

NEWS RELEASE



Thursday, 13 November, 2008

Academics help school principals tackle rural isolation

Deakin University academics are helping rural school principals tackle challenges posed by economic and demographic change in country communities.

Professor Karen Starr and Dr Simone White, of Deakin's Centre for Educational Leadership and Renewal, say a three year leadership project, in partnership with the Country Education Project, funded by Victoria's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is assisting principals to counter professional isolation by working together and learning from each other.

Case studies documenting their experiences will be included in a new book to be edited by the two academics and published by the department early next year. The text will be an opportunity for rural principals to have a voice in shaping their own and others' professional learning.

"Drought has taken a huge toll on economic livelihoods, especially in agricultural communities and global competition has encouraged many long standing rural industries to relocate offshore," the academics note.

Declining rural incomes have contributed to growing numbers of rural students who are being raised by one parent because their other parent has moved away to look for work and welfare dependent families are moving into rural communities in search of affordable housing. Principals and teachers need support to ensure all students receive the quality education needed to underpin successful adulthood.

Dr White, who grew up in the country and has taught at rural schools, says principals need to maximise their resources by collaborating with each other and their local communities.

"Most of the schools in the study have less than 80 children and small numbers of staff so opportunities for professional development and to give and receive feedback on their teaching are limited. They need to work together to make best use of their human resources, physical assets and technology."

Earlier research by the two academics showed that principals in small rural schools often feel marginalised and ignored by education bureaucracies.

Professor Starr says they face conflicting work demands of a kind not experienced by principals in larger schools "having to be generalists and straddle a line between the demands of teaching, leadership and administration.

The necessity of teaching multi-grade and ability levels concurrently and the absence of personnel such as assistant principals, business managers, student counsellors, specialist teachers and maintenance staff makes their job more labour intensive."