



Country School Visits Observation 2022

In term 3 2022, SASSLA visited 12 school sites in the Iron Triangle, Riverland, South-East, Mid-North, and Kangaroo Island. The focus of our site visits was to gain an appreciation of the issues and pressures facing school leaders and their leadership teams. Prior to our site visits, SASSLA undertook an in-depth telephone survey in 2021 of seven country principals on labour market conditions as part of our research for development of a submission on the Department's Workforce Strategy Discussion Paper.

Our work with country principals has enabled us to develop a more complete picture of the working conditions and challenges facing people in these roles. This report is a reflection on what we have learned and the implications for future policy development.

Our work was undertaken over the course of the COVID-19 Pandemic (the Pandemic) when schools were experiencing significant operational pressures. It remains an open question as to whether the Pandemic will have a medium to longer term structural impact on the operation of country schooling.

This report is organised under six headings:

1. Acknowledgement of Country Principals
2. Three Building Blocks for a Successful School
3. Specific Observations and Issues:
 - Labour Market
 - Workload
 - Local Education Teams (LET Teams)
4. A Tale of Four Principals
5. Future Strategic Responses

1. Acknowledgement of Country Principals

Through our work, we have built a genuine respect for country principals and recognise their commitment to the aims and values of public education. These qualities were brought into the foreground in the difficult circumstances imposed by the Pandemic in mid-2022.

The direct engagement with country principals highlighted their practical wisdom, deep engagement with their communities, and personal resilience. These capabilities have, and will continue to be, the backbone of country education.

2. Three Building Blocks for a Successful School

There is no common "country experience" and operating conditions varied widely from site to site. Some schools were managing well while others were struggling.

When we debriefed our experience at the conclusion of the visits, we identified three indices of site capacity that were influential in schools navigating the difficult Pandemic conditions and providing the building blocks of a successful school. The indices are described below:

- **Stability factors:** These included stable enrolment patterns that supported student diversity, a core of experienced and dedicated staff, a cohesive school culture, and solid community relationships.
- **Access to quality staffing resources:** The capacity to fill vacancies in a timely way with reasonable quality teaching and ancillary staff and access to temporary relief staff for short term vacancies.
- **A capable and experienced school-based leadership team:** A core leadership group with capacity and adaptability to build confidence and certainty and manage the day-to-day risks and pressures that schools face.

It was evident that when these three conditions were met, schools had some capacity to manage the additional pressures associated with the Pandemic. Where one or more of these conditions were not met, schools were under intense pressure and their efforts directed almost entirely to the management of day-to-day issues and risks.

Specific observations from our visits were:

- **Stability factors:** Long-term reduction in enrolments of students within the catchment resulting from economic and social changes (including students moving to the private system or alternative public-school options) led to an unbalanced student profile that, in turn, impacted negatively on the school's profile and reputation within the community. Another critical stability factor was the capacity of schools to maintain a cohort of capable and engaged staff needed to build and support a successful school over time.
- **Access to quality staffing resources:** All schools experienced staffing difficulties resulting from the Pandemic. However, the level of impact varied significantly across sites. It was evident that recruitment problems were most acute in sites already experiencing significant difficulties with recruiting staff prior to the Pandemic which suggests this is an embedded structural problem.
- **A capable and experienced school-based leadership team:** A critical observation from our visit was the positive impact of a capable and experienced leadership team in supporting the principal in navigating the complexities and pressures associated with the Pandemic. We noted that schools with robust systems and structures and an even spread of leadership capabilities were managing well. In schools with limited leadership capacity and limited systems and structures, a disproportionate weight of expectation was placed with the principal.

We observed that a small number of schools were having significant issues with two or more of the indices of capacity. Where principals were dealing with a confluence of issues such as difficult community relationships, enrolment decline, lack of access to services, building and development work, and difficulty in attracting and retaining staff, they were under continual and excessive pressure.

The more difficult issues being faced by schools tend to be structural in character and significantly influenced by external conditions. Examples of this are difficult labour market conditions, economic and social conditions, and market competition factors that drive enrolment. It was clear to us that in the more difficult circumstances it is simply unrealistic that a principal can meet school improvement expectations without the tailored support needed to tackle deeply embedded structural issues.

3. Specific Observations and Issues

Labour Market

All sites experienced some difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers, and this also extended to other employment categories including SSOs. There was a general tightening of the labour market across all categories of employment. The impact ranged from moderately difficult to extreme.

- Temporary Relieving Teacher (TRTs) pools were thin and some teachers in the pool were seen as not up to the minimum standard but had to be used to meet the minimum industrial requirements for staffing.
- Access to Permanent Relieving Teachers (PRTs) was a key stabiliser and they were a valuable resource in areas that were persistently hard to staff.
- Principals identified the critical risk of employing average to poor quality staff who were employed to meet minimum staffing requirements. There were specific cases cited where the appointment of staff with competence and behavioural issues had a negative impact on the school.
- It is apparent that some permanent and contract teachers are opting for TRT employment due to the high demand for casual work and the attendant benefits of a high daily pay rate, reduced workload, and flexible working conditions.
- Housing remains a continuing problem and in a tight labour market can be a major determinant in successfully recruiting staff.
- Labour market initiatives (Teach for Australia, use of incentives etc) were having some positive impact. Limiting factors included variability in the quality of staff and the impact from the limited scale of these initiatives.
- There was evidence of innovative practice in place-based employment including providing pathways for local people to be employed as School Services Officers (SSO) while undertaking a teaching degree. There were also examples of SSO staff providing higher level administrative support that was freeing up school leaders for more pressing work.

It was notable that the Employable Teaching Register (ETR) no longer provides a reliable recruitment mechanism for many schools. This trend has been evident for some time and was raised in the SASSLA submission for the Department's Workforce Plan - Chapter 2 Education Leaders and Teachers in 2021.

How the labour market performs post Pandemic is an important strategic question. The best information suggests that the worst effects of the Pandemic will level off, but a structural shortage of teachers and leaders will remain. Shortages will be felt most at the edges of the system where the need for high quality public education is most needed to improve the life chances and social mobility of young people.

Local Education Teams (LET Teams)

There are variable views about the effectiveness of LET teams across the areas visited. Responses tended to focus on individual attributes of LET team members and ranged widely across a spectrum of highly complementary to more critical.

Specific matters raised:

- There was a universally strongly held view that LET teams are too compliance focussed and there was not an open or nuanced interest in how the school was going outside of the prescribed school improvement processes.
- A consistent view expressed was the primary focus of the Education Directors as "system stabilisers", and attention to managing corporate interests and risks were their highest priorities.
- There is a perceived lack of consistency in decision making with the most critical views expressed on reappointment and selection processes.
- The size and demography of some regions made it very difficult for regular engagement and direct contact. This directly limited the hands on support that was available for direct operational support.
- It was increasingly difficult to staff LET team vacancies with experienced candidates. Several principals commented on the relative inexperience of positions including principal consultants and curriculum coordinators and indicated that in some circumstances they would make little use of these staff.

- High quality coaching provided by former experienced Departmental employees was seen to have a high value when it was structured, was grounded in areas of practice, and provided over an extended period.

A strategic question in relation to the current organisation model is whether limited resources are being stretched too thinly and whether there are alternative models that better meet the needs of schools. This is another key question that will be informed by future labour market conditions.

The Joint Associations raised the potential for the creation of Executive Principals with a wider remit over several sites in its recent submission on Band A Classification and Remuneration. This model may have relevance to future country schooling models.

Principal Workload

Workload pressures on country school principals further increased in 2022. In the schools visited, the average median hours were close to 70 hours per week.

In several schools, due to Pandemic absences and the inability to obtain back up staff, principals took on an additional teaching load. In one site, a primary school principal had been carrying a full-time teaching load for the greater part of the year. There has been significant use of split classes and additional payments made to teachers to compensate for exceeding their maximum face to face time and the subsequent loss of NIT.

The pause of Departmental initiatives in term 2 was seen as a positive, but a concern was raised that this was only a deferment of activities and did not represent a sustainable approach to workload management.

There was a strong view expressed that principal workload was challenging under normal conditions, but next to impossible under Pandemic conditions. A small number of principals conveyed a strong sense of frustration and questioned their capacity to continue in the role if work pressures and hours of work were not moderated.

Specific Issues raised:

Intensive Education Support Program (IESP) Applications

These were universally cast as very time consuming and requiring an unreasonably high level of work. Principals stated they received inconsistent advice as to completing the applications, experienced delays in funding approval, and had to re-apply the following year. Schools where IESP applications were not seen as such an overwhelming burden commented that they had a staff member who had “mastered the art” of presenting a solid application.

Parents and Carers

Schools are increasingly dealing with difficult, aggressive, and confronting parents and carers; some with mental health or substance abuse issues. Principals detailed stories about direct abuse and venting of anger and frustration on social media. A common view expressed by principals was that these conditions had become heightened under the social and economic conditions of the Pandemic.

Staffing

The reality of many country Principals is that they are spending increased time on staffing due to difficult labour market conditions. This work extends to directly canvassing interest through social media and informal networks, following up potential applicants, assisting in relocation and searching for housing and work opportunities for partners. These activities can be hit and miss and very time consuming. Principals report that much of January is taken up almost exclusively with staffing related work.

The workload pressures experienced by principals in 2022 are unsustainable. The critical question for 2023 and beyond is how workload demands can be moderated to more sustainable levels.

4. A Tale of Four Principals

Through our engagement with country principals, we became aware of four current principals who are finishing their role in 2022 citing workload pressures and health and family responsibilities as specific factors for making this decision. Three of the four persons plan to continue employment in alternative roles in the Department, but not as a school principal. One person is on sick leave and unlikely to return to a school leadership role. A precis as to their reasons for exiting the principal role is:

- Person 1 – lack of support, loss of confidence that anything could realistically be done, difficult community relationships. Stress factors had significant health impacts making it impossible to continue in the role.
- Person 2 – role overwhelming, no support, low confidence in Education Director, detrimental effect on family. Family circumstances were a critical decision in leaving the role.
- Person 3 – constant pressure, the role has become too demanding, and the effort/reward balance just isn't there. Doesn't see a personal future in the role.
- Person 4 – a seven day a week job, too much focus on compliance and no room for different views, the system has lost the "people" focus. Excessive work demand is detrimental to health and wellbeing.

This information suggests that people are beginning to exercise individual agency in making decisions to leave the principal role. The key themes were excessive pressure, perceived lack of support, meaning and confidence, and a desire to restore some stability in their personal lives.

As highlighted in the case of Person 2, a future risk is reduced interest in the principal role from people in family formation years, or other caring related responsibilities. People who fit into these categories represent a significant chunk of the demographic group that is the recruiting ground for school leaders and principals. Anecdotal evidence suggests an increased cohort of people are not prepared to work the extended hours and live with the emotional demands that go with the principal role. This anecdotal evidence is supported by thinning fields of applicants for principal roles over the last 10 years.

5. Strategic Response

Based on the observations discussed above, five strategic responses have been identified. Each initiative has been outlined in a general way and we suggest that these be considered in future planning processes:

Principal and School Leadership Workload

Workload is becoming a major issue with all Principals reporting very high workload and associated emotional and health pressures.

There is a growing body of evidence that principal workload is a major risk in three key dimensions of organisation behaviour and performance.

- **People** - The effect of long hours doing emotionally demanding work has a detrimental effect on health and can negatively affect personal relationships and family life.
- **Productivity** - As a result of workload complexity and pressure, leaders are less able to prioritise critical elements that promote the growth of teaching, learning and practice.
- **Sustainability** - Where the demands of a job are judged to be excessive, relative to the extrinsic rewards (pay and conditions) and intrinsic rewards (job satisfaction and values alignment), people will make alternative career choices.

Education leaders are critical actors for delivering quality education and improving lives of young people. How leader roles are designed, how they are supported in their roles, and how their time is utilised and prioritised are critical strategic questions.

The “Tale of Four Principals” highlights the fact that people will make alternative career choices where continuation in a role is unsustainable.

The problem of excessive workload needs to be brought into the mainstream of managerial interest and decision making. If it is not acknowledged, not talked about, not critiqued, and not prioritised it will not be dealt with. While it remains an issue on the fringe, little will be done about it!

Intervention and Support

The Pandemic has provided valuable learning on the functioning of schools under intense external pressure.

In the sample of schools we visited, a small number of schools had complex and “sticky” structural issues that required more complex interventions and long-term support. The principals did not have the time or internal leadership capacity to deal with the myriad of issues and problems they faced. One of the four principals who finished in the role in 2022 summed up their predicament as, “a loss of confidence that anything realistically could be done”.

It appeared that there was a patchwork of approaches to intervention and support with a focus on the role of the LET team, supplementation of additional staff, and coaching based support. In our view, deeper and longer-term intervention and support models are required for categories of schools where problems are deeply embedded and require policy-based responses as well as practical on ground support.

Understanding and Responding to Labour Market Risk

As outlined in SASSLA’s 2021 submission for the Workforce Strategy Discussion Paper, changes in the labour market were already occurring before the Pandemic. While the extreme effects of the Pandemic will subside, chronic shortages will persist in the medium term. The current avenues for employment through open advertising and the ETR will not support the needs of hard to staff schools.

The impact of the tightening labour market is being most felt in hard to staff locations. It will particularly affect schools that mostly rely on recruitment of city based staff where competition from public and private schools in metropolitan and near metropolitan locations for the best graduates is strong. In hard to staff locations, it is not just about getting candidates it is also getting a fair share of the high-quality candidates entering the labour market!

An effective policy response needs to be built from an understanding of risk factors in the labour market over the medium term. There is a consensus view around Australia that the teacher labour market will be under-supplied for the next three years. Given this scenario two important points are made:

- Aggregate data does not give any indication of distribution trends and how these trends will influence hard to staff country schools. One potential risk is further skewing of supply to metropolitan and other locations deemed to be more attractive to entrants.
- The work contemplated in the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, to improve teacher supply, will have limited immediate effect on labour market conditions due to the lag effect associated with training new entrants. Over the next two to three years, practical strategies will need to be developed within the constraints of current labour market conditions.

A finer grained view of labour market risks in hard to staff country locations would greatly assist planning. Where data analysis shows high risks, creative options for attracting and retaining staff will be needed.

We note that the Department is commencing a Recruitment and Placement Co–design process in early 2023 and SASSLA has been invited to contribute to this process.

Building the Capacity of School Leadership Teams

Evidence suggests the trend in country schools in building their leadership teams from within existing staff has become more embedded over time. This appears to have been driven by a significant decline in staff mobility across the system since the turn of the century.

An important point made by the principal of a large country school was that the leadership team was primarily made up of people who had been promoted very quickly into leadership roles without diversity of experience, or structured development. Supported learning programs that assist new leaders to build leadership and managerial capabilities would be highly beneficial for country schools.

Structured and supported learning programs for leaders and leadership teams would be highly beneficial in supporting country principals. This is a potential high value low-cost initiative.

Workforce Reform Opportunities

Through our interaction with country principals, it has become clear that many schools are using SSO positions as pathways into teaching. It was also evident that some SSO administrative support roles are being redesigned to provide additional support for principals and school leadership teams.

A study of the interaction between professional and para-professional staff is needed to identify opportunities for more productive and satisfying work. There is a body of experience in country locations of innovative practice that can be drawn from in developing future options for workforce reform and development.

SASSLA has an active interest in reform of the para-professional workforce and has already contributed to the development of the SSO and ECE classification criteria. We will make a detailed submission on para-professional reform as part of the development of Chapter 3 of the Department's Workforce Plan in 2023.