

Education in Regional, Rural and Remote NSW

A resource for researchers



Acknowledgement of Country

NSW Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of NSW.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that contributed to the development of this report.

We advise this resource may contain images, or names of deceased persons in photographs or historical content.

Regional, Rural and Remote Education: A scan of the evidence

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“Engaging with research, and ensuring research evidence is used well, is key to professionalising education policy making processes, and ultimately to improving educational outcomes.”

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024)

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Executive summary

*“While it is obviously important to highlight vectors of disadvantage to inform policy and practice, we found that [existing rural research] takes rural disadvantage as a given. **What constitutes the rural, and how advantage and disadvantage is understood, yet alone produced by metro-normativity, is overlooked ... By reproducing deficit discourses and, assuming that students and their families are **deprived rather than different**, such research enacts a symbolic violence upon (all) rural students and communities.**”*

Roberts et al. (2022) (*emphasis added*)

This document provides a high-level synthesis of the evidence-base in regional, rural and remote (RRR) education within the context of NSW public education. It provides a summary of key themes and highlights gaps in RRR-specific research where future efforts may be focused.

Whilst a retrospective scan of RRR research reveals that themes have remained largely consistent over the past 30 years, there remains a lack of high-quality evidence on effective practices in RRR education in NSW and Australia.¹

Rural equity gap

The extant research consistently demonstrates that gaps in opportunity and outcomes for students in RRR locations persist. Some of these gaps are highlighted in The Rural Equity Gap in Section 2 of the report. Acknowledging and understanding the rural equity gap is the springboard to leading the system towards achieving equity of opportunity and outcomes — a focus of [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#).

Moving forward, our discourse should move from focusing on disadvantage and deficit to highlighting *difference*. Students in RRR locations may have different experiences to their metropolitan peers because of where they live, however they should not experience difference in access to opportunity and their educational outcomes.

Key findings

The scan of the evidence identified the following five key themes which highlight implemented best practice, inform where efforts in RRR education should continue to be focused, and underscore the necessity for increased research into RRR education to inform policy and practice that supports RRR students:

¹ Guenther, J., Fuqua, M., Ledger, S., Davie, S., Cuervo, H., Lasselle, L., & Downes, N. (2023). [The Perennials and Trends of Rural Education: Discourses that Shape Research and Practice](#). Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 33(3), 1–31.



Early childhood education and care – the importance of foundational education in rural areas and its impact on long-term student success.

Student outcomes – analysis of academic and social outcomes for students in RRR context, highlighting both challenges and successes.

Teacher workforce – an exploration of the recruitment, retention and professional development of teachers in rural settings, emphasising the unique challenges they face.

Post-school pathways – a review of the opportunities and support systems available for students transitioning from RRR to further education and employment.

System supports – examination of the systemic supports that are in place, or lacking, to enhance the educational experiences of RRR students.

Whilst these themes are not unique to RRR locations, they are often compounded due to factors such as distance, thin markets (availability of services) and the impact of natural disasters. A summary of the factors that researchers should consider when investigating supports for RRR students and their communities, from early childhood through to post-school pathways, is provided in Section 3. This information can guide research initiatives and help identify areas for further study in RRR education.

Additional resources

It is recommended that the following departmental materials are read alongside this document:

[Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#)

[Our Research Statement](#)

[A Guide to Our Evidence Needs](#)

[Remoteness standard](#)

[2025 Strategic directions](#)

1. Introduction

“A culture of evidence use starts with evidence itself.”

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024)

1.1 How to engage with this document

This document aims to support future research efforts that address gaps in the existing evidence while considering how research can be effectively translated into actionable practices. It provides a high-level synthesis and links to existing research and evidence in RRR education in NSW and Australia.

A summary of key themes is provided, highlighting gaps in RRR-specific research where future efforts may be focused. The point-in-time (late 2024) scan of the evidence seeks to inform policy design, program delivery, evaluation, and future research that is accessible and relevant to RRR schools.

This report is aligned with the focus on equity and priorities of [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#)² and with the department’s approach to and key objectives of research outlined in [Our Research Statement](#).³

1.2 Scope

In scope	Out of scope
Retrospective environmental scan of RRR themes highlighted in Australian research.	Primary research in RRR education, retrospective environmental scan of international research.
Highlighting the rural equity gap.	RRR education literature review (<i>addressed by Rural and Regional Education Project: Final Report</i> ⁴ and <i>Australian and International Journal of Rural Education</i> ¹).
Validation and synthesis of contemporary RRR themes via an environmental scan.	Research agenda for RRR education (<i>addressed by Research for NSW Public Education</i>).
	Comprehensive RRR education evidence base.

² NSW Department of Education (2023). [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#).

³ NSW Department of Education (2024). [Our Research Statement](#).

⁴ University of New South Wales, Gonski Institute for Education and School of Education. (2023). [Rural and Regional Education Project: Final Report](#).

1.3 Background and context

“Building a stronger evidence base tailored to supporting all schools is dependent on initiating, developing, implementing, and monitoring policies and reforms relevant to the diversity of schools within the system, not just those of metropolitan centres.”

University of NSW, Gonski Institute for Education and School of Education (2023)

In 2023, the NSW Auditor-General's Rural and Remote Education Performance Audit (the Audit) found that the department had not considered research while developing the Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021-2024). The Audit emphasised the need to consider available evidence, including findings from a 2018 review, to address equity gaps in rural education. It also recommended updating the 2013 literature review to identify factors affecting performance outcomes for rural students.

Collaborating with the University of NSW Gonski Institute, the department's 2023 research revealed a significant lack of evidence-based practices in rural education. An analysis of the Australian and International Journal of Rural Education highlighted consistent themes in RRR education research over the past 30 years, but stressed the need for contemporary evidence and rigorous research to improve education outcomes.

Despite the evidence pointing to consistent themes, there is still a shortage of quality research focused on rural education in Australia, especially in NSW. A recent capability uplift has enhanced how the department uses and understands data for RRR areas. In addition, through [Research for NSW Public Education: A Guide to Our Evidence Needs](#), we have a research agenda that focuses on evidence to help achieve the goals of [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#). These improvements provide an opportunity to build on the evidence base and embed new practice in the system to improve policy and outcomes for RRR students.

1.4 Defining RRR

This report uses the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) [Australian Statistical Geography Standard \(ASGS\)](#) Remoteness Standard (Standard). The ASGS structure defines 5 classes of relative geographic remoteness across Australia. These 5 classes are:

- Major Cities of Australia
- Inner Regional Australia
- Outer Regional Australia
- Remote Australia
- Very Remote Australia

This structure has been adopted in the department's [Remoteness Standard](#) to provide a consistent approach to identifying the impact of geographical isolation on educational performance and outcomes.



2. The rural equity gap

2.1 The rural equity gap

A gap in the experiences and outcomes of students based in RRR schools compared to their metropolitan peers is evident across the student lifecycle. This is visually represented on the following page. It demonstrates the consistent difference in experiences and outcomes of students across a range of measures between those who are based in regional, rural and remote locations and major cities of NSW.

Whilst there are intersecting and compounding causes of the ‘gap’ such as lower socio-economic status, the moral imperative to address equitable access to positive educational outcomes for such a significant student cohort remains. The focus of [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#) is to “create an outstanding, equitable education system in which every student can learn, grow and belong.”² Acknowledging the gap (through data) provides insight into systemic barriers and the department’s equity goals in student outcomes between metropolitan and RRR schools. This is a key step to achieving the aim of an equitable education system.

The rural equity gap necessarily adopts a deficit approach *at a point in time* to highlight the differences experienced by RRR students. It does not seek to dismiss or exclude the disadvantage experienced by other student cohorts.

The rural equity gap prevails across the student lifecycle

NSW public schools 2021-2024

	31% of children in Far West NSW are considered ‘developmentally vulnerable’ in 1 or more domains compared to 21% in all NSW ⁵
	76% of students in very remote locations attend school 90% or more of the time compared to 89% in major cities ^{6, 7}
	76% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled in ‘regional locations’ ⁸
	3 out of 4 areas with the highest level of educational disadvantage in NSW (FOIE Quarter 1) are in RRR areas ⁸
	54% of Year 3 and 59% of Year 7 students in very remote areas need additional support in numeracy compared to 8% of Year 3 and 7% of Year 7 students in major cities ^{9, 10}
	42% of remote and very remote primary students participate in extra-curricular activities (including organised sports or activities outside the normal school curriculum) compared to 53% in major cities ¹¹
	35% of secondary students in remote and very remote schools experienced bullying compared to 26% in major cities ¹²
	There are 2 in-school opportunity classes and 1 selective school in outer regional areas and 0 in remote/very remote compared to 66 and 21 respectively in major cities ¹³
	47% of inner & outer regional secondary students report a sense of belonging compared to 58% major cities ¹⁴
	59% of inner/outer regional students attained their HSC in 2022 compared to 75% in major cities ^{15, 16}
	18% of outer regional & remote students who complete the HSC achieve a top 2 band result compared to 45% of students in major cities ^{17, 18}
	20% of inner regional students study a bachelor's degree after completing Year 12 compared to 45% in major cities ¹⁹

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. (2022). [Australian Early Development Census 2021](#)

⁶ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2024). [Understanding attendance](#)

⁷ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2024). [2023 Semester 1 student attendance](#)

⁸ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2024). [Schools and Students 2023 Statistical Bulletin](#)

⁹ Australian Government Department of Education (2024). [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2023](#)

¹⁰ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2023). [NAPLAN national results data set](#)

¹¹ NSW Mental Health Commission. (2023). [Students engaged in school sport or extra-curricular activities](#)

¹² NSW Mental Health Commission. (2023). [Students experiencing bullying at school](#)

¹³ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2024). [Master Dataset: NSW government school locations and student enrolment numbers](#)

¹⁴ NSW Mental Health Commission. (2023). [Students who report having a positive sense of belonging](#)

¹⁵ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2024). [Year 12 certification rates – 2022](#)

¹⁶ Australian Government Productivity Commission (2024). [Report on Government Services 2024 – School Education](#)

¹⁷ NSW Education Standards Authority (2024). [2023 Higher School Certificate Participation and Performance](#)

¹⁸ NSW Education Standards Authority (2024). [2023 HSC facts and figures](#)

¹⁹ NSW Department of Education. (2023). [2022 NSW Post-School Destinations and Experiences Survey](#)

3. Themes in RRR education: the current state in NSW/Australia

The retrospective scan of the evidence base highlights themes that demonstrate the persistent equity gap for the delivery of educational opportunities and outcomes in RRR areas. A contemporary review and comparison of student outcomes, as shown in the rural equity gap in the previous section, demonstrates that these themes not only persist today, but impact across the student lifecycle.

Sources reviewed in the scan included academic journals, government reports, published statistical data and published departmental resources. Insights from the evidence base relevant to NSW public education is summarised under five themes:



These themes are also consistently reflected in the priorities and enablers of [Our Plan for NSW Public Education](#) and the evidence needs outlined in Research for NSW Public Education.

The thematic overview provides a snapshot of the important issues that the existing research and evidence base point to and highlights the knowledge gaps that need to be bridged by those who research and develop policy for RRR learning communities. The overview includes key evidence which is supported by a Recommended Further Reading List – also grouped by themes – in Section 4.

Data sovereignty

The data and statistics reported throughout section 3 were publicly available in October 2024.

3.1 Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

“A child’s early experiences and environments shape their health, development and wellbeing for life. Experiencing disadvantage during early childhood has lasting impacts at both the individual and societal level; while the impacts can be immediate and/or long-lasting, they are proportionate to the level of disadvantage experienced.”

Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (2024)

Current themes in RRR: what do we know about the equity gap?

Availability of services

- Early childhood education and care accessibility disproportionately affects families in RRR areas, where the research reports on ‘childcare deserts’ with up to three children for every one ECEC place and waiting lists are often years long.^{20,21}
- Lack of early childhood education and care availability impacts the liveability of RRR communities and attraction of essential workers^{22, 23, 24} which in turn affects those communities’ access to essential services such as healthcare.
- Parents not being able to participate in the workforce due to a lack of ECEC availability impacts the long-term health of RRR communities.²⁵

Quality of services

- A scarcity of ECEC services and workforce in RRR areas impacts upon the quality of education and care that is provided. Children who attend an ECEC service rated as ‘exceeding or above’ are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable.²⁶
- Parents have reduced choice in finding an appropriate ECEC service for their child in RRR areas,²⁰ where places may not be suitable or appropriate due to a range of factors, such as service hours, lack of support for children with additional needs and/or lack of culturally appropriate services.²⁷

Workforce attraction and retention

- The nation-wide shortage of ECEC workers is exacerbated in RRR areas despite the federal government’s initiatives to achieve parity of respect and pay/conditions with the teaching profession.²⁸

²⁰ The Parenthood. (2024). [Choiceless: The plight of parents in accessing regional, rural and remote early learning and care.](#)

²¹ Jobs and Skills Australia. (2024). [Towards a regional, rural and remote jobs and skills roadmap.](#)

²² Rural Doctors Association of Australia. (2024). [Childcare crisis reducing access to healthcare in the bush.](#)

²³ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. (2023). [Childcare Inquiry, Final Report.](#)

²⁴ National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022-2031.

²⁵ The Front Project. (2024). [Paving the path: Addressing market imbalances to achieve quality and affordable childcare in more places.](#)

²⁶ Australian Education Research Organisation. (2024). [Linking quality and child development in early childhood education and care: Research summary.](#)

²⁷ Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal NSW. (2023). [Early childhood education and care – Independent Market Monitoring Review.](#)

²⁸ Australian Early Development Census. (2021). [Findings from the Australian Early Development Census \(AEDC\) 2009 to 2021.](#)

- There is high competition between ECEC providers to attract and retain workers. Typically, smaller RRR providers struggle to recoup the time and cost of recruiting/training qualified workers when they don't stay.²⁰ Access to professional learning opportunities can also be limited due to staff needing to be released to attend.²⁷

Thin markets and underserved communities

- In many RRR areas, thin markets impact upon the desirability and viability of building and offering new ECEC services, particularly for private providers where profitability is a key factor.²⁰

Inequitable administrative burden

- Smaller ECEC centres in RRR locations have a smaller workforce which places an inequitable administrative burden compared to larger enterprises. Anecdotally, RRR providers report that resourcing and capability constraints reduce equitable access to funding and grant opportunities. Similarly, the Quality Assessment and Rating Process, Transition to School Statements, and running of local volunteer committees place an increased administrative burden on services in RRR communities.

School readiness

- Australia-wide, nearly half (46.2%) of all children from very remote areas, and more than one quarter (26.4%) of children from outer regional areas are developmentally vulnerable, compared with major cities, where just 20.8% of children are developmentally vulnerable.²⁴
- Developmental vulnerability in the Australian Early Development Census domains affects children's readiness for school and their transition to it, as well as their long-term outcomes in education, health, wellbeing, and employment.²⁹



²⁹ Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020). [Post-school aspirations: Comparisons between students from metro and non-metro areas. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth.](#)

3.2 Student outcomes

“Education improves people’s lives. The learning opportunities provided to children from their early years through school into tertiary education and the workforce will shape their futures. These opportunities, and the benefits of education, should not be limited by location.”

Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report, 2023.

Current themes in RRR: what do we know about the equity gap?

Student achievement

- A large amount of education research is directed at overcoming the ‘rural school problem’ from a metropolitan perspective and using a deficit discourse lens, and does not focus on a strengths orientation.^{291, 43}
- There is a significant disparity between students in RRR areas and those in major cities across all tests and measures including NAPLAN scores and HSC attainment.^{30, 31}
- Students in major city schools in Australia perform higher in creative thinking than students in regional schools, who in turn, perform higher than students in remote schools.³²
- RRR students are less likely to continue schooling to Year 12 than students in major cities in NSW.³³
- RRR students achieve at lower levels in HSC English and maths than their non-RRR counterparts - regardless of their parents’ socio-economic status (SES) levels, the average SES of their peers at school, their prior achievement in NAPLAN and school sector.³⁴

Attendance

- Students in RRR locations are less likely to be attending school 90% of the time or more.^{35, 36}
- There is a gap between students reporting a high sense of belonging in major cities and RRR. The gap is more pronounced at the secondary level, with less than 50% of

³⁰ Audit Office of NSW. (2023). [Regional, rural and remote education performance audit](#).

³¹ Holden, R., & Zhang, J. (2018). [The economic impact of improving regional, rural & remote education in Australia](#). UNSW Sydney: Gonski Institute for Education.

³² De Bortoli, L., & Underwood, C. (2024). [Assessing creative thinking for a better future](#). Australian Council for Educational Research.

³³ Australian Government, Productivity Commission. (2024). [Report on Government Services 2024, 4 School education](#).

³⁴ Dean, J., Roberts, P., Downes, N., & Goldsmith, A. (2023). [The spatial implications of academic achievement in Year 12: Rethinking discourses of disadvantage in rural locations](#). Australian Journal of Education, 67(1), 94-114.

³⁵ NSW Department of Education. (2024a). [Understanding attendance](#). Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

³⁶ NSW Department of Education (2024b). [2023 Semester 1 student attendance](#). Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

RRR secondary students reporting that they feel a high sense of belonging at school.³⁷

Curriculum

- The availability and relevance of curriculum is highlighted in concerns including the limited access to some subjects for RRR students; teachers teaching out of their fields of expertise and training; and the unique experiences of RRR students not being reflected in the curriculum.³⁸

Intersectionality

- There is a strong correlation between the level of school socio-educational advantage, the number and complexity of subjects that schools offer, and the overall achievement of students as demonstrated through average school HSC results.³⁹
- Three of the top four areas in NSW for level of educational disadvantage are in RRR.³⁹
- 76.1% of students who identify as Aboriginal are in RRR areas.⁴⁰
- Geographic isolation and availability of specialised services and support exacerbate the intersectionality challenge in RRR.⁴¹



³⁷ Mental Health Commission of New South Wales. (2023, 6 September). [Students who report having a positive sense of belonging.](#)

³⁸ Halsey, J. (2018). [Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education.](#)

³⁹ Dean, J., Roberts, P., & Perry, L. B. (2023). [School equity, marketisation and access to the Australian senior secondary curriculum.](#) Educational Review, 75(2), 243-263

⁴⁰ NSW Department of Education. (2024c). [Schools and students: 2023 statistical bulletin.](#) Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

⁴¹ National Rural Health Alliance. (2024). [Rural health in Australia: Snapshot 2023.](#)

3.3 Post-school pathways

“One strategy moving forward is for governments and communities to broaden conceptions of ‘worthy’ post-school pathways and occupations ... Investing in alternative post-school destinations will benefit both young people seeking a reliable career as well as society at large. Societal narratives that valorise university alone must be unsettled.”

Teachers & Teaching Research Centre, School of Education, University of Newcastle, 2023

Current themes in RRR: what do we know about the equity gap?

Vocational vs. academic pathways

- After completing year 12, RRR students are less likely to be studying a bachelor’s degree and more likely to be undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship.^{42, 29}
- Vocational rather than academic pathways may be seen as more achievable for RRR students due to the wider access to TAFE institutions compared to universities in RRR locations.^{43, 46}
- Whilst RRR students are more likely to enrol in Certificate I and II VET courses (i.e. lower qualifications in the Australian Qualifications Framework than Certificates III-IV) than their major city counterparts²¹, RRR VET students have consistently better outcomes from training than students from major cities.⁴⁴

Subject availability

- Obstacles to RRR students participating in post-school study (particularly university) include limited subject availability in secondary schooling and, a lack of access to higher-level study options in, or near, their home location.^{45, 46}

Location

- Living in a RRR location exacerbates the effect of socioeconomic background on tertiary expectations, with students from low and middle SES backgrounds in RRR locations less likely to expect to attend university than their city peers.³⁹
- Location accounts for around 30% of the gap in university participation for young people in RRR after controlling for factors such as academic achievement and socio-economic status.^{39, 47}

⁴² NSW Department of Education. (2023). [Destinations of school leavers from major city, regional and remote areas of NSW](#).

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ National Council for Educational Research. (2023). [National Student Outcomes Survey 2023](#).

⁴⁵ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2013). [Rural and remote education: Literature review](#). NSW Department of Education.

⁴⁶ Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2020). [Post-school aspirations: Comparisons between students from metro and non-metro areas. Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth](#).

⁴⁷ Buckley, S. (2024). [Opportunities for career guidance in Australian schools](#). Australian Council for Educational Research.

- Young people from RRR schools who go on to higher education are four times more likely to be living away from home in their first year of study.⁴⁸ RRR students report that moving away from established support networks affected their overall wellbeing.⁴⁹

Teaching support and guidance

- For outer regional students, Year 7 teaching (explicit teaching strategies, teacher expectations, emotional support and classroom management) has a direct, enduring and positive long-term association with later completion intentions.^{50, 51}
- School-based career guidance is important for promoting further post-school study, however students in RRR are less likely to have career advice formally scheduled into their class time.⁵²



⁴⁸ Cherastidtham, I., Norton, A., and Mackey, W. (2018). *University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion?*. Grattan Institute.

⁴⁹ Australian Government, Department of Education. (2019). *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy – final report*.

⁵⁰ NSW Department of Education, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2024). *What helps students from Rural, Regional and Remote areas to complete school?*

⁵¹ Collie R, Martin A, Le A & Flesken A (2025) 'The process and prediction of school completion: A six-year longitudinal examination', Contemporary Educational Psychology, accepted for publication.

⁵² Jaremus, F., Sincok, K., Patfield, S., Fray, L., Prieto, E., & Gore, J. (2023). *Pressure to attend university: Beyond narrow conceptions of pathways to a "good life"*. Educational Review, 1-20.

3.4 Teacher workforce

“Notwithstanding the efforts of governments, attracting and retaining the best teachers for regional, rural and remote schools continues to be one of the most persistent challenges on the ‘education agenda’.

Halsey, J. (2018)

Current themes in RRR: what do we know about the equity gap?

Attraction and retention of the RRR teacher workforce is a complex issue which has multiple and intersecting factors at play.

Workforce shortages are more pronounced in RRR

- Shortages are not restricted to the teacher workforce but extend to other essential workers such as doctors, nurses, and aged care workers, which impacts on the attractiveness, liveability, and viability of RRR communities.²⁰
- Inter-agency collaboration is needed to address the broader essential workforce issue, it is not solely a challenge for the department. The NSW Government’s successful pilot of ‘The Welcome Experience’⁵³ which is now being expanded, demonstrates how multiple government agencies can work together to support essential workers in moving to RRR areas.

Societal factors

- There are broader societal factors at play in attracting the essential workforce to RRR communities — and just as importantly keeping them — such as housing, transport, access to services, and “liveability” of a community.²⁰

School leadership

- School leadership is different in RRR with greater social expectations and responsibilities given the nature of small communities.^{54, 55}

Preparedness for the classroom

- Universities are critical partners with governments in not only promoting teaching as a rewarding career but most importantly, in adequately preparing and equipping pre-service teachers for successful and long-term careers. Given the rapid rate of change in our society and the range of challenges and complexities that present both inside and outside the school gates, this preparation extends beyond considerations of ITE curriculum and evidence-based pedagogy to resilience and

⁵³ Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development: [The Welcome Experience](#).

⁵⁴ Eacott, S., Niesche, R., Heffernan, A., Loughland, T., Gobby, B., & Durksen, T. L. (2021). [High-impact school leadership: regional, rural and remote schools](#).

⁵⁵ Hudson, C. (2024). [Leading a successful rural school in Australia](#). *Journal of Educational Administration*.

practical skills such as classroom/behavioural management.^{56, 57} The challenges and needs of early career teachers can be exacerbated and compounded in RRR communities where there is often a lack of on-the-ground support.

Pre-service teaching placements

- The experience of pre-service teachers attending practicums is known anecdotally to be problematic, and there have been a number of government and university initiatives recently announced to improve this.^{58, 59, 60} The quality of practical experience in RRR areas is particularly variable.⁵⁷
- There is evidence from the allied health workforce research that “rural exposure” at the time of professional placement correlates with transition to rural practice, a finding that could be extended to apply to other essential workers who undergo placement as part of their accreditation, such as teachers.⁶¹

Tailored induction and mentoring for early career teachers

- Australian and international research has demonstrated that high-quality induction has a dramatic effect on the transition process for early career teachers, however in RRR schools, there is a lack of experienced teachers to mentor early career teachers.⁶² Additionally, in small RRR schools where the principal also has a teaching load, induction is often brief and mentoring support is minimal.⁶³

Access to relevant professional learning

- For teachers based in RRR locations, professional learning (PL) has added considerations and complexities. Logistical challenges, including small staff numbers and professional isolation may impact teachers’ ability to access PL and collaborate with experienced teachers.⁶⁴
- PL content also needs to be contextualised to account for the difference in teaching in RRR, for example the particular needs of early career teachers who are geographically isolated, skills for teaching composite classes, or connecting curriculum to the local context.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ The Centre for Independent Studies. (2023). Starting off on the wrong foot: How to improve Initial Teacher Education in Australia.

⁵⁷ Australian Government. (2023). Strong beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel.

⁵⁸ Roberts, P., Cosgrave, C., Gillespie, J., Malatzky, C., Hyde, S., Hu, W. C., ... & Downes, N. (2021). ‘Re-placing’ professional practice. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 29(2), 301-305.

⁵⁹ Roberts, P., Downes, N., & Reid, J. A. (2022). Teacher education for a rural-ready teaching force: Swings, roundabouts, and slippery slides?. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* (Online), 47(3), 94-111.

⁶⁰ Deetlefs, A. J., Chalmers, J., Tindall, K., Wiryakusuma-McLeod, C., Bennett, S., Hay, I., ... & Rudd, K. (2021). Applying behavioral insights to increase rural and remote internships: Results from two Randomized Controlled Trials. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics*, 92, 101664.

⁶¹ San Puah et al (2023). Do undertaking rural placements and place of origin inform where allied health graduates work in South Australia?

⁶² Sullivan, A. and Johnson, B. (2012) ‘Questionable practices?: Relying on individual teacher resilience in remote schools’, *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 22(3), pp. 101–116.

⁶³ Country Education Partnership 2021 – *Regional and Rural Early Career Teachers Survey* <https://cep.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Early-Career-Teacher-Survey-Report-Sept2021.pdf>

⁶⁴ Kingsford-Smith, A. A., Collie, R. J., Loughland, T., & Nguyen, H. T. M. (2023). Teacher wellbeing in rural, regional, and metropolitan schools: Examining resources and demands across locations. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 132, 104229.

- Teaching in a Connected Community School requires deep cultural awareness and strong community engagement skills.^{44, 38, 65}
- Professional connection — i.e. the opportunity to connect to peers and mentors who have lived experience of teaching in RRR schools — is critical for ongoing learning⁶⁶ however, teachers in RRR locations have fewer incidental opportunities for professional connection and are more likely to be professionally isolated.⁶⁷

RRR teachers need specialised wellbeing and resilience support

- Teaching in RRR communities can often expose teachers to traumatic events, for example floods and bushfires. In small communities, teachers and school leaders have a dual role as community leaders and will often have responsibilities in disaster recovery efforts.⁶⁸

RRR teachers need to be supported to stay in the profession

- The high rate of beginning teacher attrition is a compounded issue for RRR communities as it difficult to attract teachers in the first place⁶⁹, a common challenge experienced across the essential services workforce.



⁶⁵ Roberts, P. (2023). [Australian students in rural areas are not 'behind' their city peers because of socioeconomic status. There is something else going on.](#) The Conversation, June 6.

⁶⁶ Kim, M. J., & Martin, K. (2020). How rural educators improve professional capital in a blended professional learning network. In Professional learning networks: Facilitating transformation in diverse contexts with equity-seeking communities (pp. 107-139). Emerald Publishing Limited.

⁶⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019). Learning in rural schools: Insights from PISA, TALIS and the literature. OECD Education Working Paper No. 196. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

⁶⁸ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2020). [The impact of bushfires on student wellbeing and student learning: Environmental scan.](#)

⁶⁹ Harris, M., Rhodes, D., Gray, C., & Vernon, L. (2025). Beyond the city limits: perceptions of pre-service teachers undertaking professional experience in regional, rural and remote schools. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 1-25.

3.5 System supports

“Service-wide reform is needed for the public sector to continue fulfilling its core function, while also adapting to the changing demands and future challenges and opportunities. Key components of this reform are improving the public sector’s use of rigorous evidence and its ability to work in genuine partnership with other sectors.”

Australia and New Zealand School of Government, 2024

Current themes in RRR: what do we know about the equity gap?

Inadequate evidence

- There is very limited research on practices and strategies that support the improvement of outcomes in RRR schools,^{43, 44} and even less evidence on the impacts of broader system supports.

Contextualised support

- The need for place-based, contextualised supports that consider local relationships, interactions and influences was highlighted in the seminal Halsey report³⁸, in the 2023 UNSW Gonski Institute report⁴, and in anecdotal evidence from school leaders identified in the current review.
- Whilst national consistency in teacher preparation, curriculum offerings, and pedagogical practices are important, evidence suggests place-based solutions and contextualised practices are critical for RRR schools.⁷⁰
- The UNSW Gonski Institute report⁴ also highlighted that policies developed in metropolitan offices do not always make sense in rural and regional contexts, for example exams that include questions about items that RRR students may not have encountered, e.g. traffic lights or motorway tolls.

Resourcing and funding

- Resourcing and funding for schools is noted in the research as an ongoing access and equity issue for RRR students.^{1, 71} The financial hardships faced by low SES students in RRR locations include the higher costs of living, travel and accommodation.^{72, 73}
- Both financial and non-financial incentives can provide user levers which contribute to the attraction and retention of teaching staff to RRR schools. The department’s own review of incentives for teachers found that financial incentives alone are not necessarily the right driver to attract the best staff, with increases in rental

⁷⁰ Lampert, J. & Wilson, K. (2024). [Bridging the Gap: A pathway to excellence and equity in Australian schools through needs-based funding and equitable policy](#). The McKell Institute.

⁷¹ The McKell Institute. (2024). [Bridging the Gap: A pathway to excellence and equity in Australian schools through needs-based funding and equitable policy](#).

⁷² Devlin, M., & McKay, J. (2018). [The financial realities for students from low SES backgrounds at Australian regional universities](#). Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 28(1), 119–134.

⁷³ Downes, N., & Roberts, P. (2018). [Revisiting the schoolhouse: A literature review on staffing rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia 2004–2016](#). Australian and International Journal of Rural Education, 28(1), 29–52.

subsidies having no meaningful impact on teacher retention. The review recommended that incentives should be designed and administered as one part of a broader overall strategy which consider a range of RRR factors.⁷⁴

- A recent inquiry by the Parliament of Victoria into the state's education system heard that teacher incentives had a detrimental effect on RRR communities as teachers were not staying long term. The inquiry recommended a review into the effectiveness of the incentives program after finding that there was insufficient data to show that the program had achieved the objective of recruiting new teachers to RRR areas.⁷⁵
- Beyond increasing funding or initiatives, there have been calls for improvements in RRR communities such as quality teacher housing and other community infrastructure.²⁰



⁷⁴ Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2020). [Evaluation of the Rural and Remote Education Blueprint – Final Report](#). NSW Department of Education.

⁷⁵ Parliament of Victoria. (2024). [The state education system in Victoria: Inquiry, October 2024](#).

4. The RRR evidence base - recommended further reading

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