Rural and Remote Schools
A special report by the School Improvement Unit

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In 2016, there were 433 Queensland state schools in the School Improvement Unit (SIU) school type categories of remote, rural primary, rural secondary and very small, rural primary schools (see SIU 2016 annual report for details). About 30 per cent of these (N=131) were reviewed in 2016 and are included in this report. This cohort was representative of the whole population of rural and remote Queensland state schools in terms of school type and region (see Figures 1 and 2). Due to definitions adopted for school types, only schools from Central Queensland, Darling Downs South West, Far North Queensland and North Queensland regions are represented.

More than 70 per cent of the rural and remote cohort had an enrolment of 100 or fewer students, and 53 per cent of schools had an enrolment below 50. The majority of these schools were remote schools or very small, rural primary schools. Overall, these two school types accounted for 66 per cent of the 2016 cohort. In addition, more than 80 per cent of the rural and remote review schools had an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage of less than 1000 at the time of review, and almost half the cohort had a principal appointed in the last two years. These factors relate to a school’s educational advantage, as well as leadership turnover, and present additional challenges for many rural and remote schools.

**Human resources**

Due to their specific location and size, rural and remote schools faced many challenges that were related to a school’s human resources. The challenges reported during reviews included:

- relatively high turnover of teaching staff
- limited availability of teaching staff, in particular qualified specialist teachers (resulting in staff shortages or high proportion of beginning teachers)
- the lack of continuity in the work of specialist staff (for example, due to leave)
- limited options for teacher replacement for sickness or attending professional development
- comparatively low staff satisfaction (below like-schools)
- limited human resources support from regions (for example, guidance officer).

The problem of staff shortages was being addressed in some schools via strategic partnering with universities to acquire graduates, resource sharing with other schools and flexible staffing arrangements. Some schools also attempted to enhance sustainability and continuity in the event of staff turnover, for example, by developing a staff handbook that outlines curriculum, teaching and learning expectations for staff members.

According to 2016 school review reports, human resources was the biggest area for improvement in rural and remote schools (identified in 58 per cent of schools). Of all rural and remote schools reviewed by the SIU in 2016, 40 per cent were recommended to develop practices that enhance human capital, more than 30 per cent were advised to develop or formalise the practices that enhance decisional capital, and about 16 per cent were recommended to work on the activities contributing to development of social capital. Very few schools were identified as needing to improve their professional learning management processes or to clarify leadership roles.

The need for professional learning focusing on the data literacy of school staff was identified in rural primary and very small, rural primary schools, and also in some remote schools. Data skills in demand included the ability to collect, display, analyse, interpret and report data on student learning; using class data to reflect on the effectiveness of teaching practice; and the ability of staff to understand and use a range of data-related tools. In addition, it was suggested that schools increase the capability of classroom teachers to stretch and challenge higher-ability students, deliver higher order and creative thinking strategies for all students, and identify and address the learning needs of individual students. In a few reviews, it was recommended that attention be paid to teaching skills in the priority area (for example, in reading) and understanding of the Australian Curriculum.

1. Human capital reflects the skills and knowledge of school staff; social capital includes collaboration and social networks; and decisional capital, which is enhanced by human and social capital, refers to the staff’s ability to make sound judgments and decisions.
According to the review data, the leaders of rural and remote schools needed to boost decision making, mainly by developing instructional leadership practices and school-wide processes for observation, feedback and coaching. The recommendation for rural primary schools was usually to revise, strengthen or formalise the existing programs of coaching, observation and feedback. However, for many very small, rural primary schools, the improvement strategy was to develop and implement such processes, aligned with the agreed pedagogical practices and explicit improvement agenda. Many very small, rural primary schools had very knowledgeable principals who were active members of local schools clusters and accessed regional support in principal coaching, but their role as instructional leaders was often limited to delivering key professional learning, and at times, modelling pedagogical practices.

**Explicit improvement agenda**

The staffing issues faced by rural and remote schools, mostly linked to their size, rurality and remoteness, reportedly disrupted the implementation of improvement strategies, or challenged the consistency of shared expectations and implementation of new pedagogies in some schools. This made the role of rural and remote school leaders as change agents even more challenging.

According to rural and remote school reviews, there was an identified need to ensure a sharp and narrow focus of explicit improvement agendas; maintain the clear alignment between the explicit improvement agenda, implementation of teaching strategies and professional learning; and communicate the explicit improvement agenda to all stakeholders. These factors are essential for ensuring a shared understanding and commitment to the direction of improvement.

While rural secondary and rural primary schools needed mostly to sharpen the focus of their improvement agendas, very small, rural primary and remote schools were challenged by developing achievable and measurable targets and timelines.
Partnerships

Rural and remote schools developed many and varied partnerships that helped them overcome the challenges associated with their location and support student learning. The most frequently reported partnerships were those with school P&Cs, other local schools or school clusters, and parents and families of students (see Figure 3 below).

Partnerships with P&Cs significantly contributed to financial standing and smooth running of rural and remote schools. They were usually small, but very active groups undertaking a number of fundraising activities each year and providing significant funding (or applying for grants) to supplement school resourcing, facility upgrades and extracurricular activities for students. P&Cs often organised key school and social events, and were involved in the implementation of the improvement agenda.

Most rural and remote schools had developed strong partnerships with other local schools. These most frequently concerned transition programs from primary to secondary school, but some schools also used them to access human resources (for example, a pedagogical coach), extend learning opportunities for students, or run joint school events such as sports carnivals.

There were also examples of schools aligning their pedagogies to support a seamless transition from primary to secondary school for students. In addition, local school clusters provided rural and remote schools with opportunities to develop greater collaboration among the school staff, build their expertise through additional professional learning opportunities (usually during cluster professional development days), engage in external moderation processes, provide specialist lessons or additional activities for students (for example, music and physical education, public speaking, mathematics competitions and sporting activities), and provide additional funds acquired by the cluster to improve student learning.

Figure 3: Partnerships reported by rural and remote schools during 2016 school reviews

![Chart showing the percentage of schools reporting different types of partnerships. P&Cs are the most frequently reported, followed by other schools, parents and families, school clusters, and community organisations.](chart.png)
Parent involvement in schools was given high priority in rural and remote schools. Parents volunteered in classrooms, for example, assisting with reading, swimming lessons, making lunches for all students and helping to maintain school facilities. The relationships with parents and families were longstanding at times, with third or fourth generation children attending the same school. Rural and remote schools often engaged parents and families by resourcing playgroup programs or transition to Prep programs that focused on building relationships between the school and parents.

While most rural and remote schools were successful in developing positive partnerships with parents and families, there were some schools in which parent and family involvement was limited to special events, and this was seen as an area for development.

Rural and remote schools also often reported partnerships with local community organisations and businesses. These were mainly used to develop a range of programs to increase student engagement (for example, Adopt-a-Cop or lunchtime sports), contribute to the organisation of school and community events, support the school’s improvement agenda (for example, by donating prizes to encourage high student performance), and provide workplace experiences or school-based traineeships for students. In association with the local community radio station, a rural secondary school in Central Queensland region developed an alternative pathway and positive engagement in learning program for students to explore a media career option, build personal self-confidence and re-engage with school.

Many rural and remote schools also developed strong relationships with early childhood education and care centres, government agencies, cultural groups and tertiary education institutions.

**Curriculum and pedagogy**

Most rural and remote schools had documented or were developing whole-school curriculum plans at the time of their review. At the same time, however, more than
one third of these schools had areas for improvement related to curriculum identified during their reviews. It was suggested that schools:

- refine (or develop) a whole-school curriculum plan aligned to teaching practices, and assessment and reporting procedures
- develop whole-school practices to quality assure curriculum alignment (vertical and horizontal) with the Australian Curriculum
- develop a whole-school assessment schedule and assessment practices
- develop whole-school moderation processes
- develop collaborative and consistent curriculum planning practices
- embed engaging, challenging content within the curriculum.

Many rural and remote schools used student learning and assessment data to monitor the progress of students and to inform differentiated teaching. However, at times, differentiation was informal or developed by individual teachers, with no whole-school approach or consistency. In a remote school in Far North Queensland region, the principal, administration officer and staff members worked together to identify and respond to the individual learning needs of every student in the multi-age context. The school was working with a local small schools cluster and regional personnel on a differentiation project. Teachers identified the learning needs of individual students, monitored their progress and documented their differentiation planning and practices.

According to the data from school reviews, more than 40 per cent of all rural and remote schools were recommended to improve their teaching practice, in particular:

- to collaboratively review the school’s pedagogical approach/framework to ensure a common understanding of a range of implemented pedagogies, and assure the consistency of practice in all curriculum areas
- to develop consistent differentiation policies, guidelines and strategies, in particular to support high-achieving students.

In addition, some rural primary schools were advised to enhance inclusive practices and embed evidence-based teaching strategies.
School culture

According to 2016 reviews, most rural and remote schools displayed a positive school culture, with a caring, orderly learning environment and respectful relationships between staff, students, and community. Acknowledgement of the dedication and commitment of teaching staff by students and parents was identified as a major positive aspect of many schools. High levels of trust, and positive interactions between staff and parents who felt that they could discuss the learning needs of their student in a welcome and open conversation, were also evident. Parents were often involved in the decision-making processes of the school and in most instances, they spoke highly of the school. Many rural and remote schools were the centre of the local community. For example, a culture of supportive, authentic and caring relationships was a key feature of a very small, rural primary school in Central Queensland region. A climate of belonging and collective belief in the ethos of the school was apparent from all groups: students, staff members, and parents. As one P&C member stated, ‘This is not a school, this is a family’.

In most rural and remote schools, it was apparent that student wellbeing and achievement were at the centre of the positive and caring relationships within the school community.

Although many rural and remote schools did not have a documented wellbeing framework or formalised processes for collecting and using wellbeing data, most had developed a wide range of initiatives aimed at improving the wellbeing of all school stakeholders.

Their small size allowed for an individualised, case management approach to address the learning, behavioural and welfare needs of students, usually in consultation with parents.

Examples of initiatives developed by rural and remote schools, with the significant support of local community members, groups, and organisations, included a chaplaincy program, breakfast club, program whereby older students mentored younger students, annual screening program for hearing loss, and after-school homework program.

In addition, a number of rural and remote schools paid particular attention to staff wellbeing and promoted a culture of trust, collegiality, and mutual support. One rural primary school in Darling Downs South West region had a staff wellbeing team to promote collegiality and extend relationships between all staff members. A school cluster professional development program focused on staff members’ wellbeing in another rural primary school in that region. In a rural primary school in Far North Queensland region, staff wellbeing was identified by the workplace health and safety committee as a priority. The school embarked on a process to identify the reasons for low staff morale and implemented collaboratively determined strategies to improve the existing culture.

In summary, the following strengths were noted in rural and remote review schools in 2016:

- many and varied partnerships that helped them overcome the challenges associated with their location and to support student learning, for example, other schools and school clusters
- parent involvement in schools given a high priority
- student learning and assessment data used to monitor the progress of students and to inform differentiated teaching
- a positive school culture, with a caring, orderly learning environment and respectful relationships between staff, students, and community
- acknowledgment of the dedication and commitment of teaching staff by students and parents
- high levels of trust and positive interactions between staff and parents
- a wide range of initiatives aimed at improving the wellbeing of all school stakeholders.

Further consideration may assist in overcoming common problems of practice in rural and remote schools:

- staff (including principal) turnover, teaching staff expertise such as qualified specialist teachers, and limited opportunities for staff professional learning due to limited replacement options
- instructional leadership and school-wide processes for observation, feedback, and coaching
- a sharper and narrower focus on, and alignment with, the explicit improvement agenda, and communication to all stakeholders
- clearer whole-school curriculum plan alignment with teaching practices, assessment and reporting procedures, and the Australian Curriculum
- common understanding of the school’s pedagogical approach/framework and consistency of practice in all curriculum areas, and a stronger focus on differentiation to support high-achieving students.

The department has invested in rural and remote schools through the establishment of a State Schools – Rural and Remote Branch, and the development of a four-year Advancing rural and remote education action plan informed by extensive stakeholder consultation. The focus of this plan is to support regions to deliver educational services to rural and remote state schools that will enhance the quality, range and accessibility of learning experiences for students in rural and remote locations to lift their learning outcomes.

This report is an extract from:
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