

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCHOOL TO A RURAL TOWN

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### ABSTRACT

The school has a number of roles in a rural community. This paper investigates just what those roles are in three rural high schools in the Wimmera District of Victoria. After summarising the roles provided by interviews in the three schools, four of the roles are examined in more detail. These are the community use of the school facilities, the expenditure of the staffs in the three communities, the involvement of the staff in community associations and organisations and the employment created by the three schools. The investigation shows that in those three communities, the schools are important. In addition, the paper refers to roles which are difficult to quantify such as tradition and community integrity. These roles are also of importance to the rural communities.

### INTRODUCTION

Sher (1977), in a Kansas study of the small rural high school and its place in the community social setting, concluded that:

... The town's high school was tightly integrated into the fragile fabric of the community's social life. The communities and their schools were mutually reinforcing. To remove the school from such a community (and thereby alter the reciprocal balance) would be destructive of the community. (Sher, 1977: 71)

Just how important is the high school to a rural community in Australia? This paper seeks to provide answers to this question. Research was carried out in three rural towns, Dimboola, Nhill and Kaniva in the Wimmera District of Victoria in 1987 to establish the importance of local high schools to those communities.

In order to obtain opinion about the role of the school in the community interviews were held with the principal, two teachers and two parents at each school. Of the two teachers interviewed one was a senior teacher and the other an assistant teacher. One parent interviewed was the president of the school council whilst the other was not involved with the council. In all seventeen different reasons were given as to why the three high schools were important to those communities. Figure 1 summarises the reasons given.

The five most mentioned reasons, in priority order, were the use the community made of the school facilities, the financial expenditure by the school staff in the community, the school being an important provider of education for the community's children, the staff involvement and contribution to local community organisations and the school being a service industry which was important for community survival.

Some reasons given, such the sentimental importance, tradition, and a sense of community pride, reflect an affinity and attachment of the community members to the local high schools and supports the community importance of the schools as suggested by Sher.

Figure 1

### Why the Wimmera High Schools Are Important to Their Communities

- The school is an important part of the community as a war memorial.
- The school provides community library facilities.
- The school provides a community hall.
- The school involves the children of the community and so there is a co-operative community effort for their benefit.
- The school has tradition and sentimental attachment.
- The physical position of the school, being located on the highest position over-looking the town, gives it prominence in the community.
- The school facilities are used by the community.
- The school is a source of financial expenditure in the town.
- The school is the focal point of the community.
- The school provides a sense of achievement and a confidence in the future.
- The staff involvement and contribution is important to community associations and clubs.
- The school has a sense of family.
- The school is important as a service industry in the community and is important for community survival.
- The school provides for community expectations and is a reflection of the town.
- The school is an important agent of community change.
- The school provides employment for the community.
- The school's success is important for community pride.
- The school is an important provider of education for the community's children.

Source: Interviews at the Three Wimmera High Schools.

A number of the roles can be quantified. This paper examines only four such roles in detail. They are community use of the school facilities, the school as a source of expenditure in the town, the staff involvement and contribution in associations and clubs and provision of employment.

#### COMMUNITY USE OF SCHOOL FACILITIES

Information about community use of facilities was provided in a questionnaire completed by the principals for the three Wimmera high schools and from the interviews conducted at the schools. From the principals' questionnaire data and those interviewed, 35 community groups were identified which used the three Wimmera high school facilities. The groups are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Organisations That Use the Wimmera High School Facilities

Sporting Clubs.	Service Clubs	Other Community Organisations.
Hockey	Rotary.	Garden Club.
Judo.	Lions.	Drama Group.
Netball.	Apex.	Agricultural and Pastoral Society.
Table Tennis.		Country Education Project.
Badminton.		Bird Observers' Club.
Aerobics.		Complex Committee.
Gun.		Dancing Lessons.
Squash.		Reunions.
Cricket.		Adult Literacy.
Tennis.		Community Education Group.
Football.		Pottery.
Angling.		Victorian Farmers' Federation.
Little Athletics.		Returned Servicemen's Club.
Martial Arts.		Community Aid Abroad.
Softball.		Library.
Pony.		
Basketball.		

Source. Questionnaires and Interviews at the Three Wimmera High Schools.

Based on the questionnaire and interview data, it is apparent that the three Wimmera high schools are an important community resource.

**THE SCHOOL AS A SOURCE OF EXPENDITURE IN THE TOWN.**

In the investigation of the school as a source of expenditure, the expenditure by staff members and bus drivers in those towns and elsewhere was calculated. One hundred and five people gained direct employment in the operation of the schools. These consisted of 79 teachers and 26 ancillary or council employed staff. In addition 24 bus drivers also gained employment in transporting the rural children to the schools.

All teaching, ancillary and council employed staff in the three schools were surveyed to obtain information about their gross salary, the estimate of their expenditure in the town where they taught and estimates of expenditure in neighbouring towns. Seventy five of the 105 staff responded to the survey. The respondents included a mix of teaching, ancillary and council employed staff and the respondent teachers were a mix of different classifications. The respondents appeared to be representative of the total staff population and the findings were extrapolated for the total staff numbers.

Of the estimated gross income of \$2,492,600 for the staff at the three Wimmera high schools, \$960,400 or 39% was spent in the townships of Dimboola, Kaniva and Nhill. A further \$187,440 or seven per cent was spent in other service centres in the Wimmera. Of this amount, \$184,200 was spent in Horsham. Expenditure in Horsham, the main service centre of the Wimmera, decreased with the increased distance of the three towns from that centre. The total expenditure in the Wimmera by the staff of the three schools was \$1,147,850 or 46% of estimated gross salary.

No attempt was made to survey bus contractors and bus drivers for their expenditure in the three West Wimmera towns or the Wimmera. It was assumed that gross income from the bus operations was spent in a similar pattern to that of school staffs. Of the total bus contract income of \$345,890, \$134,900 (39%) would be spent in Dimboola, Kaniva and Nhill. This would give a total expenditure of \$1,095,300 at those three towns. The expenditure of bus contract income spent in the Wimmera would be \$159,110 (46%), giving a total expenditure in the Wimmera of \$1,306,960.

The actual local expenditure at the three towns could even be greater because of school expenditure on school supplies such as students' requisites and canteen supplies. It can be seen why those interviewed placed expenditure in the town as one of the most important roles of the school in the community.

#### **STAFF INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS.**

A questionnaire was used to obtain information about staff involvement in activities and organisations in each Wimmera town. Staff members of the three high schools were asked to indicate their involvement in a variety of organisations and associations in the towns where they lived and also the involvement of members of their families. There was an opportunity provided for involvement in other organisations and associations not listed on the questionnaire to be added by the respondent. The questionnaire also sought information as to whether the staff members held executive positions in the organisations and associations. From the data obtained it was possible to determine an average involvement for the staff members of the schools and members of their families.

The involvement of teachers and ancillary staff members and that of their families in community clubs, organisations and associations at the three Wimmera towns is summarised in Table 1. The involvement figure represents the total number of activities of the teachers, ancillary staff and staff families who indicated involvement in organisations. For example, 34 of the 75 staff respondents had 62 involvements in school activities or organisations other than teaching. One teacher could have been involved in three activities - the parents' club, the fete committee and the school council.

Table 1

**Staff Members and Their Family Involvement  
in Community Organisations**

Organisation	Staff Involvement	Family Involvement	Total
Shire.	1	-	1
School Activities. (Non Teaching)	62	14	76
Country Education Project.	13	-	13
Sporting Activities.	177	151	328
Service Clubs.	9	2	11
Youth Clubs.	4	16	20
Church Groups.	22	29	51
Cultural Organisations.	14	8	22
Community Organisations.	39	26	65
Other Organisations.	26	37	63
<b>Total (75 respondents)</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>650</b>
<b>Average Involvement.</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>8.5</b>
<b>Total involvement.(all staff)</b>	<b>504</b>	<b>388.5</b>	<b>903</b>
<b>Number of executive positions held.(75 respondents)</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Average number of executive positions held.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>1.3</b>
<b>Number of positions. (all staff)</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>31.5</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Major Involvement</b>	<b>Sport School Community Other Church</b>	<b>Sport Other Church Community School</b>	<b>Sport School Community Other Church</b>

Source. Survey of Staff Members at the Present Wimmera High Schools.

Table 1 shows that staff members and their families of the three high schools were very much involved in community, social, cultural, sporting, church and other activities in the three Wimmera towns. This involvement was quantified to be an average 8.5 activities for each staff member and his/her family. The highest level of involvement was in sport, followed by school activities, community organisations (eg. Hospital Board, Hospital Auxiliary, State Emergency Services, Red Cross, Ambulance Association, Sports Complex Committee, and Community Aid Abroad), other organisations (Pastoral and Agricultural Society, Gardening Club, Tidy Towns Committee, Young Farmers' Club, Country Fire Authority, Victorian Farmers' Federation) and church organisations.

It was assumed that if a person held an executive position in an organisation that person exerted considerable influence on that organisation and its membership. For example, if a staff member was the coach of a community sporting team that person had a definite influence on the players of that team. The number of executive positions held could be used as an indicator of the extent of the influence staff members and their families had on the organisations of the towns.

Table 1 also shows that the estimated total number of executive positions held by staff members and their families at the three Wimmera towns was 136. This was an average of 1.3 positions per staff member and his/her family. Staff members held approximately three times more executive positions than their other family members. With this level of involvement, it was apparent that teachers' interests, skills, expertise and leadership, and that of their family members, were benefiting the community members in the three towns. This evidence of involvement supports the belief that staff members have other important roles in the communities where they live beyond teaching the students at school. The communities also benefited from the participation and leadership of staff members' families.

#### **EMPLOYMENT RESULTING FROM THE THREE WIMMERA HIGH SCHOOLS**

One hundred and twenty nine people gained direct employment from the operation of the Wimmera high schools. This employment comprised 79 teachers, 26 ancillary, one council employed staff and 24 bus drivers. In addition and as a consequence of the operation of the schools, there would be a multiplier effect on employment in those towns. Employment could be affected in such areas as bus servicing, fuel distribution, road maintenance, canteen supplies, the operation of the sports centres, the use of fuel and electricity, the purchase of students' supplies, uniform sales, school supplies, rental housing and buildings maintenance. Some employment effect would be local but in some of the categories mentioned, it may be at another Wimmera centre or further afield. No attempt was made to quantify this additional employment created by the operation of the schools because of the difficulty in doing so, but it was assumed to be important to the school communities. In rural towns such employment is important in the economic fabric of the communities.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In the four roles examined, the importance of the rural high school to the local community in areas other than educating the children, is obvious. In addition to the three high schools, there is a State primary school in each town and two registered schools in one town and one in another. If the effect of those additional schools on expenditure, community use of school facilities, involvement of staff in community organisations and employment is similar in relative terms to the high schools, the schools in the three towns are very important to the well being of those communities.

Peshkin (1982:153-158), another American writer when analysing the importance of the school to the community noted the importance of the schools symbolic functions of autonomy, vitality, integrity, personal control and community tradition. These roles are difficult to measure but are also reflected in a number of the other roles of the schools identified by those interviewed in the Wimmera. They involve sentimental attachment and emotional feeling for the school and are important to a rural community. Those involved in restructuring rural education need to be aware and sensitive to the important community roles that the school has in a rural community.

## REFERENCES

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### Author.

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