. The themes within these categories of responses were also very similar.

While responses were similar to the first question, there were a greater number of responses about the challenges of staffing rural schools and equity and access concerns. Staffing challenges included: inexperienced staff, attraction and retention issues, accessing and implementing relevant professional development, lack of qualified staff, poor specialist teacher supply, low availability of relief teachers, the importance of committed teachers, and concerns about the quality of teaching. In terms of access and equity issues, responses focused on poor funding and a lack of access to resources, services, and facilities. This included the effects on extra-curricular activities, curriculum delivery, and cultural activities. For example, participants' responses indicated that students do not have access to adequate resources and extra-curricular opportunities because of the extra cost of accessing such experiences in rural schools. Also, due to having fewer students enrolled in each school, and therefore fewer staff members, curriculum offerings were limited.

The metro-centricity of the education system was also evident in responses. Again, many responses focused on what rural education was perceived to be lacking in comparison to metropolitan schools. However, a small number of responses focused on starting with the needs of rural communities and students in mind within the education system. This included concerns about the irrelevance of the curriculum and the need for staff that are committed to the community they work in.

Some other issues identified include:

- Political influences: including the influence of changing governments and their priorities and perspectives
- Technological challenges: including access to working technology that meets the needs of students
- Geographical isolation: its influence on community population, stability, and shrinking infrastructure

### **3. *The challenges for rural communities***

Responses to this question had a much broader focus, with issues beyond school under consideration. Almost all responses focused on what rural communities are lacking and the influence this has on residents.

Broadly speaking, responses centred on the impacts of isolation and the resultant inability to maintain community infrastructure and stability. This included the need for education, health, banks, etc. in rural communities, and the impact of their removal. Serious concerns here involved the lack of employment opportunities, along with the subsequent need for youth to leave, lifestyle complications associated with high levels of unemployment and low socioeconomic status, and ageing populations. The need to travel long distances as a result of losing such community infrastructure was also highlighted.

Concerns around education were also evident, centring on the quality of the education system and opportunities for rural students. These concerns included staffing problems, students leaving to go to boarding schools or tertiary institutions, and a metro-centric education system that does not cater for the needs of rural students. These concerns were not as highly considered as they were in previous questions.

The influence of politics was also a major source of concern. Several responses highlighted the effects of standardised policies from decision-makers who were not local, creating mis-matches between the community's interests and needs and what the inadequate funding or policy provided. This included the effects these issues have on the education system, educational outcomes, options for youth, and the subsequent impacts on the needs of rural communities. A focus on community first, rather than politics, was important to respondents.

There were also concerns around health issues for young people. These included concerns about anti-social behaviour, the use of drugs and alcohol, and a limited circle of social influences. Responses indicated that these issues were a result of what rural communities were lacking for their youth.

Other concerns included:

- A lack of role models in the community: including those who can model the value of education and professional occupations
- The challenges presented by environmental conditions such as drought
- Access to cultural experiences

### **4. *Improvements & changes for the futures of rural youth***

Finally, participants were also asked what they would like to see change to help improve the futures of rural youth. Again, the majority of responses centred around equity and access in opportunities, particularly through increasing what is available to youth.

Suggestions around education were most prevalent. Respondents felt youth need more opportunities for further education (including universities and vocational education), access to the same education that city students have, more subject choice at school, more schools to avoid families feeling as though they have to send their children to boarding school, funding for school and higher education opportunities, improved connections with other options for education (such as distance education), better teaching pedagogy, more relevant curriculum, and more committed teachers. Most of these suggestions related to trying to counter the issues identified in the first and second question of the survey.

There was also a focus on rural communities, not just rural schooling. In particular, there were calls for a stronger focus on building and sustaining rural communities to ensure bright futures. This included more job opportunities (including apprenticeships), focusing on regional development, improving community infrastructure (especially technology), and improve funding to enable more youth initiatives.

More local decision-making and a changed approach from politics were also important to respondents. Key suggestions focused on opportunities for rural youth to be heard and make decisions about their own future as well as recognising local community needs in decision-making. These issues were particularly important in relation to the issue of sustaining rural communities. Respondents also identified the importance of better political recognition and consideration of rural futures.

Youth mobility was also a focus. Respondents were divided on this issue. Some identified needing to find ways to stop youth from being pulled towards the city through trying to find ways to improve rural communities. Others suggested that focus should be on ways of enabling mobility between the city and county, both during and after education, to enable youth to access the widest variety of opportunities.

Other suggestions included:

- The need for Reconciliation to be a social priority, and wider access to cultural experiences
- Promotion of rural communities and the benefits of living in rural locations
- Promotion of options for rural youth

## **Conclusion**

The SPERA members and interested stakeholders in rural education clearly have serious concerns about rural students' access to quality education. This came through repeatedly in their responses. There are also grave concerns about the survival needs of rural communities not being met in fundamental ways. Of interest is the similarity in issues raised by SPERA members and the issues raised by submissions from stakeholders in the recent IRRRRE report. In particular, the concerns around the staffing of rural schools, the need for more post-school transition support, and curriculum relevance for rural students were highlighted in both this survey and the IRRRRE. However, SPERA members had more concerns about the health and sustainability of rural communities, recognising that rural schools do not operate in a vacuum. While the IRRRRE report calls for more ICT infrastructure, SPERA members additionally call for community infrastructure, especially access to quality healthcare. They note that if rural youth are to have successful outcomes, then their communities need to be robust before, during, and after their time at school. These concerns are not new, with many being similar to those raised in other reports such as the HREOC Report (2000) and the Commonwealth Schools Commission Report (1987). Since these reports, there have been many targeted attempts to try to limit the

presence and effects of these issues in rural communities, such as initiatives to attract staff to rural schools and programs to increase curriculum access, but still they persist.

Many of the issues raised in this survey seem to be shaped by concerns about what rural schools and communities are lacking for their youth. This included concerns about lack of resources and quality staff as well as a lack of community infrastructure. Respondents felt a key challenge was overcoming obstacles that resulted from this and that by providing 'more' for their youth, some of these issues would be resolved. Many described this to be in relation to their concern about 'equity' for rural students.

Some respondents also felt that many of the challenges rural communities face were due to a dominance of metro-centric bias and as such, they felt it was important to challenge this bias. Respondents identified the ill-effects of policies made elsewhere and when the rural is seen to be 'competing' against the metropolitan, for example in standardised tests. To combat this, many called for an increase in decision-making from a rural perspective, for more opportunities for rural voices to be heard, and local knowledge to be celebrated. There was a clear acknowledgement of the need to value the rural.

With the recent release of the IRRRRE report, it is timely to consider the issues identified in this survey. This is particularly important given the similarities in issues identified, and the different stakeholders involved in both of these. Specifically, both the SPERA member survey and the IRRRRE highlight the importance of consulting rural people when considering the needs and futures of their communities. They know what they need to succeed on their own terms and want to see a change in the metro-centric influence on their communities.

### References

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