

SUBMISSION: Inquiry into the Victorian State Education System

North Central Cluster Schools



North Central LLEN

Creating opportunities for children and young
people to thrive in education, work and life

October 2023

INQUIRY INTO THE STATE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN VICTORIA

Submitted by the North Central LLEN on behalf of the North Central School's Cluster

Rural schools are the cornerstone of a thriving community, and the state of Victoria has long been committed to providing a high-quality education to its students. However, the landscape of education is not uniform across the state, and significant disparities exist, particularly between metropolitan, regional cities and rural areas. It is within this context that we present this submission to the inquiry into the Victorian state education system.

Through this submission, we aim to shed light on the pressing issues facing the Victorian state education system, with a focus on rural student outcomes. It is our hope that by identifying these challenges and proposing practical solutions, we can contribute to the ongoing efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education for *all* Victorian students.

In recent years, the divide between metropolitan and rural education has grown, raising concerns about the future of educational opportunities in rural communities.

Despite the challenges faced by rural schools, it is important to emphasize that we believe the advantages they offer to students and communities continue to far outweigh the disadvantages. This submission seeks to address these disparities while highlighting the remarkable achievements of rural schools.

To improve student outcomes, we will focus on the critical areas of *equitable resourcing, workforce, administrative burdens, well-being, the impact of COVID-19, the recent flood, and the need for professional trust* within the education system. Each of these facets plays a crucial role in shaping the educational outcomes for young people - particularly those living in rural Victoria.

Supporting Student Aspirations

Too many of our children are experiencing developmental vulnerability and not arriving at school ready to learn in one or more areas. In the 2021 Australian Early Developmental Census, our vulnerability in more than one area of development, ranged from 21.8%-55% in north central Foundation groups.¹ Across North Central we have a strong history of partnering in the early and middle years and have been fortunate to have received philanthropic support. In rural regions with small populations over large geographic area, it is essential that we have everyone at the table considering cross-sectoral and cross-government policy, funding, legislative and regulatory challenges together.

We believe that child development and education is a whole of community responsibility, however backbone support to connect-up the service system and best support our kindergartens and schools is critical <https://www.ncllen.org.au/solid-foundation.html>

The Social Economic status of rural communities often limits the aspirations of rural students, making it challenging to pursue opportunities outside their local towns. Schools have reported that students are not reaching their full potential as they do not want to add to their family's financial burden by moving away to attend university, TAFE or to gain employment. This, in turn, reduces their aspiration to their local region.

Recommendations:

- Backbone support for facilitation of promising place-based partnerships such as Strong Families Strong Children (SFSC) and Strong Youth Strong Community (SYSC) are required.
<https://www.ncllen.org.au/publications.html>
- Critical support for earlier evidence-based career aspiration programs such as Passions and Pathways <https://www.passionsandpathways.org.au/> are particularly critical for under-resourced students who can't be what they can't see.
- An urgent review of the cost and barriers to students accessing higher education is required with support to navigate targeted resourcing and supports. Your postcode should not limit your aspiration or opportunities.

Resource distribution

Our region is unique in that our schools collaborate to support each other through rural specific challenges. One challenge being the lack of VET (Vocational Education and Training) delivery options in individual local schools.

The North Central Trade Training Centre (NCTTC), based in Charlton, is a partnership demonstrating that shared resourcing can deliver on access equity for VET provision which would have otherwise been unrealistic for each individual school to fund, staff, and resource.

Opened in 2014, the NCTTC is a significant boost for vocational education in our local communities whereby it guarantees rural students having access to modern facilities and equipment to undertake courses in areas of local skills shortages. A lack of access to funding, to ensure we can update and maintain these state-of-the-art facilities, is an ongoing challenge.

The NCTTC facilitates the delivery of Certificate II and III qualifications in community services, agriculture, allied health, automotive, construction, engineering, hairdressing, and hospitality. Other subjects available to students include Animal Studies, Beauty, Music, and Sport & Recreation.

Showing that this facility can offer courses in 11 out of 12 priority pathways as outlined in recent reforms - with the 12th area of Digital media and technologies being investigated in addition to the new 2024 priority area of Clean Energy and Engineering.

Challenges of staffing and funding VET provision have been widely discussed. Rural areas such as ours require our system to be open to even more creative place-based solutions and support to facilitate ongoing provision of quality students' skills and experience in areas of industry need and jobs growth both regionally and beyond.

The recent VDSS Transport funding has been instrumental in ensuring that our students in outlying areas can tap into existing transport and access VDSS options. However, the cost of transport to facilitate other opportunities for our students is a key barrier.

This heavily impacts the ability of schools and families to support access to critical aspirational opportunities through excursions, camps, work experience, structured workplace learning etc.

Recommendations:

- A commitment from Department of Education (DE) to ongoing maintenance, updating and resourcing of this critical community facility.
- A commitment to encouragement and incentives to support collaborations with industry to explore place-based, more sustainable, grow your own solutions.
- Subsidies for transport costs to address inequity in access to a range of opportunities and support aspiration in rural schools including camps, camps, excursions, work experience etc.

Financial Incentives and Teacher Recruitment

Targeted Financial Incentives (TFIs): Some of our local schools feel the TFI's have often created more problems than solutions. They feel these programs attract teaching staff to the regions who do not commit to staying in the region which leads to a high turnover of staff and teachers do not get involved within the local community, which is very important to rural communities.

The schools have also mentioned that this incentive negatively affects the school culture due to many existing staff feeling devalued due to the pay disparities.

Teach for Australia has been an effective program for many rural schools.

Rural Infrastructure Challenges

Housing for Teachers: The lack of housing options can deter or make it impossible for teachers to accept positions in rural areas. Improved housing access would aid in teacher recruitment and retention.

Our schools have needed to get creative with one school coordinating and funding its own bus, from a regional centre over an hour away, every day to bring 12 teachers to the school as there is no housing available locally. Extremely limited public transport options for both staff and students highlights further rural challenges rural school communities face.

Childcare: Teachers are unable to work due to no availability of childcare. At one school, up to a quarter of the workforce is at risk of not being able to work due to this ongoing issue. Understanding the extent of this problem is crucial – we can't afford not to facilitate childcare in rural areas, and this requires a different approach including considering block-funding for sustainability.

Critically, early years services in rural areas must be considered as a whole. Planning for provision of new state funded kindergarten initiatives while welcomed, must be considered in light of the whole early years eco-system, ie. state and federally funded programs.

Recommendations:

- Redirecting TFI funds toward housing and other incentives, such as rewarding staff for long-term commitment, could be more effective.
- A commitment to exploring and funding quality rural early childhood education and care (ECEC) delivery models that, for example, all of our schools are open to investigating hosting ECEC facilities on-site to facilitate a whole of community commitment to provision of education from cradle to career.
- Continue to promote the Teach for Australia model

Professional Trust

Schools require professional trust to operate effectively within their communities. Excessive accountability measures hinder schools' flexibility and effectiveness.

In addition to the same leadership and accountability requirements of larger regional and metropolitan schools, a Principal in a rural school is much more likely to have a teaching allocation and significant expectations by the community of participation in broader community life.

The Principal's feel that many areas of onerous oversight add nothing to student outcomes and impacts the time and resources they have available to adequately provide school and instructional leadership.

Rural school Principals have to be multi-skilled and have a significantly more diverse workplan than their city counterparts in terms of community engagement & leadership, student support, resource acquisition, managing multi-grade classrooms, addressing transportation and housing challenges, providing distance learning opportunities, supporting unique rural ongoing teacher recruitment and retention challenges, delivering personalised education, regular blurring of personal and professional boundaries, bushfire management, and integrating technology.

One rural Principal is referred to as the poly-filler and currently teaches -

- 3 periods of Year 7 Geography, 4 periods of Literacy and Numeracy Intervention (class of 8 x Year 7 & 8 students), 2 periods of private study, 2 periods of Grade 2/3 Maths
- A total of 11 periods out of 30 which is equivalent to a 0.45 teaching allotment

Principals feel that navigating these unique challenges is vital for the success of their schools and the overall development of rural communities however the burden is significant and professional trust is a critical enabler.

Administrative Challenges: Principals and teachers face an increasing administrative burden, which can detract from their primary roles and add additional stress to their roles.

Recommendations:

Consult with rural Principals/ schools to

- a. Simplify administrative processes.
- b. Consolidate the number and purpose of portals.
- c. Support Principals' well-being: this can be achieved through ensuring a level of professional trust is enacted.

Our young people were already disadvantaged before COVID-19

Data shows rural children and young people experience more disadvantage than their metropolitan and regional centre counterparts. Before COVID-19 school aged young people across our region were already behind the State averages on indicators of wellbeing and disengagement from school, for example:

- Students in Buloke and Loddon surveyed in Year 4 through to Year 9 pre COVID-19, already had lower-than-average wellbeing scores on optimism, self-esteem, happiness, and absence of sadness.¹
- Around one in five 15- to 24-year-olds were disengaged from both earning and learning (16% in Buloke; 19% in Loddon, 20% in Gannawarra).¹

Children and young people in our region face a double disadvantage: they have fewer resources to support them, and rural areas in turn have fewer resources to compensate, due to an acute lack of access to services including:

- the internet/digital connectivity, which is low in disadvantaged rural households⁴, and the number one issue reported by the region's young people⁵
- primary health, mental health, sexual and women's health, specialist health, and disability services.⁶ A local consultation's findings were confirmed by a [Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System 2021](#), for example, found "at least 63% of young people living in rural and regional areas trying to access a mental health service are unable to" and that "one in four young people will experience a mental health illness within a 12-month period".
- education services, including a full curriculum, high quality facilities, etc.⁷
- recreation activities (including to suit different young people's needs), the second biggest issue reported by the region's young people,² and
- access to a holistic youth work model, with an agencies consultation in Loddon finding a deficit of specific youth services, youth workers, counselling, youth spaces, ways for young people to have a voice, alternative school programs, school holiday events, public transport, and crisis accommodation.³

Well-being Challenges

The Student Support Services (SSS) workload is substantial, and ratios are too high in comparison to other industries making it less attractive and increasingly difficult to recruit and then retain staff. Wellbeing programs require a lot of rigour and accountability which adds to the administrative burden. There are effective internal and external wellbeing programs that the schools do not feel are supported.

The inability to recruit and retain qualified professionals in our rural schools significantly impacts the ability to offer effective wellbeing programs. With the noticeable increase in well-being issues over the past year, the consistency and quality of these programs are crucial.

Access to local health and well-being services could be facilitated as a model that ensures access for students in rural settings and where wellbeing staff are supported in professional health related environments: this is not supported under the current funding model. In addition, schools would not have the additional pressure of recruitment of the wellbeing staff which is difficult in the rural areas.

Allocation of wellbeing programs into primary schools have been, and will be, a welcomed addition. In particular, our local schools that are P-12 needed this expansion.

Recommendations:

- Rural schools need to be able to be supported to access and value-add with available local and regional resources – professional expertise in rural communities often sits with our partners rather than in the DET Structure.
- Prevention is key- having effective well-being programs in primary schools will have a positive impact on our students' long-term health and well-being. Recruitment and retention challenges again require consideration of external service options.

The Impact of COVID-19 & recent flooding

Our local schools found that since the compounding challenges of Covid-19 and the recent flooding in our region, more students are experiencing more extreme mental health issues and issues with reengagement and retention in school.

COVID-19 Effects

COVID-19 has disrupted education and engagement in schools. Reengagement efforts and support are needed, both for students and staff.

- VICLENs surveys of school Principals across Victoria's secondary schools in post the pandemic restrictions 2021 and 2022 (unpublished), including our region, reported negative impacts on student's mental health and wellbeing including: grief, loss, isolation, sadness about missing 'rites of passage', fears about completing schooling, and doubts about their future; and decreased morale and motivation leading to disengagement, dropping subjects, studying only minimum subjects, or moving to unscored VCE, all of which affect tertiary options.⁸
- 65% of Principals and school leadership in Buloke, Loddon and Gannawarra Shires in our 2021 consultation reported that students were disengaging even while attending school (logging in, but checking out) rendering attendance data an underrepresentation of disengagement.³

Flooding Impact

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) recently completed a submission for the Victorian Governments inquiry into the 2022 flood event. This submission found that there were several impacts of the flooding on our young people, some of which included extreme stress and impact on their schooling and exams.⁹

- The impacts of climate change including floods, droughts etc have a cyclical impact in rural communities. Our schools have reflected that pre-service teachers are not educated and/or equipped to support these realities of rural living. Additionally, per-capita funding for student wellbeing services often results in extremely limited mental health services when they are critical in enabling young people to reach their potential in education, pathways and life.

Recommendations:

- Recommendations were made in reflection of these recent flooding impacts, centring around services and supports, housing, food, health and mental health, youth and community supports, and educational supports. The full submission can be found at <https://www.ncllen.org.au/publications.html>
- In more isolated rural schools, it is critical that professional mental health services can be accessed by the student, their family and school. This requires a flexible approach to access the highest quality and most appropriate service available in the community or region. For example, the Mental Health Practitioner program has been very challenging and required a work-around approach.
- Pre-service teacher training should include education and capacity building around supporting the ongoing impact of climate change in rural communities and the flow on effects to student wellbeing.
- Per-capita funding needs to be reviewed in terms of its constraints on enabling adequate wellbeing supports in rural areas.

Comprehensive Monitoring System: The North Central region is a part of a 4-year project in partnership with the AEDC and Deakin University that has tested the feasibility of the full monitoring system (including early years, adolescent and young adult surveys) in the Shires of Loddon and Buloke, Victoria through the North Central LLEN.

This whole of community approach holds considerable promise for strengthening community-based approaches to promoting mental health, and preventing mental disorder, within and across generations.

More information on the Comprehensive management system can be found at:

- <https://www.vic.gov.au/australian-early-development-census-victoria>
- <https://seed.deakin.edu.au/our-research/project/comprehensive-monitoring-system>

Recommendation:

Support is provided for rural schools and regions to access evidence-based data and to design a mental health master plan and access to the most appropriate high-quality supports.

Disparities and Advantages in Victorian Education

Continued Funding Support: It is crucial to maintain the current level of extra support for rural schools. Concerns exist that this support may not continue, which could undermine the progress made.

Strategies for Success: To enable rural schools to maintain their outstanding work, a comprehensive set of strategies must be implemented. There are instances of schools in rural areas achieving exceptional results, demonstrating the potential of these institutions.

Reevaluating Regional Classifications: The current regional classifications need to be reviewed to ensure equitable distribution of resources. Bendigo, Geelong, and Ballarat schools are still categorised as rural despite improved access and significantly better resources.

Transport and teacher resourcing for professional development and student excursions have significantly higher financial cost to rural schools in comparison to these 'regional cities' that have libraries, museums, science & technology centres, TAFEs & universities within close proximity.

There is a need for a clearer distinction in these classifications to ensure an equitable distribution of funding.

Recommendations:

- A commitment to continuing the Location Indexed Funding and Country Area Program supports to provide the extra funding support to rural schools
- Regional and rural classifications need clarifying with additional funding made available for rural schools to support students to equitably access opportunities and support aspiration ie. transport funding subsidies
- Continual improvement including evaluation of place-based rural excellence should be encouraged, supported, well-resourced and scaled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is imperative to address the challenges and inequities in the Victorian state education system to ensure a brighter future for all students and educators in the region. Neglecting these issues will only worsen the existing disparities and hinder the development of a fair and inclusive education system.

It is crucial for policymakers, educators, and the community to come together and work towards solutions that promote equal access to quality education, support for disadvantaged students, and professional development for educators.

By taking action now, we can pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for *all* students involved in the Victorian state education system.

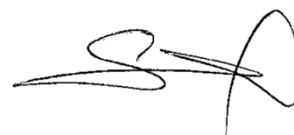
This submission is from the North Central Schools Cluster, incorporating the nine schools within the North Central Cluster, along with the North Central Trade Training Centre servicing these schools and the North Central LLEN.



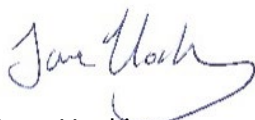
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Footnotes

- ¹ Australian Early Development Census (2022). <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/2021-aedc-results>
- ² Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne (2020) Child Health Poll. COVID-19 pandemic: Effects on the lives of Australian children and families. <https://www.rchpoll.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/nchp-poll18-report-covid.pdf>
- ³ Buloke, Loddon & Gannawarra (2021) Strong Youth Strong Communities. https://www.ncllen.org.au/uploads/9/4/0/9/94099509/final_report_-_strong_youth_strong_communities.pdf
- ⁴ Thomas J, Wilson CK & Park S (2018) Australia's digital divide is not going away. *The Conversation*. March 29, 2018
- ⁵ Conversation Caravan (2019) *Loddon Shire Youth Strategy 2019. Engagement Summary. August 2019*
- ⁶ Pope J (2019) The role of infrastructure in addressing regional disadvantage in Victoria. https://www.infrastructurevictoria.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Background-paper_The-role-of-infrastructure-in-addressing-regional-disadvantage.pdf
- ⁷ Lamb S, Jackson J, Walstab A & Huo S (2105) *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*. Mitch-ell Institute: Melbourne
- ⁸ VicLLENs (2020) State-wide consultation with Principals of Secondary Schools. Unpublished.
- ⁹ YACVic (2023) YACVic Submission: Inquiry into the 2022 Flood Event in Victoria. <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/YACVic-Submission-Inquiry-into-the-2022-Flood-Event-in-Victoria.pdf>.