



Beth Walsh with students Crystal and Lucille

Profile of a principal **Beth Walsh**



The head of a remote outback school has found that creative initiatives and regional collaboration have opened up rewarding opportunities for staff and students alike.
By Madeleine Regan

Creative solutions are mandatory when you're the principal of a combined primary and secondary school in a remote region with 50 students. In such a place, teachers must extend their skills beyond their teaching areas to cover content in all learning and with multi-level class groups.

Beth Walsh, principal of Hawker Area School since 2008, has developed significant strategies to address issues such as the challenges of a remote location, the need to offer a diverse curriculum in senior secondary years and providing opportunities for professional learning for staff.

Walsh's interest in rural education originated from her experience as a parent when she moved to a small country town to raise her family in 1991. Growing up there, her children experienced the advantages of a little school and a caring community.

"What I didn't know as a parent that I now know," she says, "is that much of what

goes on in a school is determined not by the education department but by the level of commitment, dedication and expertise of the staff and, in particular, the vision and leadership of the principal."

Alongside parenting four children, Walsh completed all her teaching qualifications, including honours in Aboriginal Studies, via distance education with phone tutorials. It was only at the end of her degree course that she first used the internet.

Hawker is more than 400 kilometres north of Adelaide, with a population of about 500. Hawker Area School is a member of the far north local partnership of the South Australian Department of Education and Child Development, which links 12 schools and preschools in the far north of the state.

Walsh is the current chair of the partnership. Its schools are addressing the challenge of providing a broad and rigorous curriculum through innovative, collaborative arrangements. Three schools – Hawker, Leigh Creek and Marree

– have formed a professional learning community (PLC).

Hawker and Marree are also collaborating with Mintabie, Woomera and Oodnadatta schools, which together have fewer than 30 secondary students, to develop content for Phase 1 Australian Curriculum units that can be taught in all five schools, the most remote of which is 800 kilometres away.

Expert teachers from the larger schools in the partnership and Port Augusta Secondary School are assisting with writing in specific curriculum areas.

This year, all teachers at Hawker Area School have made the three-hour round trip to Leigh Creek Area School to attend professional learning sessions with the other two schools in the PLC.

For example, primary teachers at Hawker and Marree schools have attended a series of three meetings with the mathematician-in-residence at Leigh Creek. "It's a new way to look at professional learning," Walsh says. "Instead of sending off individual staff to learn about different things, we capitalise on the group experience.

"We concentrate the skills and sessions in one area so everyone shares the learning and it becomes part of a culture of learning in the region."

It also works out much more efficiently in terms of time away from school. If a

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teacher went to Adelaide, it would mean two days' travel for a one-day professional learning event.

During the professional learning days, the combined staff in the PLC participated in workshops covering executive function and cognitive skills facilitated by professor Martin Westwell from Flinders University.

Another innovative strategy has enabled teachers from Hawker to take two days at Leigh Creek. They attend after-school professional learning workshops on successive days, using the full day in between for classroom observation and professional reading. Walsh facilitates release time through clever resourcing of staff, including one relief teacher.

As a result of these programs, instead of being limited by distance and the small size of a remote school, staff at Hawker are expanding their expertise and interacting with a range of teachers who have a breadth of experience.

"I'm seeing the growth of teachers through the broad professional learning opportunities we can access with other schools in the region," Walsh says. "I think we're finding some creative ways to alleviate the burnout that can affect teachers in remote schools when they teach multi-level classes.

"Curriculum planning is richer and more rigorous and there is a strong sense of teamwork across the schools in spite of the geography."

Recruiting staff has not so far been a major concern for Walsh as there has not been a high turnover during her time. However, at the end of this year three

positions will need to be filled for 2015.

As is the case in many schools, it is more difficult for her to attract science and maths teachers. Once again, however, a creative answer has emerged through the regional collaboration. A part-time science teacher at Leigh Creek is employed for the equivalent of a day a week to teach students at Hawker.

This involves a phone hook-up for four lessons in one week, during which Walsh supports the students and solves any technological problems. In the next week, the science teacher travels to Hawker for a half day face-to-face class and practical lessons.

"It takes a high degree of innovation, will and commitment from staff," Walsh says, "as well as collaboration with other schools, businesses and community groups to deliver a wide range of subjects, often in non-traditional ways."

In the senior secondary area, teachers identify students' strengths and develop a personalised curriculum for individuals. Students select subjects, VET units and school-based apprenticeships that are relevant and provide a pathway to training, employment or further study.

The success of the school-based apprentice scheme was demonstrated in 2013. A Hawker student was named Trade Schools for the Future School-Based Apprentice of the Year in the South Australian training awards. Because of the customised curriculum, he was able to complete his South Australian Certificate of Education in Year 11, rather than Year 12.

Recently, Walsh was awarded a rural

educational leadership scholarship to study for a master's of education (leadership and management). The largely online course, developed by Flinders University and Principals Australia Institute and funded by Origin Foundation, will build capacity and skills in 21 school leaders in rural and remote Australian schools over the next three years.

Compared with the distance courses Walsh studied early in her career, the master degree offers extensive online resources including podcasts, webinars and internet videos. The students make connections with lecturers and peers through online forums and blogs, and are creating a strong network of rural and remote school leaders through a virtual learning community.

Walsh thinks that some of the solitariness of leading a remote school can be addressed through the online collegial group because it is possible to share common challenges and be exposed to the innovations and solutions that leaders use in different contexts.

For Walsh, the scholarship provides thinking space and time to work with peers, discuss shared questions and build professional relationships with leaders from four states. The big questions are about how collaborative arrangements improve the quality of teaching and learning and how these can be facilitated across large distances.

"I see this as a wonderful opportunity to learn alongside other rural colleagues," she says. "We can research and analyse what works for leaders of rural and remote schools and develop resourceful approaches." ■

Madeleine Regan is a writer at Principals Australia Institute.

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