

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF SPERA

Emmy Terry

President SPERA

The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, or SPERA, draws together educators and other community members, for the common goal of improving learning outcomes of students in rural, regional and remote locations, both on the nation and international scene. Throughout its 25 year history SPERA has sought to influence governments, education policy, educators and communities to ensure students in rural locations have the opportunity to receive and achieve equitable and socially just outcomes through:

- promoting a positive view of education and training in rural areas and encouraging innovation and initiative in the provision of rural services;
- supporting and encouraging rural communities and educators to work towards the provision of quality education and training; and
- providing a framework for the sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training in rural areas.

SPERA began as a national entity in 1984. The organization emerged from a New South Wales in-service activity organised by Marie Dale. The activity brought together Marie Dale and Bob Meyenn, then Lecturer in Education at Riverina College of Advanced Education, and the pair went on to organise a National Conference on rural education, which was held in Armidale, New South Wales in 1985. At this Conference, SPERA was endorsed as a national organisation and Marie became its foundation president. On reflection, it seems appropriate that the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, also hosted the first International Symposium For Innovation in Rural Education (ISFIRE), *Innovation for Equity in Rural Education.*, in February 2009. Participants for this conference were welcomed from all over the world.

Marie and Bob saw the need to establish a national organisation which would advance the positive aspects of rural life and rural education and celebrate the unique features of rural education as they were both concerned by the effect the "disadvantaged" label was having on rural communities. This perception of 'disadvantage' prevails as we move into the twenty-first century and rural and remote communities are becoming more and more marginalized. Education must provide opportunities to overcome these barriers as it influences and impacts on more and more aspects of people's lives. Furthermore, we SPERA must be a driver in helping communities move beyond this concept of disadvantage and promote the unique nature of rural communities including their positive contribution to our nation's economic prosperity.

Complex challenges and opportunities for education in regional and remote areas, largely brought about by geography, continues to revolve around the teaching profession – recruitment, retention, limited access to support and services, professional isolation, multi-grade classes and high costs of living; and students and learning – attendance, transience, access to resources and facilities, access to specialist academic programs, access to services e.g. health, opportunities to participate in sporting competitions, cultural and other activities, excursions, university visits and visiting speakers etc, and students commencing school with English as a Second Language.

Many factors combine to contribute to the disparity in student achievement levels and the equity in the provision of education and training opportunities for students living in regional and remote locations. Research generally indicates that students from low socio-economic backgrounds, regardless of location, achieve at significantly lower levels in areas such as reading, scientific and mathematical literacy than students from middle to high socio-economic backgrounds. However, despite significant advantage in technology and transport systems/linkages geographic isolation continues to be identified as the most significant factor impacting on student achievement. Research data demonstrates that students attending schools in regional and remote locations generally perform at significantly lower levels than their metropolitan counterparts. (OECD PISA (2006) in PISA in Brief from Australia's Perspective).

SPERA believes that opportunities to access education should not be limited by the challenges of distance and isolation and continues to implement a wide range of supplementary, targeted initiatives to meet the needs of regional and remote area education. There has been an ongoing commitment to promote use innovative technology and appropriate programs for regional and remote areas.

As a national, rural education and training organisation SPERA continues to provide a strong forum through a raft of activities which includes a national annual conference, the bi-annual cutting edge Education in Rural Australia Journal, the highly sought after Australian Rural Education Award and regular informative newsletters which combine to celebrate and share the positive learning programs which are embedded in many rural and remote education and training institutions.

25 YEARS OF HIGHLIGHTS

National SPERA Conference

The annual national conferences provide opportunities for educators to exchange ideas and information about education in rural areas, discussion and networking. Through such a forum many innovative solutions have been implemented positively impacting on students and the rural communities in which they live.

Over the past 25 years the SPERA National Conference has been the recipient of high-quality keynote addresses and workshop presentations that provide conference delegates with opportunities to discuss the many experiences, successes, innovations, strategies, issues and challenges that face educators, students and communities in rural locations.

Conference themes in the past have focused on partnerships, communities working together, technology, equity, opportunities and resourcing. It is evident that rural communities are often severely disadvantaged because education and training resources tend to be concentrated in urban centres. SPERA conference delegates argue the rural people must have equitable access to education and training, and growing opportunities to participate. Issues, highlighted at conferences, that continue to be of particular concern to SPERA include: rural isolation; Aboriginal education; opportunities for women and girls; integration of the disabled; school retention rates, student achievement, human resource issues, socio-economic disadvantage and secondary and post-secondary education and training. SPERA believes that Governments must address these issues and provide funds for equitable access, and that programs offering opportunities to study locally in rural areas must be developed.

Education in Rural Australia

Similarly, the SPERA Journal, *Education in Rural Australia* (first published in 1991 by Colin Boylan who is still on the editorial committee today), produced biannually, has significant international standing due to the research, quality and depth of articles published relating to rural education. It is one of the few national and international journals that focus on addressing the issues, challenges and developments in rural education.

The journal includes articles, reports, reviews and research which:

- Promote the development of education in rural Australia (and overseas);
- Disseminate innovative ideas, actions, programs and policies in rural education;
- Link people interested in providing quality learning experiences;
- Provide a forum for new ideas and innovations in rural education; and
- Provide a venue for sharing of information on rural education issues and the development of programs.

The new editorial team, lead by Dr Graeme Lock from Edith Cowan University, includes editors from Australia, United States of America, Canada and New Zealand.

Australian Rural Education Award

The annual Australian Rural Education Award which is awarded to a current project occurring in rural or remote Australia is presented annually at the National SPERA Conference. It was established in 1994 by SPERA as the first national award recognising both excellence in rural education and promoting creative and positive ways of meeting the educational needs of rural families and their communities, and celebrating the positive aspects of living, working and being educated in a rural community. The objectives of the Award are to:

- promote a positive image of education in rural Australia
- acknowledge individual or group achievements in rural education

- celebrate and promote creative ways of meeting the education needs of students and families in rural locations.

Since its initiation submissions from around Australia are testament to the partnerships and engagement with communities and other agencies. This whole of partnership approach builds on the concept of the rural school as a community resource and provides a dedicated and unified strength in working towards the future, benefiting young people, their communities and the nation as a whole.

Pre-Service – Novice Teacher

At the SPERA Conference held in Melbourne in 2008 the executive explored various options on how to support pre-service educators completing professional experience in rural and remote schools across Australia. Our first initiative was to endorse a motion to provide free membership to SPERA for any current education student. As Executive member Sheila King is responsible for the Pre-service Network portfolio. Sheila has been pro-active in this area and has initiated correspondence and information to a significant number of pre-service teachers in Queensland, particularly those at the University of Queensland. Currently 10 USQ students have taken up the offer of membership which is a great start.

SPERA intends to work on providing support to these members electronically, particularly whilst they are completing their professional experiences. Once the network is fully established we hope to extend it to support novice teachers assigned to rural and remote schools. Each state has also been asked to make contact with Deans of Education in universities to promote this initiative.

SPERA continues to evolve and grow due to the dedication, work and commitment of a number of educators across Australia. I thank all these people for their generosity and contribution. It is because of committed persons over the last twenty-five years that SPERA has become a truly national entity. SPERA will continue to celebrate the "doers" or quiet achievers in rural education and promote the many wonderful examples of education excellence in early childhood settings, primary and secondary schools, TAFE, universities, adult and agricultural education.

REFERENCE

Thompson, S. & DeBortoli, L. (2006). PISA in Brief from Australia's Perspective. The Pisa 2006 Assessment of Students' Scientific, Reading and Mathematical Literacy Skills. Retrieved 8 August 2008, from www.ozpisa.acer.edu.au.