EXPECTATIONS OF RURAL AND REMOTE STUDENTS

Chris Sidoti
Human Rights Commissioner

National Council of Independent Schools’ Associations
2000 National Conference
Barossa Valley SA

16 July 2000


**Education is power**

In May last year Commission staff and I travelled to Nguiu in the Tiwi Islands north of Darwin for our inquiry into rural and remote education. Nguiu is a small community of around 1500 people. No one from Nguiu has ever completed year 12 at school, let alone gone on to university. We met with a group of school students there. One teenage student, 15 year old Trevor, told us

> School is about education and education is power for me. And there are a lot of things that I need to know about the whole world. When I leave school I might go to a university in Darwin, I want to be a scientist. In future I hope to be President of the Land Council.

Education *is* power – personal and political. That’s why it’s recognised as a human right. Everyone has the right to education.

Education is also fundamental to the full enjoyment of most other human rights: most clearly the right to work but also the right to health. And to the exercise of social responsibilities including respect for human rights.
This core significance of education was the reason the Commission chose rural and remote education as the subject of its inquiry in response to *Bush Talks* consultations we conducted during 1998. You may recall that we consulted extensively throughout the country during that year on the human rights concerns of regional, rural and remote Australians. Their concerns were many. We were told of fading towns, dwindling populations, withdrawal of services, wholesale departures of young people, lost jobs and lives lost to accidents and emergencies which could not be reached in time and to suicides.

The Commission decided to investigate school education in rural and remote Australia as a way of understanding what was happening in all sectors of rural and remote community life and as a focus for recommendations which, if implemented, may help country people to meet the many challenges they face with creative solutions for local conditions addressing local needs. We saw good education as essential if small towns are to have a future.

**Rural schooling**

Between one-quarter and one-third of Australian students attend school or undertake distance education in rural and remote areas.
Only about 5% attend schools which qualify for the Commonwealth’s Country Areas Program (CAP) funding and fewer than 1% (12,243 students) receive the Commonwealth’s Assistance for Isolated Children.

The independent school sector is, as you know, a significant one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>% of primary schools</th>
<th>% of secondary schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table shows % of total schools in the jurisdiction – not just rural and remote schools. Excludes Catholic schools and Special Schools

Evidence to the Human Rights Commission’s 1998 national Bush Talks consultations revealed a growing disquiet about the state of school education in rural and remote areas: a sense of being left behind in the new information technology age and of being
relegated to the second division in terms of curriculum choice and staff quality. We were told during *Bush Talks* of concerns about

- the growing costs of schooling
- travelling times and distances and the lack of public transport
- the lack of inter-school sporting, debating and other competition and cultural opportunities
- the high turnover of teachers and their lack of preparation to deal with remote school issues.

Certainly the limited information available on schooling outcomes for students in rural and remote areas provokes concern. Country students are less likely to finish school than their metropolitan counterparts. School participation by 16 year olds, for example, is highest in the wealthiest suburbs of the wealthiest capital cities and lowest in some of our most disadvantaged rural regions.
School attendance of 16 year olds, top and bottom 5 region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top 5 regions</th>
<th>Bottom 5 regions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mosman</td>
<td>Kimberley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ku-ring-gai</td>
<td>Southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camberwell</td>
<td>Mersey-Lyell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brighton</td>
<td>Balance (ie outside Darwin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woollahra</td>
<td>South West and Central West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosman</td>
<td>Kimberley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ku-ring-gai</td>
<td>Southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camberwell</td>
<td>Mersey-Lyell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brighton</td>
<td>Balance (ie outside Darwin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woollahra</td>
<td>South West and Central West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


On average, too, the school performance of country students lags somewhat behind that of urban students. Although they constitute up to one-third of school students, rural and remote students constitute only about 17% of tertiary students in Australia.¹

**The Commission’s Inquiry**

Education presented itself as an obvious subject for closer inquiry by the Human Rights Commission following our *Bush Talks* year. It offered us the opportunity to consider not just the provision of

---

¹ DETYA submission, page 16. Note that the major submissions can be consulted on the Commission’s website at [www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/rural/education](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/human_rights/rural/education), together with hearing transcripts and meeting notes. Also published there are the inquiry’s reports.
school education – which is a core right of every child and essential, of course, to everyone’s capacity to exercise human rights responsibly – but also the availability and quality of auxiliary services including disability support, child health, early childhood and information technology infrastructure. These auxiliary services are in their own right critical to the success of education delivery. It is clear that rural and remote areas of Australia are gravely disadvantaged in accessing them.

The inquiry was undertaken on something of a shoestring budget. Nevertheless we managed to visit every State and the Northern Territory and received 287 submissions. We also received valuable information from more than 3,000 respondents to a survey the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne conducted for us. We were delighted that more than half of these respondents were students.

We visited more than 30 towns and remote communities. In each one we always convened student focus groups – one each for secondary students and primary students. We also held informal community meetings, open to the public, and heard from parents, teachers, education support workers, local government, child welfare and many other community members.
We also conducted formal hearings in every capital city, at which witnesses gave evidence and answered questions. Witnesses included education department officers and Catholic Education administrators as well as some representatives from independent schools association.

We have summarised the evidence received by the inquiry in our March report *Emerging Themes*, copies of which are available here.

**Expectations of rural and remote students**

Listening to school students was an important part of our inquiry. That too is a human rights issue. Under Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* children have a right to have their views heard and taken into account, in manners appropriate to their development and maturity, on all matters affecting them.

Many students who spoke to the Inquiry expressed their appreciation of what a small country school can offer them.
Our school [St Cecilia’s College] is small. There are only about 100 students at our school so we know everyone. We feel listened to at our school. ²

Smaller classes were appreciated for the opportunities they offer for one-on-one teaching.

I like the smaller classes because the teachers can give you plenty of attention. In the senior school the classes are like 5, 8, 10, 11 and 12. In English the classes are about 14.³

Students expressed enthusiasm and pride in their school when popular courses were well-taught.

At Port Lincoln High School we can do music from Year 8 right through to Year 12. We can record our own music at school because we have a recording studio. We have an Aboriginal Nunga band too and we got a national award for our music this year. We will also be making a video clip at the school.⁴

---

² Student meeting in South Hedland WA.
³ Student meeting in Nhulunbuy NT.
⁴ Student meeting in Port Lincoln SA.
Students often expressed, too, a deep appreciation of the freedoms of country life. On the other hand, many described the effects on them of remoteness from capital city based learning and competition opportunities.

*Most of the educational events occur in more heavily populated areas and therefore students sometimes miss what would otherwise be available. For example we miss HSC seminars and conferences and sporting events as well.*

Students throughout rural and remote Australia were critical of the restricted range of subjects available to them in their country schools.

*We have less teachers because we don’t have so many students and then we don’t have enough subject choices and then if we choose them we don’t get them, and if we do get them we have problems with them anyway. We have to do them by ourselves.*

---

5 Student meeting in Walgett NSW.
6 Student meeting in Walgett NSW.
They were also critical of the inexperience and high turnover of their teachers.

_The situation is that first year out teachers come to Bourke as their first appointment. A lot of the teachers here, Bourke is their only experience. Last year we got three new executive at the same time. And for the HSC marking our teachers aren’t released to do it because they can’t get a casual to come out and relieve them. So only one of our teachers has ever marked the HSC. No other teachers have ever marked it and so they lack the experience to prepare us for HSC exams._

Students were particularly critical of the library and sporting facilities at their country schools.

_We don’t have enough textbooks and what we do have are badly damaged. Two of us have Business Studies class from 3 ‘til 7 and at the moment we can’t have textbooks each because it’s our last and it costs too much to order two just for us. Our teacher has to photocopy pages out of the book_
and then give them to us. And that’s the same with Legal Studies too.\(^8\)

We have just compiled an audio tape of a selection of student comments to the inquiry which I’d like to play for you. What’s especially interesting I think is that many students had good ideas for resolving the difficulties they identified.

**A human rights perspective on students’ expectations**

The human right to education is recognised in at least three international treaties, the *UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education* of 1962, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* of 1966 and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* of 1989.

International committees assess whether any particular country fully respects the right of its children to education by reference to five criteria.

- Education must be available for all without discrimination.
- It must be accessible, either within safe physical distance or by correspondence or some other form of distance education.

---

\(^8\) Student meeting in Bourke NSW.
• It must be affordable; in fact primary education must be free and once a country has succeeded in providing a free secondary education, fees can only be reimposed for very compelling reasons.

• Education must be acceptable, culturally and in other ways, to both students and their parents.

• And it must be adaptable so that it meets the different circumstances and changing needs of each individual student.

The inquiry evaluated the evidence it received against these five criteria. We found that some Australian children are failed on one or more of these criteria. To address the school education deficits in rural and remote Australia the inquiry made 73 recommendations in its report tabled in federal Parliament on 28 June. They range from broad statements of principle to very detailed recommendations, for example about the amount of income support required for a student studying by distance at home and about the training of teachers prior to taking up a rural posting.

The inquiry concluded that the availability and quality of school education in rural and remote Australia can be significantly enhanced if all education providers and auxiliary service providers work together with substantial community involvement
and with a child focused approach. I’d like to close by giving one brief example of this approach in a very disadvantaged town – Bourke in northern New South Wales. The Bourke Joint Schools Council was described to us by the two government school principals in Bourke, Paul Loxley from the primary school and Michael Chapman from the high school. 50% of Bourke students are Aboriginal.

*It has brought together virtually everyone involved in education in Bourke: Maxine from the pre-school, there are people from the TAFE, and the principal of St Ignatius has been to some of the meetings. The Aboriginal Education Consultative Group also have a place on the Joint School Council.*

*Our stated aim is for every kid who leaves school in Bourke to go to some sort of work placement or specific training that they’re interested in. I don’t know that we are going to achieve it every year, but we do have employers on side. The Cotton Growers Association has actually got five of our students working there. They took some of our kids who were going to university this year over the holidays to give them work so that they had money to take away with them.*
We have got to look at where our kids are going to go from Bourke Public School. Given the change in technology we need to think about what is going to happen for kids that are in kindergarten now and what life skills they’ll need and what they’ll have to be able to do.

The kids have got to be effective life long learners. They have got to be responsible and caring citizens and full participants in the decision making processes within the school.

The curriculum that they study at school is driven by the needs of their work placement so that their literacy and their numeracy is actually work-based literacy and work-based numeracy. So hopefully we can give them the skills to go on and do something when they leave.

Two questions

The Inquiry identified two questions that challenged all Australian governments and communities.

First, what is necessary to ensure that, by the age of 18, each child in Australia has received the education he or she requires
to participate to his or her full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community?

We sought to answer that question in our recommendations report. I consider that we have provided a blueprint for a new deal, a fair deal, for rural education.

The second question is whether we as a nation are prepared to do what is necessary to achieve that. We can’t answer that question. That’s up to us all. My hope, though, for the sakes of all the Trevors out there in rural and remote Australia, is that we are.