Rural Education Leadership: Better Preparation Urgently Needed
by Professor John Halsey

Leadership is crucial to how well organisations function and meet the needs and interests of all associated with them. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, (2004, p.1) conclude from their study that school "leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning…” The researchers found that school leaders achieve this kind of impact by “setting directions, … developing people and… making the organization work” (pp. 6 & 7).

It has never been more important in the life of our nation to have vibrant, productive rural communities. Why? Population growth out to 2050 which will see the ‘global village’ increase to between 9 and 10 billion, and our country to around 35 million. There is already enormous pressure on food production and food security, water and energy supplies, the health and resilience of the natural environment, as well as contentious dilemmas around territorial security.

To be vibrant and productive, rural communities need access to high quality, relevant and affordable education, training and care at all ages and stages of life. Put another way, maintaining local access to essential human services in rural communities is fundamental. Strip away the institutional capital and sustainability becomes jeopardised and a downward spiral of decline and dysfunction sets in.

In 2010, the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities at Flinders University with the assistance of the Australian Secondary and Primary Principals Associations, collected data from 683 rural* education leaders around Australia. (*rural here is all locations outside cities and large regional population centres)

The data was collected using an electronic survey comprising invitations to provide bio information, rating and ranking items dealing with work issues of a rural leader and, open response questions.

While the data clearly shows there is much that needs to be done to improve the preparation and support of rural leaders, there is also some ‘good news’.

Firstly, 82.5% of respondents said they rated their job satisfaction at ≥75% and 23.8% rated it at 90%. Just over 7% rated their job satisfaction at 100%

Secondly, 75% of respondents prefer working in a rural, regional or remote location compared to 5.6% who indicated a preference for urban locations, and 20% are undecided. Presumably, some of these after further experience may also prefer a non–urban work context.

Thirdly, a preliminary analysis of over 1,800 comments received shows that notwithstanding a wide range of issues and concerns, there is clearly a large interest, indeed passion, in being a rural education leader. This augers well for enhancing rural leadership as a career pathway.

In terms of data which shows an urgent need to improve the preparation and support of rural educational leaders, there is much to work with.

Being appointed a rural educational leader is for most their induction to becoming responsible for a whole organisation. Over 82% of survey respondents are in their first leadership position and 46.3% said they received no preparation for it. A further 29.2% said they received only short course preparation.

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Making it Work: extended rural professional placements in the Riverland and South East

To bring an idea to fruition requires the co-operative bringing together of many facets.

The Extended Rural Professional Placement (ERPP) program commenced in January 2011 with the help of many. They include the Dean of the School of Education, a grant from the Yulgilbar Foundation, a donation from Creditunion SA, Flinders University (FU) fourth year student teachers who were ready to take on a new challenge of being placed in a rural school for 2 terms, and Principals and teachers of the participating schools in the Riverland and South East. As well, there has been valuable support from FU lecturers to deliver course units, Flinders University Rural Clinical School (FURCS) staff and facilities, Mr Brian Featherston and Mrs Wendy Featherston from the Murray and Mallee Regional Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) office, family members of the student teachers, and members of local communities.

Welcome Dinner

Final year teaching students have been placed at Barmera Primary School, Berri Primary School, Glossop High School, Loxton High School, Monash Primary School, Moorak Primary School Mt Gambier, Renmark North Primary School and Waikerie High School. To celebrate the commencement of the ERPP, the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities (SMC) held a Welcome Dinner in February that was attended by most of the key stakeholders. Present were Prof John Halsey, Dr Aaron Drummond and Marja van Breda-SMC, Prof Bob Conway-Dean of the School of Education, Lecturers of the School of Education-Dr Julie Clark, Jayne Heath, Dr Jane Jarvis, and Dr Barbara Nielsen, attracting and retaining teachers of the participating schools in the Riverland, the seven Riverland ERPP student teachers and their guests. In addition, two Community Leaders from the Riverland- Mr Tim Whetstone MP - State Member of Chaffey and Mr Peter Hunt - Mayor of Berri Barmera attended, as did Mr Mike Day - Creditunion SA. Prof Jennene Greenhill Director - FURCS in Renmark, Mr Brian Featherston- Assistant Director Murray and Mallee Region DECS, Mrs Wendy Featherston-Performance Analysis and Reporting Consultant Murray and Mallee Regional Office DECS, and Hannika Roberton, Emily Frost and Alana Christensen of the Flinders University Rural Medical Practicum program also attended. The evening was lively and a resounding success!

In Print and Over the Airwaves

Since January, the ERPP program has featured in the news. In the Loxton News, 2 February 2011, Prof John Halsey said that the program was inspired by Flinders’ successful parallel rural community curriculum for medical students. “An enduring issue for education in rural Australia is attracting and retaining teachers,” he said. “Instead of placement of a few weeks, the student teachers will spend an entire semester learning, working and living in a rural centre as part of their preparation for careers as teachers.” The Sunday Mail Adelaide, 6 February 2011, noted that FU is leading a radical new education program that involves student teachers undertaking a six-month placement in school in SA’s Riverland and South East. The River News, 9 February 2011, welcomed new staff at Waikerie High. The Principal, Neil White, said: “We are also part of a trial program running in the Riverland this year by FU and have welcomed student Femia King.” On 15 December 2010, ABC Radio interviewed Mr Peter Hunter, the Principal of Renmark North Primary School, who hoped that a student placement program will help graduates who come] from Adelaide to work in regional and remote areas. Further ABC Radio interviews were held with Prof John Halsey in February 2011. The Border Watch, 15 February 2011, reported that Malita Wilkinson, the student teacher placed in the South East, presented the “Keeping Your Brain Healthy” session together with four medical student with the FURCS in Mt Gambier. The FURCS program administrator Kathryn Sylvia said: “It is a wonderful demonstration of integrated learning. A win/win situation for all. Medical students had an opportunity to interact with children and Malita had some experts on hand to present the topic.”
Country hospitals still in limbo
By CATHARINE MILLER

SOUTH Australian rural communities will be left to pick up the bill from the State Government’s dogged determination to withdraw about $800,000 in funding to three community-run, not-for-profit hospitals if drawn-out discussions with Country Health SA fail to deliver. The cuts to Keith & District Hospital, Moonta Health & Aged Care Service and Ardrossan Community Hospital were announced in the State Budget and despite the public outcry, including a large-scale rally on the steps of Parliament House last October and numerous petitions, Health Minister John Hill is refusing to budge. All three hospitals have had their finances examined for possible cost-savings. While Keith and Moonta are still in discussion with Country Health SA about the uncertain future of their hospitals, Ardrossan Community Hospital Board is resigned to losing $1,400,000 of accident and emergency department funding. Ardrossan chairman Dough Barton said the Board had vowed to keep both their accident and emergency department and hospital open.

“In recent years we’ve seen a decline in the number of people coming to Keith & District Hospital, with a loss of business from both hospital departments and the practice. The cuts will have a major impact on the hospital’s future,” Mr Barton said.

Keith & District Hospital Board chairman James de Boer said the Board was still in discussions with Country Health SA, but he was unable to comment further on the progress.

Late last year, Keith’s Board commissioned a report by Flinders University School of Education’s John Halsey into the social impacts on the upper South East town and other rural communities of stripping essential health care and education.

Professor Halsey estimates the costs from a lack of confidence in the town’s future to be far greater than the proposed $363,000 in funding cut with financial pressure on small businesses to downscale or relocate. “Maintaining local access to essential human services in rural communities is fundamental to them being vibrant and productive. Strip away the institutional capital and sustainability becomes jeopardised and a downward spiral of decline and dysfunction sets in,” the report says. As a former principal, he has first hand knowledge of the need for services to attract young families and skilled professionals to country towns. “Upfront, before moving to an area, people will ask ‘what is the school like, what is the housing like, is there a hospital, a doctor, a dentist, and make their decisions based on this,” he said.

Prof Halsey said another major impact was likely to be the devaluation of real estate in Keith, and even assuming only a modest reduction of $5000 a dwelling, it showed residents would collectively be paying about $1.75 million for the decision.

Debate to date had centred around the economics of funding a particular number of beds but in the report he examined the bigger picture and the importance of maintaining vibrant rural communities for a sustainable Australia. He said with a strong global population growth and Australia’s population tipped to reach 35m by 2050, rural communities would become increasingly important for food production but paradoxically.

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many country towns had been stripped of essential services in the past two decades. “It will not come from producing food in high-rise buildings in cities,” he said.

Another underlying social issue was the privileging of urban populations over their rural counterparts and willingness of governments to preference spending in cities on projects such as the Adelaide Oval redevelopment. “It (Keith and District Hospital) is a very interesting case of yet another rationalisation of services in a country area.” “If you look at the amount of public funding going to the Adelaide Oval to ensure a pristine piece of grass for the Adelaide Oval to ensure a pristine piece of grass for the Oval redevelopment. projects such as the Adelaide Oval redevelopment.

We’re on the web!
www.flinders.edu.au/education/rural

M any of our Flinders readers will be aware that our very own Professor John Halsey has now become one of the faces of Flinders University with his visage appearing on the famous (infamous?) loop bus. The picture (shown) is approximately ten feet tall and therefore very visible! I here-with invite you to participate in some research. So far, the catch phrase “Get on board the Halsey bus, or get out the way!” has become part of our vocabulary. We are, however, seeking other options. Email your suggestions to aaron.drummond@flinders.edu.au - the best catch phrase will receive a signed copy of our next newsletter.