

CONSULTATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BROADBANDED NATIONAL EQUITY PROGRAM FOR SCHOOLS

A RESPONSE FROM THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROVISION OF
EDUCATION IN RURAL AUSTRALIA (SPERA)

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Response to the Broadbanded National Equity Program for Schools

Prepared by the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (S.P.E.R.A.)
Incorporated.

Introduction

Thank you for giving SPERA the opportunity to respond to your Consultation Paper on the development of a Broadbanded National Equity Program for schools. Thank you also for the opportunity to appear in Sydney to tender our views verbally. The following represent the broad views of SPERA on those particular issues that the Society sees as most relevant for it to comment upon. It should be borne in mind that while all programs affecting education in rural areas are the concern of SPERA the especial focus of the Society is on the CAP and DSP Programs.

Comment on the Key Principles

- 1.0 SPERA is generally in favour of a Broadbanded National Equity Program provided that a number of important conditions are satisfied:
 - 1.1. that there are identifiable savings arising out of efficiency and other gains, and that these savings will flow through to the end users -- students in schools;
 - 1.2. that the identity and function of the existing set of equity programs, which serve differing but important needs, are not lost;
 - 1.3. that some sort of transition mechanism is designed and put into place so that there can be a 'phasing in' of the new arrangements; and,
 - 1.4. that public disclosure of outcomes be undertaken in ways that have appropriate regard for the sensitivities involved, e.g. the use of public statistics.

We feel that Key Principles a), b), and c) in the Consultation Paper need to be tightened up somewhat to give them a greater force of meaning. For example, statement a) might be better expressed as:

"The major purpose of any new program should be to ensure that every student suffers no impediment attributable to background (ethnic, socioeconomic, etc), location, or other form of disadvantage in reaching the level of educational attainment they desire, and their individual capabilities permit."

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Comments on the Key Questions

3.0 The Objectives of the Program.

SPERA recommends that the objectives of the proposed program refer to:

- i) student outcomes; ii) school outcomes (both for staff and for community); and
- iii) system level outcomes, since these cannot be separated in any meaningful sense.

An outcome for a student is, ipso facto, an outcome for a school program which, in turn, can scarcely be divorced from system level outcomes.

On the issue of setting quantitative targets, SPERA suggests a cautious approach is preferable. The achievement of quantitative targets needs to be viewed in terms of the complexities which underlie such results. This recommendation is based on research conducted by Boylan and Meyenn (1985), Braggett, Boylan and Hatchford (1988), Sinclair, *et al* (1990) on rural schools and students. Collectively, these studies indicated that:

- i) more rural females than males were staying on to the end of Year 12 in rural NSW and Victoria; and
- ii) many of the staying on students were from rural properties;

These changes in rural participation rates can, in part, be attributed to:

- i) restricted eligibility for unemployment benefits for 16, 17 year olds;
- ii) the downturn in the rural economy both in primary production and in rural industries; and
- iii) the high 15-19 year old rural youth unemployment rate.

Collectively, these findings suggest that whilst quantitative targets might be set by governments, and subsequently met (e.g. the 65% Year 12 participation rate by 1993) these achievements might not necessarily be wholly attributable to the implementation of educational programs.

3.1 The Scope of the Program.

See points made in 1.1 above

3.2 The Basis on Which Funds Should be Allocated.

On the broader issue of the distribution of funds between states, there is a need for the Commonwealth to use up-to-date socio-economic, demographic, geographic and access-to-services information as a basis for determining state allocations. The focus should be regional, since the needs of the region are best understood and responded to, within the region. In many cases this will require cooperation between states where regions cross state boundaries. The work of Dennis Griffiths and Project Rubicon (Northern Territory Department of Education) has some useful suggestions here. Examples of across-state regions are Broken Hill/South Australia, Mt Isa/Northern Territory, the Mallee/NSW Riverina.

3.3 The Funding Cycle.

SPERA recommends that a three-year funding cycle be incorporated into the B.N.E.P., perhaps even a 'rolling triennium' arrangement would be appropriate. The major benefit from this recommendation is that it would provide a continuity of service provision in schools that should result in better utilisation of, better access to and better distribution of the services through the client groups.

3.4 Government and Non-Government Schools.

At the local level, many benefits result from sharing resources/facilities/services between government and non-government schools. The fostering of opportunities for teacher professional development created by the interaction of staff from government and non-government schools in programs such as C.A.P. (with the resultant cross-system student contact) needs to be considered when funds are allocated.

Further, at the State administrative level, the creation of two or three separate bodies, each performing the same functions, has the potential to be wasteful.

3.5 Community Participation.

In S.P.E.R.A.'s view, there is a need to improve the extent and quality of community participation in Equity Programs at the local school level, at the level of state management committees, and at the Commonwealth level.

Anecdotal evidence from Victoria's C.E.P. would indicate that as parent/community participation increases there is a corresponding increase in value derived from the funding dollar. It has been claimed that the spending of one CEP dollar returns in value to the client groups the equivalent of four government dollars spent on the same project. Especially in rural areas, there are informal networks which can and do achieve outstanding results because the community wholeheartedly lends its support to the project and invests considerable individual and collective community time in ensuring its success.

It is important, however, that an appropriate definition of 'school community' be adopted. In rural communities there is potential for a considerable overlap between an individual's role as 'teacher' and as 'community member'. Guidelines for the structuring of community consultative groups need to be sensitively drawn so as not to impede the ability of educational professionals who are members of communities to provide educational leadership.

Additionally, SPERA takes the view that community participants should represent a broader constituency from whom they can obtain policy direction and to whom they can be accountable. Bodies such as SPERA, and perhaps ICPA, could provide such a constituency. These bodies are in a position to provide a continuity of representation and have the capacity to foster amongst their membership, and to pass on from one representative to the next, the necessary skills and competencies to ensure effective participation.

3.6 Monitoring and Reporting.

S.P.E.R.A. supports the Commonwealth government's desire for improved monitoring and reporting on the programs, subject to such considerations as are outlined in 1.4 above.

S.P.E.R.A. would support any move by NBEET and the Schools Council to actively disseminate information on developments/programs/policies in rural education.

SPERA holds an annual national conference and produces the journal Education in Rural Australia. Both of these activities provide an excellent infra-structure for dissemination of information. In addition, SPERA has well-established contacts with university and system-based research centres specialising in the investigation of rural education issues (the Rural Education Research and Development Centre at Townsville, the Centre for Research and Teaching in Rural Education at Bathurst, Catholic Education Offices and the various state government research units in school education and TAFE).

SPERA would be keen to negotiate with NBEET and the Schools Council to take on a role as the clearinghouse to receive, process and disseminate information and research findings arising from the proposed BNEP.

3.7 Evaluation of the Program.

S.P.E.R.A. would recommend that major externally managed evaluations of the BNEP occur regularly and be ongoing. An early indication of the efficacy of the BNEP would clearly be needed, but perhaps of greater importance, is the ability to make informed decisions about necessary adjustments to the program as it proceeds.

This evaluation typically would cover such matters as:

- i) Commonwealth NBEET and Schools Council responsibilities, administration policies and practices, achievement of educational outcomes and analysis of funding formulae; and
- ii) State/System level administration and operations, the effectiveness of major projects on student performance and the degree of achievement of student outcomes from major projects (e.g. participation and retention rates, curricular organisation, diversity and delivery modes, and student welfare matters).

The Notion of 'Rural Disadvantage'

4.0 Equity and Quality

There is an implicit assumption in much writing about rural education that identifies the essential task for the rural educator as one of providing education for rural students that is 'as good as' that provided for urban Australians. Indeed, many would argue that the models that inform educational provision in Australia were those developed in urban settings and that the continuing challenge for rural educators has been to conscientiously ignore the differences in the environments that confront them in order to remain loyal to the models. The obvious danger in this approach is that it is becoming increasingly hard to sustain the myth that urban schools are universally successful, or that those which are successful can attribute their success to their location. Clearly, many urban schools are, as Jonathon Sher suggests, 'dysfunctional and deeply troubled institutions' of which he may rightly ask 'Who today could argue, with a straight face, that urban education is such a stunning success that it deserves to be emulated throughout the nation's small towns and rural areas?'. (Sher, 1991)

For these sorts of reasons a new focus has entered the debate about questions of equity in educational provision. Rather than seeking equal provision amongst schools and educational service providers, this approach suggests that the goal should be that of ensuring that the highest quality education is achieved regardless of geography, socioeconomic statuses of the learners or the vicissitudes of the national economy. The goal is ordinary enough -- it merely asserts that all learners are of equal value and that if the nation is to earn international respect as a developed democracy and to meet its national objectives then only the highest quality educational provision is appropriate to each learner. What this perspective does force us to confront, however, is that to achieve that goal in a sparsely settled and geographically diverse nation such as ours may require some very extraordinary approaches -- in Jonathon Sher's words 'ordinary education via extraordinary means'. (Sher, 1991) Australian education has developed a strong tradition in this area -- School of the Air is a prime example -- but there is a need to ensure that contemporary developments are similarly daring, creative and appropriate.

SPERA strongly rejects the cliches of rural disadvantage. For too long segments of the rationale for equity programs aimed at rural Australians have appeared to harbour an automatic equation of rurality with disadvantage. The Society chooses to promote a view of rural educational disadvantage such as is outlined below:

- 4.1. Equity programs generally, and presumably the proposed BNEP in particular, are aimed at the amelioration of those factors that might impede the achievement of agreed educational goals by identified groups of Australians. These factors, whose existence has been established and verified by a body of respected research and practice, together comprise a significant array of impediments to the achievement of educational equity in Australia (socioeconomic disadvantage, language difficulties, accessibility of services, provision of physical facilities and intellectual support infrastructures, etc).
- 4.2. Within this array, it is possible to identify a subset of factors which could be present in any school (e.g., physical facilities, shortage of appropriately trained personnel), a further subset whose effects are more likely to be magnified in an urban school (e.g., language difficulties, alienating environments, threats to physical safety of learners), and a further subset whose effects are most likely to sharply impinge on a rural school (see below).
- 4.3. It is towards this third subset of factors that SPERA believes that the resources of a BNEP should be directed. These would include:

4.3.1. **Isolation.**

Geographic isolation adversely affects the ability of many rural families to physically access educational services. Distance is clearly an element of this, although in some parts of Australia distance is less important than other factors such as terrain or climate (D'Plesse, 1990). These families are similarly denied easy access to those other services and facilities such as health, welfare, recreation, etc, whose effects on educational outcomes are less direct, but scarcely less important. For many rural families, including some where the degree of geographic isolation may not be especially pronounced, there are considerable complexities involved in assuring that their children have access to common out-of-school activities (sports practice, musical rehearsals, Scouts or Girl Guides, and the like) because of the difficulties of transport arrangements and travel times. (As a simple example consider the child who is denied opportunity to participate in

activities before or after school because he or she must travel an hour or more on a school bus to reach the school and whose parents are unable to make any alternative travel arrangements should the child not catch the bus.)

There are, however, other important elements of isolation which can impact on rural families. Amongst these would be:

A) Cultural isolation.

This is most often associated with one or more of

- non English speaking background
- low socioeconomic status--poverty, unemployment, underclass effects, the 'new rural poor', etc
- lack of family support
- local of social support networks

B) Structural isolation.

This may arise from factors such as

- inappropriate or inadequate distribution of resources
- attitudinal or organisational deficiencies in the community/social infrastructure
- distorted power relationships in the society, such that some groups are, or perceive themselves to be powerless.
- infrastructures (both physical and social) built on inadequate information about users and potential users

C) Psychological isolation.

This manifests itself most commonly as

- inertia and/or insularity amongst individuals preventing them taking 'obvious' steps to minimise the disadvantages of their situation. This is the most likely source of the much-touted 'levee bank' effect whereby children in isolated rural towns are said to suffer from extremely limited horizons -- not to be able to see beyond the levee bank surrounding the town.

The effects of each of these forms of isolation will be magnified in rural areas if the available technologies of communication (telephones, fax, television, radio) are limited or non-existent.

4.3.2 Rural Teachers.

Research evidence supports the commonsense observation that teachers in many more remote rural areas are likely to be younger and less experienced than those in more congenial locations, and that they are likely to stay for a shorter period before seeking a move. It does not follow from this, however, that the quality of the service they provide will necessarily be inferior. What is demanded is that the responses of the employing authorities to this reality are appropriate -- that the standards of induction programs, of professional support, and of teacher welfare programs are adequate to meet the needs of the teachers who accept such appointments, and that appropriate arrangements are set up

within the schools to ensure that there is continuity of educational programs and a level of security for students.

4.3.3 Social, Cultural and Recreational Opportunities.

The sheer size of some rural communities may limit the extent or the complexity of social, cultural and recreational opportunities that it is possible to organise from within the community. It will therefore be necessary sometimes to arrange for community members to move out of their local area to participate in such activities or for a suitable range of activities to be imported.

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