

RURAL MATTERS 2015

Applying the Rural Lens

Rural schools have a unique set of complexities that impinge on the delivery of education.

Many of the same challenges also face urban schools but they are aggravated by rural factors such as travelling distance, small roll numbers, inflexible policy and structure and lack of access to timely and cost effective support services.

PLD

- PLD is difficult to access because of costs, including travel and time and the availability and cost of relievers whose travel time also has to be factored in.
- Most PLD programmes do not appreciate rural schools' issues so are less relevant to a small school setting where there are few staff.
- The contracting out of PLD means rural schools have limited access.

Hauora Networking & Support

- Peer support and networking opportunities are very important for hauora and sharing practice. Often, solutions to issues reside with our colleagues and their rich experiences.
- The competition between schools for students has created an environment less conducive to collaboration and collegial support.
- Teaching a class and managing a school are both challenging roles and it is difficult to balance the demands of both in what is often an isolated setting with very little release time.
- Rural communities sometimes have a deep seated, direct and historical connection to their school, which can create a strong sense of ownership over the school. This situation has the potential to result in additional pressure on the principal.

Special Education

- It is problematical providing services and expertise for students with learning difficulties.
- Rural immigrant populations are growing rapidly to fill gaps in the horticultural and agricultural workforce. This is creating an influx of ESOL students for whom rural schools are ill-equipped to cope.

Property & Staffing

- Property is often old and hard to maintain. Tradesmen are expensive and generally based a long distance from the school.
- It is challenging to attract staff to some locations and rural settings can be seen as career limiting.
- Staffing levels are insufficient for small schools. It is unrealistic to expect a sole charge principal to teach a class of 26 year 0 – 8 children full time with no support, whilst also performing all the duties of a full time principal.
- Rural relievers are hard to find which means principals have to work even if they are sick or have PLD or meetings to attend.
- Rural immigrant populations are growing rapidly to fill gaps in the horticultural and agricultural workforce. This is creating an influx of ESOL students for whom rural schools are ill-equipped to cope.

Community and Personal Issues

- It is difficult to access specialist support and guidance as a rural principal. Rural principals are more vulnerable to mental health issues associated with isolation, personal safety issues and stress.
- Living within the community blurs the line between personal life and professional life.
- Community issues can have a concentrated impact on the school. These might include the mental health of community members, drug and alcohol issues, trauma within the community, conflict, poverty and diversity.
- The pool of people available to be members of the Board of Trustees is modest. Where there is a strong sense of ownership of the school, community members of the Board can frequently blur the lines between governance and management. Conflicts can be magnified and rapidly escalate.
- Administration support is limited leaving the principal little if any time to pursue personal interests.

Resourcing and staffing to rural schools needs to take into consideration these realities to enable rural schools to survive and thrive.

Rewards of Rural Principalship:

- Community partnership and input.
- Autonomy -control over everything.
- Opportunities for innovation made easier by the small scale.
- Greater chance of making a real difference for children's learning.

- Flexibility to respond to the local environment and students' needs.
- Connection with students and whānau can be very strong and have a positive effect on achievement and well-being.
- Excellent opportunity to learn every aspect of the principal's role because rural principals cover every function of school leadership.
- Networking with other rural principals can be especially rewarding and it is possible to create a tight professional and supportive group.

Rural education is frustrating to those who wish it would conform to uniform education policy. It is a vulnerable part of our educational landscape that needs more focussed consideration. We must draw attention to the special circumstances of these schools who seem largely invisible to the policy makers.