



Gonski Institute Research Brief Series
No. 2023.3

Linking schools and their communities

Part of the *Rural and Regional Education Project*

The issue

Raising educational outcomes for students in rural and regional communities is an ongoing issue. [PISA 2018](#) showed that Australian students in rural areas are in some cases almost two years behind metropolitan students in reading literacy, mathematical literacy, and scientific literacy. The *Rural and Regional Education Project* aimed to identify ways in which the New South Wales Department of Education could help to raise educational outcomes in rural and regional schools.

What we did

As part of the larger *Rural and Regional Education Project* we explored the relationship between rural and regional schools and their communities. We collected and synthesised survey, interview, and focus group data from principals, teachers, students, and parents in 17 schools, as well as members of their local communities and relevant department personnel.

Key findings



A local school's reputation is integral to the ongoing survival and prosperity of its rural community



Being a principal or teacher in a rural school is more demanding than in a metropolitan context



Local communities represent an underutilised resource for rural schools



Community-level goals for schools serving the same community may help to overcome competition

A vibrant local school was regarded as a sign of the health of rural and regional community. Community members were aware of the importance of the reputation of their school for attracting enrolments that would ensure its ongoing viability. In communities with more than one school, collaboration to make the most of scarce resources was seen as sensible, but the current structure of the education system encourages competition for enrolments.

Principals and teachers are prominent members of rural and regional communities. Staff new to these communities can struggle with being always visible. Willingness to live in the community and to become involved community activities was seen as indicative of an individual's commitment to that community, and contributed to mutual understanding and trust.

“

“They want your involvement at a very personal level. They want to stop you down the street and talk to you about their son or daughter and, you know, they were naughty today or they forgot their uniform or whatever. That's what – it's like you're just part of the family and they just want to be talking to you all the time. And then the other side of that is you need to get away from that.”

– Sara, Principal, Cluster 2

”

We found examples of parents contributing to curriculum delivery in areas such as agriculture and cooking. There is scope for greater integration of schools and communities. This requires particular skills of school leaders as well as time. It is an example of the many ways in which being a principal or teacher in a rural community is different from, and arguably more demanding than, working in a metropolitan context.

Want more information?

This research brief is based on section 4.1 of the *Rural and Regional Education Project: Final Report*. The full report is [available for download from the New South Wales Department of Education website](#).

Beswick, K., Roberts, P., Eacott, S., Holden, R., Alonzo, D., Downes, N., Mularczyk, L., Loughland, T., Cridge, S., Corbyn, E., & Bedford, M. (2022). *Rural and Regional Research Education Project: Final report*. Sydney: UNSW Gonski Institute for Education and School of Education.

About the researcher

Professor Kim Beswick is the Director of the Gonski Institute for Education. She is passionate about providing equitable access to quality education that empowers all students, and her [research](#) is closely connected with practice in schools and classrooms.



Acknowledgements

This research was undertaken as part of the Rural and Regional Education project, which was commissioned by the NSW Department of Education, and completed by the Gonski Institute for Education, the School of Education at UNSW Sydney, Social Ventures Australia, and the University of Canberra.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



We are proud to contribute to the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#).

About the Gonski Institute for Education Research Brief Series

This series delivers accessible summaries of recent research that responds to the questions of policymakers and the general public. All research reported is conducted by Institute-affiliated researchers.

Based at UNSW Sydney, the core mission at the Gonski Institute for Education is to address inequity in Australian education and improve access to high-quality education for all students. Our members are marked their commitment and capacity to lead dialogue and debate in education reform by translating high-quality research into practical strategies and policy recommendations.

[Visit our website to learn more about our work.](#)