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2021 Short-Term E-Exchange Program – Research Submission

Leadership to address rural school complexity

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As part of the International [E-Exchange Program](https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/scholarships-and-programs/international-teacher-exchange/short-term-e-exchange-program), a virtual exchange was completed between New South Wales and overseas counterparts. This exchange provided an opportunity for short-term one-on-one partnerships between educators with similar interests or fields. This action research report on the shared focus area was completed following the 6-week program.

# Introduction

Rural schools share many commonalities despite differing contexts of two schools explored: Australian K-12 central school and Canadian Grade 4-6 elementary school. The learning needs faced in schools are tightly entwined, and it is challenging to separate single causes or issues. Rural location impacts across all issues and presents as a complexity that impacts educational equity for students. This rural school complexity was explored through a comparative lens commencing with the impact of COVID-19. Transformational leadership, school organisation and resourcing are key factors in creating educational environments where teachers thrive and enable students to succeed, despite the complexities of location.

# Focus: comparing and creatively addressing rural complexities

Research involved comparison of:

* rural school contexts
* impact of remote learning as a result of COVID-19 including digital hardware and internet access
* school funding including Indigenous education and learners
* student attendance and engagement
* staff development particularly Professioanl Learning Communities (PLC)

The focus involved exploring the complexity of these in a rural setting along with creative solutions through resourcing that facilitates the best learning opportunities for students.

# Signficant learnings:

Educational systems of New South Wales and Alberta share many commonalities, in particular the needs and complexities of students in rural settings and schools. Whilst overall issues surface as similar, the unperpinning reason can differ and this impacts how the issues are addressed through transformative and often creative leadership.

With COVID-19 spanning across three school years, learning from home posed problems, particularly for rural students. At Harry Gray Elementary school every student has their own Chrome book and had access to internet, however it was very expensive. In Australia the majority of families shared one device, while year 11 and 12 students were provided with a loan computer, however out of town students’ internet access was intermittent due to geographical location. Each presented a barrier for learning for many students. Conversely, online professional learning for principals and teachers opened access and minimises long travel times to attend face-to-face learning and meetings.

Location impacts the ability of principals to attract support staff and services such as School Counsellors, education assistants /SLSOs or Indigenous Support workers/Aboriginal Education Officers. Differences between the amount and source of funding adds to the inability to resource schools with these services. Solutions include schools combining funds to share employment of a staff member or using flexible funds to purchase additional hours or specialist services. Access to these staff supports the complex needs of diverse rural families.

There is a shared focus on attendance and engagement for students which influences the types of programs and intiatives within the schools. Creative ‘flex’ or ‘options’ are at the forefront of leadership decisions to support increased attendance and engagement for student learning and the pursuit to close the learning gap for all students, in particular for Indigenous students representing 46% at the Canadian school and 26% at the Australian school.

Professional development of staff is supported through an investement in the human capital of both schools. Providing time for teachers, leaders and Educational Assistants/SLSOs to engage in professional learning and Professional Learning Communities within the timetable, in addition to allocated preparation or relase from face-to-face time, was pivotal in creating the best conditions for quality teaching and student success.

Rural location is a complexity that impacts equitable access to education for students across all aspects of schooling. Creative, solution-focused leadership that invests in the human capital, both students and staff, reduces the challenge and support success.

# Conclusion: Recommendations

Resourcing is key for solutions that provide opportunities to:

* Provide additional time for teachers to work collaboratively in professional learning communities or team meetings
* Prioritise and allocate time for students to engage in ‘options’ or ‘flexibile electives’ to engage students and increase attendance
* Enable equitable access to devices, external services, educational support for students
* Close the learning gaps for all students with diverse learning needs
* Be creative in finding solutions to complex issues

This partnership will continue in 2022 to further explore the topics commenced in this brief E-exchange and expand with research and comparsion of strategic school planning, curriculum and programming.

# Acknowledgements

Bonnie Countryman, Harry Gray Elementary School, Valleyview, Alberta, Canada

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