



Meeting with Rural School Principals

'Think Tank' led by VPA President Gabrielle Leigh held in Warrnambool on 26 May 4.00-6.00pm 2010

Quote of the 'Think Tank'

*Just as small **positive** things make a huge difference to the well-being of a small school environment – small **negative** things make a huge difference to the well-being of a small school environment.*

1. What do principals like about being principal of a small school?

- The professional satisfaction/pride in making a real and hopefully lasting difference to the lives of small children within a defined rural community. The capacity to make such a difference is significant. You can be proud of the school and your role in it – important, central part of the community.
- Being able to express your skills and talents as an effective educational leader within a defined community.
- The responsibilities you hold as a school leader for the students, their parents and the staff involved in your school.
- The professional opportunities provided in being the leader of a school with the full range of leadership responsibilities, accountabilities and rewards.
- Change is immediate
- You can achieve consensus which helps to build clear goals and strategies for improvement. All staff contribute to AIP.
- Relationships within the school community (parents, staff) are strong.

2. What are the key features of the role of a small school principal?

- To attend to all matters detailed in a Principal's Roles and Duties Statement – expectations and requirements focused on the administrative/technical, accountability and compliance, educational/teaching and learning, cultural and ethical, human and physical resource management, people well-being and welfare, community involvement and engagement and safety and emergency management.
- Oversee the day-to-day running of the school – plan for, structure, monitor and participate in the life of the school.
- Being the face-of-the-school with regard to the community. The Principal is seen as a significant person within the local community and holds a position of elevated responsibility by that community (when compared with many multi-school communities).

3. What key challenge do you face as the leader of a small school?

- Being able to juggle the daily requirements and expectations of a hands-on educational leader within the school with the out-of-school requirements, the full accountability and compliance requirements of the role and the inevitable but unpredictable and occasional unexpected matters that arise within the day's leadership journey.



- Responding to the ever changing educational and administrative landscape impacting on schools – the changing curriculum, increased accountabilities in administrative and educational.
- Meeting the Professional Learning expectations – both personal and DEECD mandated.
- Ensuring the needs – educational, social, emotional, physical and aesthetic – of each and every child are fully (adequately) resourced to achieve expected outcomes as determined by the Department, the parents and the wider community.
- Manage an annual and longer term budget which varies in its source, its purpose and its capacity to meet determined outcomes – an SRP determined according to a set formula but with variable capacity from year to year to address needs and wants.
- The capacity to fully and comprehensively address severe and critical incidents which may arise within the school's sphere of influence, due to factors such as small staff numbers, remoteness, limited range of 'on-ground' specialized skills and competencies, communications and transport.
- Being able to manage the increasing complex, multi-task role is not limitless – a new paradigm for small school principalship is required to meet the realities of the current role.
- There are times of considerable frustration. This is a hard gig with high expectations and it can be overwhelming. Principal welfare needed, as well as support in such areas as policy development and planning.

4. What issues are particularly important in small schools?

Workload

- Lack of time to perform the tasks required. In small schools, many of the same things that have to be done in large schools are required, but without the level of support that large schools can access. Some tasks (e.g. compliance requirements) take much the same amount of time no matter what the size of the school.
- Some PCOs have teaching loads e.g. .6 - need to reduce teaching loads for PCOs to do the job properly. Still expected to be a quality teacher yet have to spend more time out of the classroom and out of the school. This shows up clearly in the data. Need more funding to address this.
- The capacity to attend to (and keep up with) all the information coming into a school is problematic. Attending to phone calls/emails while at the same time supervising a class of students while helping out in a 'fill in' situation - APT provision, teacher absence and no CRT, PD attendance, parent enquiry etc., was not uncommon.
- The current roles and duties statement for a small school principal is problematic - it is a highly complex and increasing demanding role and the duties are incredibly multi-faceted - not a great incentive for a very few dollars over that of a leading teacher in a larger school. - an equity issue.
- ** A thorough review of the roles and duties of a principal in a small school should be undertaken.

Staffing structure

- Small pay differential between Leading Teacher and AP 1, yet the workload difference is huge and the expectations re what you need to know.
- Expert teachers take up too much of the SGB
- Greater ES support needed – in particular, need a Business Manager as more is required of schools.
- ES range reviews have created financial pressure.



School Buses

- A very political issue. Catholic students are supposed to pay. Changing a bus route is difficult and lengthy process e.g. 12 months! Some dairy farming areas have no bus access.
- Significant issue for small schools without their own bus route. Many parents driving children to school and at times following secondary buses which are too early for the local primary school to utilise even they were permitted to do so.
- Most of these busses also convey non-government school children to their school in Warrnambool or Hamilton etc.
- There is a distinct discrepancy between 'fee paying' and 'non-fee paying' students travelling at times on the same bus.
- Bus routes that can be accessed are not always in the best interest of the small school.
- There have been 'many' enquiries re school busses and bus routes - the problems continue and the small schools in particular 'miss out' on any localised solution to problems and inequities that can be identified.
- Small schools should be able to put a thoroughly researched case for localised bus services to the authorities.

National Partnerships

- All small schools indicated they were aware of and were pleased with the additional resources this initiative has provided for their schools. The long term nature of such support (planning ahead) is a concern. They are not aware of how funds were allocated for their schools - they just accepted a good outcome.

'Hot Spots'

- Strategies such as 'on-demand' testing bring special problems to small schools in relation to their operation and technical requirements.
- ICT operations and support is problematic in small schools - when a problem arises it is often 'ages' before any meaningful help arrives (the 'time' allocation is small and does not equate to the realities of issues and problems as they arise).
- Netbook policies. High expectations created.
- Transport difficult with such large distances
- Concern re MySchool website. Correlation of data in small schools is difficult.

5. What could be considered to improve the educational well-being of small school?

- Provision/capacity to enable the principal to be able to attend to the full range of daily teaching and administrative duties, to appropriate and effective professional school leader and teacher learning and development, to 'emergency' level or deviation type incidents/requirements which arise unexpectedly during a school day (student, parent, staff, community, derived) and to the increasing 'out-of-school' Department requirements and expectations associated with Department, Regional, Network operations and communications.
- Enhanced recognition that there are 'special needs' and 'work load' issues associated with the management and leadership of a small school environment and a 'reasonableness' in the manner in which these 'special needs' and 'work load' matters are identified and responded to in a timely and effective manner.
- The small school principal is desperately in need of adequate resources to enable them to carry out their role – it is becoming increasingly difficult/challenging to be a teaching principal in a small school with the requirements around leadership, administration and management at this time.



6. What is being required of a small school principal in attending Network, Regional and Central in school administrative and educational activity?

- The need to participate fully in the wider educational community is recognized and appreciated. However, the time commitment and possible additional administrative commitments arising from such participation needs to be rationalized in context – a principal with a regular teaching or part time teaching commitment is restricted in their capacity to slot in this level of principal engagement.
- The capacity of a small school's budget to replace the principal in teaching commitment areas is impacting significantly on the school's CRT budget. The principal's 'required attendance at out-of-school engagements is increasing and imposing. An inordinate number of days have been required for out-of school activities this year. DEECD expects us to respond yet the local community expects us to respond locally. For example this year there are 27 mandated days out of the school
 - 8 Network.
 - 3 Instructional Rounds,
 - 4 regional briefings,
 - 4 Professional Learning,
 - 6 Ultranet,
 - 2 Regional conference)

This makes us the most expensive teacher in terms of CRT replacement costs.

7. What support would you value from a professional organization such as the VPA?

- As a school leader, the level of being 'on-your-own' is high in small schools – collegiate support is very highly valued and any input by the VPA in this regard would be appreciated.
- Recognition that what you are doing and how you are doing it can be supported by having a range of professional association opportunities. Local network (formal and informal) are valuable in this regard and can be enhanced by a broader level of collegiality and professional support. Contact with the VPA, both indirect (e-letter) and direct (personal visitation, phone/email/skype contact, conference attendance) can support a small school principal both personally and professionally. The well-being of a principal is critical to their effectiveness and their growth as an educational leader.
- The VPA can be a forum for advocacy and a 'change agent' with regard to the role of a small school principal. Advancing issues of significance (position papers – even small school position papers), providing a forum for discussion and debate (meetings, Think Tanks, Forums), bring a 'whole of system' perspective to collegiality and professional learning are positive VPA initiatives in this regard.
- The capacity to provide 'distance' communications – conference-type calls, blogs etc. - needs to be considered.