

STAFFING ISSUES IN REMOTE RURAL SCHOOLS - WHAT CAN NEW ZEALAND LEARN FROM THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE?

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Isolated rural schools in New Zealand have always had difficulty attracting and retaining appropriate staff but under the "Tomorrow's Schools" regime, the situation has become much worse. Schools in New Zealand are governed by a Board of Trustees, comprising members of the local community and these Boards are charged with the responsibility of employing staff and monitoring their performance. There are few incentives to attract and retain teachers in remote areas and so the fields of applicants are often small and finding a suitable applicant can be a real problem. Appointing suitable applicants is difficult but retaining them in rural areas is even more of a problem and monitoring performance is almost impossible for a Board of Trustees with little or no expertise in the area of performance appraisal. The Education Review Office carries out school reviews every two to three years and reports to the Minister of Education on the performance of the Board of Trustees.

Staffing problems are particularly severe in the East Coast - rural Gisborne - Wairoa (Tairāwhiti) area where I live so when the opportunity to apply for a scholarship to travel in the Pacific Basin area arose, I decided to apply to travel to Australia and look at staffing issues in rural schools. I was keen to look at incentives to attract and retain teachers in remote schools and also to see what forms of monitoring and appraisal were in place and the extent to which parents and community members were involved in the process.

Initially, it was difficult to make contacts in Australia but the Auckland Consultant to Rural Schools, Doug Morland, invited me to join the Trans Tasman Principals' exchange, a programme he runs in conjunction with the advisors in the Western Region of New South Wales and I arranged to link up with other rural principals for their exchange trip to this region from 7 - 21 May.

The School Trustees Association was instrumental in putting me in touch with David Bennett, the President of the South Australian Association of State School Organisations who kindly undertook to organise that leg of the study tour. The STA also gave me a contact at James Cook University in Townsville, who referred me to Dr David McSwan. David arranged the northern Queensland visit and gave me a contact in Darwin - Dr Jim Cameron who helped me plan my meetings and visits in Northern Territory.

My trip involved visiting Northern Territories, South Australia, northern Queensland and the Western and Riverina regions of New South Wales. I was able to visit a wide variety of schools ranging from an eight pupil school to one of more than 700 children. The types of schools visited included a School of Distance Education, an aboriginal school, a number of rural primary schools and an area school. Other places visited included universities, teacher training facilities, teacher support centres and other educational facilities.

I met with parents and community members, including the National President of the Council of Government School Organisations, Richard Creswick, and the President of the South Australia State School Organisations, David Bennett. I discussed staffing issues with teachers and principals from rural schools and I also met with a range of Education Department officials in each state including those responsible for supervising groups of schools, (superintendents or

directors of schools) and those in staffing positions. I contacted representatives from a range of groups with a vital interest in rural education such as the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, the Rural Education Research and Development Centre and the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia.

In every case people were happy to talk frankly to me and I was able to gain a valuable insight into rural education issues. Australians were keen to discuss the "New Zealand Experiment" (their term for Tomorrow's Schools) and the effects the changes in education administration have had on rural schools.

I was surprised at the differences in education between the various states I visited, particularly in the extent to which parents and community members were involved in governing schools and the role they play in the appointment process. New Zealand, where the responsibility is totally in the hands of the community and its Board of Trustees, lies at one end of the spectrum and Queensland, where the only input from the parents and community is in compiling the school description lies at the other.



LIFE MEMBERSHIP PRESENTATION

Mrs Marie Dale, inaugural President of SPERA and a committee member of the Executive over its ten years, was presented with Life Membership at the Tenth Conference in Fremantle, Western Australia.

President, Sheila King and The Hon. Derrick Tomlinson MLA both spoke of Marie's vision, commitment and courage to found SPERA and her energy in promoting Rural Education in Australia.

The National Executive congratulate Marie Dale on her significant contribution to rural Australia.

