

MEDIA RELEASE



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(News editors – Small schools are at the heart of rural and Regional towns across Victoria. The principals outlined below as well as Professor Starr and Dr White are available for interview, comment. Please call Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance)

Forum helps principals and leaders celebrate the beauty of small schools

Principals and leaders from rural schools who have taken part in a State Government-funded Leadership program will celebrate their progress at the last of a series of forums being held across country Victoria.

The final forum of the Leading across Effective Small Schools Project being led by Deakin University in partnership with the Country Education Project will be held on Thursday and Friday October 18 and 19 at Seymour, on Monday and Tuesday October 22 and 23 at Lakes Entrance, and on Thursday and Friday October 25 and 26 at Halls Gap.

Project leader, Professor Karen Starr and Dr Simone White, from Deakin University's Centre for Educational Leadership and Renewal said being a principal or a leader in a small school was a difficult but rewarding job.

"On the upside you get to know the students really well, the students develop a lot because of the cross age-group interaction and there is a great sense of community because in a small school teamwork is critical – for example, everyone has to be on the cricket team, otherwise there isn't one," Professor Starr said.

"However if there is disquiet or a difficult issue within the community, that can affect the school. In addition, while there are great opportunities to develop as leaders, teachers and principals can also feel that they are constantly running short of time for things like administration."

Professor Starr said the program had been a great opportunity for the 83 principals and leaders on the program to collaborate and use each other's strengths to resolve issues.

"At the beginning of the program participants were asked to identify common issues and document the resources and strengths available to them and collaborate to solve the problem," she said.

"Some looked at ways to promote rural schools. "While other groups looked at ways to use Information Communications Technology across schools, for students and teachers. Another group looked at ways to support students in their schools with special needs."

"One of the teams in the Halls Gap region had worked on promoting professional learning and curriculum", said Professor Starr.

"They held a curriculum planning day and were able to release the staff in all eight schools in their working group. It was a positive thing for them to all get together."

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Dr White, who grew up in a country town and began her teaching career in a small school, presented at all of the forums on leadership and worked in particular with a team in the Shepparton area who focussed on developing giving and receiving feedback in a performance and development culture.

As part of the project, she interviewed the participants so their experiences of the program can be used as a documentary and case study for successive groups on the program

"There is not much material on this subject in Australia," she explained. "I find film is a very powerful means of conveying an experience.

"The members of the group found the filming process helped them articulate what they had done, what they are doing and their perspectives on leadership and this will be an excellent resource to use with leaders in small schools to build leadership capacity."

Dr White, who is also part of an ARC funded research team investigating the retention of country teachers, has used film previously to promote country teaching to Deakin students.

"There are greater opportunities in rural schools to take on responsibilities quite quickly and for professional learning and growth," she said.

"You have a higher profile in the community and you know you are making a difference in the community and the school. It is an enriching and rewarding experience."

Andrew Ewan, the new Principal at Merino Consolidated School, said the experience had been invaluable.

"I have had the opportunity to actually get to know my colleagues quite quickly through an active collaboration working towards a definite goal," he said. "We have made plans to help build this collaborative approach across all of our schools which are actually quite small and historically quite isolated too. As a new Principal in this area with no previous ties or contacts, it has been very rewarding to be a part of getting this process established."

Robert McCurdy (Cluster Chairperson, Elphinstone Primary School) said the Loddon Mallee Region, Southern Network schools of Elphinstone, Taradale, Redesdale-Mia Mia, Langley, Yapeen, Chewton and Guildford Primary Schools have a combined enrolment of around 200 students but experienced similar challenges.

"The LAESS forum allowed the identification of common issues and the opportunity to celebrate successes. We have since drawn up a three year plan which will allow us to address common issues," he said.

Peter Farrell, Principal of the Zeerust Primary School in Zeerust said his group had looked at ways to provide teacher feedback about the teaching process within their respective

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schools. "The most powerful part of this process has been the fact that we never insisted on a one-size fits all solution to our common problem," he said. "Instead the group acted as a think-tank where all perspectives were valued."