Australian rural students face severe disadvantage

Warwick Doolan, Erika Zimmer
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It is almost two years since the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission released a report into education in rural and remote Australia, concluding that country children suffered "substantial disadvantage" that amounted to "discrimination". Yet virtually nothing has improved. Recently, the study's author, former Human Rights Commissioner Chris Sidoti, told the *World Socialist Web Site* he was "greatly disappointed" that "not much" had changed.

The study, published in March 2000 after a year-long national inquiry, presented a range of statistics showing that on every indicator country students fared worse than their city counterparts. They were, "less likely to participate in schooling, more likely to be absent, less likely to complete the compulsory school years, less likely to complete Year 12 and less likely to participate in tertiary education and training".

Up to a million children—almost a third of Australian students—were disadvantaged because of where they lived, the report revealed. A glaring question arose, although the study did not pose it: Why is geographical location still the cause of educational disadvantage, given the revolutionary developments in communications and transport that have transformed the very meaning of distance?

Another issue also emerged from the report. The children of the rural poor—the farm labourers, rural workers, shearers, miners and unemployed—were doubly disadvantaged. But while the report itself made no attempt to measure the extent of social inequality, evidence from submissions and comments from public hearings indicated that it was enormous. The well-off were largely able to overcome the disadvantages of distance by sending their children to boarding schools, whereas cash-strapped rural families, expected to meet a bigger share of education costs as governments cut back funding, faced a cycle of decline.

According to a Youth Research Centre survey commissioned by the inquiry: "The greatest education 'disadvantage' faced by people in rural and remote locations is that to gain access to an education—any education—they have to pay more... There is provision of financial assistance but parents report that this fails to meet costs... While some families can afford these costs... [other] families find the burden too great, and students drop out of school early."

Overall, rural and remote students were far less likely to complete even the compulsory years of schooling. In Mosman and Ku-ring-gai, affluent suburbs in northern Sydney, 97.3 percent of 16-year-olds attended school, compared to 40.4 percent in the Kimberley region of Western Australian, 46.9 percent in southern Tasmania or 52.6 percent in south-west and central Queensland.

High school completion rates showed variations for urban, rural and remote students, at 67 percent, 63 percent and 54 percent respectively. When broken down into states, even wider gaps emerged. For example in Victoria, the highest metropolitan score recorded was 81.5 percent, compared to rural Gippsland, which scored 64.4 percent.

When specific groups were looked at, such as Aboriginal children, the levels of inequality were even more polarised with only 39.7 percent of Aboriginal girls and 28.2 percent of Aboriginal boys participating in the two post-compulsory years of schooling, let alone completing high school.

The study reported that numbers of Aboriginal children living in remote communities and some children living on pastoral stations had no schools to attend. About 700 to 1,000 children in one region alone, the Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory, had no access even to primary education. Sidoti noted that some 15 East Arnhem Aboriginal Communities had no schools. One submission reported that up to 200 children around Doomadgee in northern Queensland were in same position.

Access to secondary education was worse. The report noted its concern for the "very substantial numbers" outside the major urban centres in the Northern Territory for whom "secondary schooling was simply unavailable". The problem was not confined to Aboriginal children. In the southern island state of Tasmania "fewer than half of rural secondary schools (22 of 51) offer Years 11 and 12 (senior secondary schooling)".

A disturbing indice of inequality was the gap between literacy and numeracy standards in urban and rural regions. On this point, the report was vague, referring only to rural averages lagging "somewhat behind that of urban students".

At one of the inquiry's public hearings, a parent from the tiny hamlet at Pallamallawa in northern New South Wales reported that 42 percent of Year 3 children at her school were in the lowest reading band. Nevertheless, the school was set to lose one of its four teachers because the education department staffing formula allocated 4 teachers per 84 students, one short of the school's total of 83 children.

Other sources indicate stark differences across NSW, Australia's most populous state. Figures compiled by the NSW education department show that among Year 3 children in the better-off

Sydney suburbs, only around 4 percent scored in the lowest reading band. At the other end of the scale, almost one-third of the students in the remote working class country towns of Moree and Broken Hill scored in the lowest band. In the poorest urban areas, a quarter of Year 3 pupils were in the bottom reading band.

Results from the Higher School Certificate, the final secondary school examination in NSW, published at the conclusion of the inquiry, showed that despite making up one-third of the school population, only 4 percent of rural students were among the top achievers. Country students were also under-represented among those engaged in tertiary studies, making up only 17 percent of the total.

The report cited high staffing turnovers, restricted subject choices and transport problems as major concerns. Rural students complained of inexperienced teachers, many of whom were only in their first or second year of teaching. Specialist teachers in fields such as English as a Second Language (ESL), maths, science and information technology were particularly scarce.

Smaller schools were confronted with a choice of narrowing their range of subjects or cutting back on face-to-face lessons. Students at Walgett in northern NSW told the inquiry that in their senior year of high school, their geography lessons had been cut from four per week to two, "...which is just not enough for a two-unit subject".

In its submission to the inquiry, the South Australian Independent Schools Board complained that due to the high costs involved, information technology was widening the gap between city and rural locations, rather than helping to overcome it. Problems frequently cited in submissions were insufficient funding, lack of access to technical support and equipment, poor training and competition for scarce resources between schools.

Many families complained of lack of transport options and high transport costs. Travel times starting at 6.30am and finishing at 5pm were not uncommon, a factor partly responsible for high absenteeism among Aboriginal children, according to Sidoti. One mother travelled 200 kilometres (120 miles) a day to get her child to school. A family of several children, unable to afford the petrol to travel 20km each day to the nearest bus stop, was forced to attempt education at home.

Numbers of parents and teachers attending public hearings gave a sense of being overwhelmed by the enormous difficulties they faced. For example, a worker at the Moree Time Out Centre for students excluded from school told the inquiry the Centre suffered a 50 percent funding cut. "Now for some of the children who attend our Centre this is their life support. They are not coping at school very well. So they come to us in a small group and they are working well. We have found some students that have come to us were referred as slow learners, remedial learners and we have found them complete opposites. Because they have had problems within the school system they do not seem to blossom. They will come to us and they do."

Many spoke of the threat of school closures due to declining enrolments. Small rural public schools, like those in the cities, were competing for students against a proliferation of highly-subsidised private schools. A "roll-on effect" meant that when enrolments were down, school funding was cut, more students left, resulting in teacher transfers and "the death knell of the school". A school council president from Mungindi in northern NSW described a "spiral going down, not going up or even stabilising."

The most striking aspect of the inquiry's more than 70 recommendations was that they avoided any direct criticism of federal or state governments and made no reference to the overall assault on public education. While the report made repeated references to funding constraints, it gave no overview of education's declining share of government budgets. Nor did it refer to the increased funding of private schools.

The report's political context explains these glaring omissions. The inquiry was one of a number of overtures to country voters following a series of electoral disasters for Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National Party coalition government from 1998 on. A high proportion of the inquiry's submissions came from private school advocates, Aboriginal groups and farmers. No submissions were made on behalf of rural workers' children.

The inquiry made some bland recommendations for more funding. It also suggested that schools share scarce resources, a proposition that could accelerate closures. The few specific recommendations were mainly targeted to better-placed sectional interests, including increasing government allowances for boarding school fees and lifting subsidies to farm owners.

For Aboriginal children, the report proposed the establishment of schools "designed on cultural lines" based on "cultural immersion". While Aboriginal students should have the right to pursue cultural issues if they wish, they should also have the right to exactly the same educational opportunities—including a wide range of subjects and experienced teachers—as all students. Any proposal that confines Aboriginal children to culture-specific subjects is nothing more than a rationale for an inferior education, requiring fewer resources, and a recipe for perpetuating the grim cycle of poverty and unemployment within Aboriginal communities.

The Howard government's only response to the report has been to increase the Basic Boarding Allowance by 10 percent, a measure directed towards wealthier families, while freezing funding for the Country Areas Program, the main source of federal financial assistance for children in government schools.

Speaking to the *WSWS*, Chris Sidoti pointed out that the state of country schooling had been completely ignored in last November's federal election. The Howard government and the Labor opposition were too busy "outdoing each other" moving to the right, he said.