

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia

Report by Dr Catherine Day – 2003 Churchill Fellow

A study of initiatives in the provision of education to students in rural and remote centres in Canada

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Executive Summary

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Project Description: A study of initiatives in rural and remote education that address current challenges in establishing and supporting school environments where all students are provided with the opportunity to achieve a standard of education that will enhance their life success.

Overview: I visited regional education centres and schools in the Gulf Islands of British Columbia, and various districts in the Provinces of Saskatchewan, Ontario, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. I also worked with representatives of Statscan in Ottawa looking at statistical reports dealing with education issues.

I met with staff in Provincial education, School Boards, schools and community people. Specialist information was provided on e-learning at the Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation in Newfoundland and at the Cyber School in Saskatoon. Statistical information was provided by Scott Murray of Statscan in Ottawa.

Major Learnings and Recommendations:

Canada has many rural centres in various provinces facing depopulation as well as changing demographic patterns similar to Australia. Provinces are responsible for ensuring Canadian students in rural and remote centres receive equitable opportunity to access quality education in their local districts and to assist each student to maximize achievement. There are several Canadian initiatives that would provide benchmarks against which to review the implementation of the MYCEETYA *National Framework for Rural and Remote Education* in Australia. These initiatives include:

- *Schoolplus* in Saskatchewan and its success in strengthening educational capacity and community development in rural centres
- Early intervention programs for 3 and 4 year-olds attached to elementary schools
- Directions taken by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada impacting rural education
- Developments in e-learning, virtual professional development for teachers, access to computers and connectivity for low income families and access to high-speed internet services in remote centres
- Directions in Aboriginal education

To disseminate the learnings from my Churchill project, I will firstly work to improve circumstances within the region in which I am employed in North Queensland. I intend publishing papers in educational journals, presenting at conferences and writing to Ministers of Education in each State with suggestions for rural and remote education.

Program

Due to work commitments in Australia, I limited my project to a period of 4 weeks. I added an extra week of vacation leave to allow time for reflection, writing and enjoying Canadian hospitality and friendship. During this period I traversed Canada from west to east. Although this involved travelling vast distances, it allowed me to experience some of the diversity both within and between the provinces. I was able to explore local, provincial and national directions that impacted education in diverse rural and remote areas of Canada. Each of the provinces I visited presented variations in the way education is organized. Provinces also presented different economic profiles from the faster growing economies of British Columbia and Ontario to the slower economies of the Maritime provinces and Saskatchewan.

Common issues were also notable in each of the provinces and included changing demography with an aging population in general but an aboriginal population that is much younger and with a relatively high birthrate. Depopulation of rural areas and a changing economic base from a high reliance on natural resources to knowledge industries were also noted as a common thread. Across Canada there was a concern that while schools are better than ever before, they nevertheless are not meeting society's expectations. This has generated a strong focus on student achievement and school improvement. Furthermore, funding difficulties for education associated with increasing competition for the tax dollar continues to fuel the need for reform. Whilst Canadians, in general, want the best education outcomes from Canada's schools, the aging population is also concerned with maintaining what is arguably the best health care system in the world. Funding restrictions have required amalgamations of school boards and some school closures in various districts. Budget deficits have led to some extraordinary responses from School Boards.

Below I have outlined the provinces I visited in chronological order and the particular places and organizations I visited.

Province of British Columbia

- Gulf Islands-Saltspring Island Elementary School and community

Province of Saskatchewan

- Regina Roman Catholic School Board
- Saskatchewan School Boards Association
- North Battleford Public School Division and the following schools – *Connaught School, Pheonix School, Ecole Mckitrick K-8 Community School*
- Sekewaw High School which is governed under joint agreement among Battleford School Division, North West Catholic School Division and Battlefords Tribal Council.
- Maymont K-12 School
- St Paul’s Roman Catholic School Division and the following schools – *Mother Theresa Elementary School, Joe Duquette High School, St Mary’s Community School*
- Saskatchewan Education (*Sasklearning*)
- University of Saskatchewan
- Tisdale community
- Prince Albert community

Province of Ontario

- Statscan – Ottawa
- St Joseph’ High School Renfrew
- Burnstown community

Province of Novia Scotia

- Department of Education – Halifax
- Various rural districts across Cape Breton

Province of Newfoundland

- Department of Education Newfoundland - Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation – St John’s
- Various communities throughout rural Newfoundland

Introduction

Project Aim

To observe educational policies and strategies which have resulted in improved educational outcomes for students from low socio-economic circumstances in rural and remote regions of Canada.

Background

In 2000, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a national inquiry into rural and remote education in Australia. The inquiry investigated the provision of education for children in rural and remote Australia with reference to

- The availability and accessibility of both primary and secondary schooling
- The quality of educational services, including technological support services
- Whether the education available to children with disabilities, Indigenous children and children from diverse cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds complies with their human rights.

The key question for the inquiry was:

What is necessary to ensure that, by the age of 18, each child in Australia has received the education he or she requires to participate to his or her full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community?

The Catholic Education Office in Townsville participated in the inquiry having a range of schools in rural and remote centres. As I am employed in a regional leadership role within this organization, I took an active interest in the inquiry. This led to my interest in investigating rural schooling in Canada and subsequently, to the fulfillment of this personal interest through my successful application for a Churchill Fellowship. The project was timely given the current interest at national and state levels in developing a responsiveness to rural and remote student's needs. In Queensland, a new document has been produced by Education Queensland, titled, The Rural and Remote Education Framework for Action 2003-2005. This framework

builds on the principles and intent of the National Framework for Rural and Remote Education (2001) developed by the MYCEETYA Taskforce on Rural and Remote Education. The Queensland Catholic Education Commission published its policy Catholic Education in Rural and Remote Queensland in 2002.

This newly emphasised focus on rural education is critical given the findings of the HREOC inquiry. In particular, this inquiry found that despite some excellent innovations and achievements, rural schooling remains a site of significant educational disadvantage across the nation, with high teacher turnover and variable student outcomes being key features (HREOC 2000, *School Communities: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education*).

This Churchill Fellowship allowed me to observe and learn from the different provincial approaches to rural schooling throughout Canada. In particular, I investigated the following issues:

- Policy development aimed at improving rural students access to quality schooling
- Approaches to teaching and learning that are designed to improve student achievement
- Evidence of improved student achievement
- Directions in developing responsiveness to diverse and changing rural contexts

The observations I made with reference to each of the above issues are outlined more fully in the next section of this report.

Policy Development designed to improve access to quality schooling

Canada is facing many of the problems in rural areas that Australia is currently facing. These problems include depopulation, economic downturn in rural centres, limited services and uncertain returns for agricultural production. Students in rural areas have a diverse range of needs. Provinces have experienced funding difficulties in the provision of educational services requiring in some cases some rather stringent

actions on the part of school boards. In the Gulf Islands, I arrived to find community members gathering for the purpose of protesting about cuts to school board budgets and, in some cases, to argue against the closure of a particular local school. Solutions to resolving budget deficits included the introduction of a four-day school week. Whilst this solution was rejected by many people, it was felt there would be no option but to move in this direction in the new school year. Amalgamations of School Board districts were occurring in each of the provinces I visited.

To meet the diverse needs of students across the province, Saskatchewan has developed a province wide policy called Schoolplus designed to ‘ensure the wellbeing and educational success of Saskatchewan’s children and youth’. “Schoolplus will look different in different communities, reflecting the unique needs and interests of the children and families in the area” (Government of Saskatchewan). Schoolplus has been developed within the philosophy of community education which has its roots in community development. It promotes the idea of community schools which see the community as a resource, emphasizing community development and empowerment. It seeks ways of incorporating community resources in the life of the school. Whilst there are several individual schools which are great examples of the community school ideal, there are also communities which have established highly integrated services with the school as the hub. Tisdale is a fine example of the extent to which a small rural community has taken this model on board.

At the heart of the Schoolplus policy is the recognition of the changed role of the school. Schools today serve two primary functions:

1. to educate children and youth and
2. to support service delivery.

There is a growing focus on early years education throughout Canada. The introduction of Pre-kindergarten in several schools I visited reinforced my own long held view that this initiative is an important opportunity not to be missed in Queensland, particularly in Indigenous communities. The work of Canadian academic, Fraser Mustard provides a strong foundation for this early years education response.

Connaught Elementary School has established pre-kindergarten with a five day, sessional program for children with the inclusion of parents on the fifth day for the purposes of literacy development and parenting programs. Ecole McKittrick School offers pre-kindergarten and a transitional year between Kindergarten and Year 1. The diversity in approaches schools have taken is supported within the Schoolplus initiative.

The concept of community schools in which the school becomes the centre of a community requires strengthened partnerships with families, community organizations and youth. I visited three fully functioning community schools. All three were in the early stages of this new approach, with school and board personnel displaying a mixture of skepticism and excitement. With their continuing assistance, I am keen to monitor the impact of interagency collaboration and integrated services located within the school precincts on student achievement and teacher pedagogy. This includes recreation, cultural and justice needs of children and their families along with responsiveness and innovation in curriculum to meet the diverse needs of students. I was particularly impressed with the strong aboriginal community ownership of Sakewew High School and Jo Duquette High School and the great improvements made in retention and completion of secondary education for aboriginal students.

The development of information/communication technology (ICT) to deliver online courses and virtual schooling options was another area of strong interest and development. I visited the Cyberschool in Saskatoon which is attached to Holy Cross Catholic High School and is funded by the St Paul's Roman Catholic School Division. The Cyberschool was an excellent example of local initiative in creating a responsive approach to the provision of curriculum. In addition, as a Catholic school innovation, I was impressed with the introduction of a cyber-chaplain and on-line school counsellor.

Newfoundland's Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation provides another approach to the use of ICT for curriculum. Again a key factor in the success of this multimodal approach is the employment of experienced and highly regarded teachers located in different parts of the province to develop the programs and to work online with students. The Newfoundland approach, however, is not offered in as flexible a

way as the Cyberschool. A province wide program has been developed and timetabled requiring schools to build their class timetables around the province on-line courses timetable if they wish to access such material. This was being reviewed at the time of my visit. Nova Scotia will follow the Newfoundland model and the Schoolplus approach to meet the needs of students in rural centres.

Approaches to teaching and learning that are designed to improve student achievement

This Churchill Fellowship project reinforced for me the notion that teachers are the single most important influence in improving student outcomes. Each province restated this tenet of educational good practice throughout my journey. The changing context of education, however, has required teachers to learn new ways of designing courses, diversifying delivery, expanding options to adapt to changing local contexts. Three particular issues stand out:

1. The increasing emphasis on the provision of professional development to ensure teachers are constantly learning about the best ways to respond to students needs and circumstances. Whilst there is still an absolute commitment to actualizing core curriculum, this curriculum must be designed to be adaptable to diverse needs and circumstances. Of particular interest was the Virtual Teaching Centre in Newfoundland.
2. The establishment of Aboriginal Community schools such as Sakewew in North Battleford and Jo Dequette in Saskatoon are models of schools which are less institutionalised and more thoroughly linked and owned by the aboriginal community. At the same time, these schools are fully supported by the broader community including the establishment of joint Board of governance for each school. Innovative and realistic curriculum diversification is a hallmark of the community schools along with interagency services and strong cultural affiliations. These schools have taken cognizance of the social worlds of students which are characterized by great diversity including wealth and poverty, family stability and dysfunction issues such as pupil-mobility and cross-cultural issues including racism. Both these schools take a developmental rather than a deficit approach to their students that begins where the student is and endeavours to take the student as far along the path of

learning as is possible. Sakewew is a new high school which was built with a childcare facility included for the children of students. Students have access to schooling to complete matriculation until they are twenty-three years of age. From personal experience, such a collaborative approach to governing schools has proven difficult to achieve in Queensland and the Saskatchewan examples could be helpful in making change.

3. Whilst I was highly impressed with the quality of the online programs and the flexibility these programs provided for students, it was the teachers working within these cyber contexts who were most impressive. These teachers are all considered to be excellent in terms of their pedagogy and their particular subject area. Students in different regions therefore, have access to the best teachers. The knowledge that these teachers have acquired as a result of their involvement in the Cyberschool is a valuable source of professional development for other teachers both in classroom settings and in the delivery ICT curriculum programs. They have a very good understanding of the need to find the correct balance between technology and pedagogy, taking account of individual students learning needs.
4. A strong emphasis on post-schooling options is a key to ensuring students remain motivated to continue their schooling. As the fastest growing sector in the Saskatchewan population, aboriginal people want to ensure that more highly trained aboriginal educators graduate from university. Saskatchewan has established a First Nations University to provide aboriginal students with tertiary education options with a strong focus on aboriginal culture including contemporary culture and cross-cultural and intercultural experiences.
5. There is growing recognition of the need for a strong early years education programs. Pre-kindergarten programs in community schools such as Connaught are very successful and the expansion of this educational service is an element of Schoolplus in Saskatchewan and is also being pursued across other provinces. A key to the success of such programs, however, is the strong integration of human services especially health and education to the 0-3 year age group.
6. Community literacy programs such as the Prince Albert Family Literacy Project are designed to assist parents of young children to read and share imaginative oral and written literature at home. This program is co-ordinated

through the Prince Albert regional library with a funded family literacy coordinator.

Evidence of improved student achievement

The Effective School's research and literature has strongly influenced the directions in the provinces I visited with regard to establishing school improvement procedures. These procedures contribute to data collection practices to inform planning, instructional practice and continuous program improvement. Saskatchewan has established the Saskatchewan Education Indicators Program. This program is committed to collecting and reporting broad-based information to provide recent snapshots, show past trends, and to support data-driven decision making to enhance student learning in the future (Saskatchewan Learning). The Saskatchewan Education Department incorporated the analysis of the PISA (OECD Program for International Assessment) results into their indicators. This analysis shows that this province has made significant improvements in narrowing the gap between students from low socio-economic circumstances and high socio-economic circumstances. There is still a need, however, to raise the overall achievement levels of students in Saskatchewan. Nova Scotia published a similar but less detailed set of indicators for education. Newfoundland has a less broad-based approach in their published indicators with a stronger focus on reporting student achievement in provincial criterion-referenced tests and public exams.

At a national level, I accessed valuable information from Statscan, the government agency responsible for collecting and analyzing statistical information. Mr Scott Murray had recently made a presentation to the Ottawa-Carleton School Board and principals of schools within this school district. His presentation was titled, Successful Schools: What we know. The material Scott presented was made available to me and it provided some very useful data looking at a range of issues across provinces including student achievement utilizing the PISA (OECD Program for International Student Assessment) results from 2000. The material also provided international comparisons with OECD countries including Australia. Issues such as GDP per capita and literacy, probability of unemployment and literacy proficiency, earnings and literacy proficiency. Canada rates near the top of the world in reading literacy ahead of New Zealand, Australia, the UK and the USA. Students in the

OECD participated once again in PISA in 2003. The results for Canada will not be released until later this year. Along with the PISA analysis, Statscan also conducted the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS) involving 30000 fifteen year olds across Canada. The YITS is a longitudinal survey designed to provide policy-relevant information about school to work transitions and factors influencing student pathways. Data for this survey is collected from youth, their parents and their school principals.

Directions in developing responsiveness to diverse and changing rural contexts

Education in Canada is clearly defined in Section 93 of the Constitution Act of 1867 as an area of provincial jurisdiction. This has provided a strong local and regional context for education in the various provinces with the Provincial government working through local School Board district offices to deliver education. There is now an increasing pan-Canadian and international context for education which requires strong co-operation amongst the provinces and a national agenda for education. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) was established in 1967 as a forum in which to discuss issues of mutual concern for the provinces. The CMEC relationship to the Federal government of Canada has been described as fragmented and ad hoc. There has been an increasing recognition, however, of the necessity for greater collaborative efforts across jurisdictions. This led to a review of the role of CMEC and the development of a new Framework for the Future. Within this review, comparisons were made with other countries in terms of the relationships and structures to support federal and provincial interfaces. Australia's MCEETYA was analysed and whilst considered a very positive model was not recommended as the way forward for Canada's CMEC.

In 2003 Canada's Premiers agreed to create the Council of the Federation to work towards increased provincial co-operation and collaboration. There is a view that this initiative will strengthen federal/provincial/territorial cooperation. With an aging population, Canadians saw health care as their major federal government election issue. Another issue for Canada and particularly for Saskatchewan will be the need to consider changing the taxation burden to include the Aboriginal population who under Treaty agreements have certain taxation exemptions at present.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This project inspired me, challenged me, and allowed me to focus not just on rational and objective issues such as course materials, but also on the human dimension. This dimension is what allows strong communities to flourish in which people individually and collectively take responsibility for educating children. I felt privileged to meet the many committed people in every region I visited, listening to their stories and bearing witness to the struggles and achievements in their communities. In particular, my discussions with Canadian aboriginal educators reminded me just how strongly the fates of non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians are bound together and that schools play a key role in creating a harmonious society. Schools which are mere institutions will not achieve such an outcome. Where schools are the hub of the community, however, the circumstances may be created for responsiveness to and responsibility for the well-being and learning success of each student. This is the foundation of the Schoolplus initiative and such an initiative promotes the idea that people really are greater than the institutions they create and collaboration across agencies is essential.

Whilst visiting Canada, the Canadian Federal election was called. This created much discussion about priorities for government. It was plain that concerns about competition for limited funds for healthcare, education and other services will continue to create serious policy and taxation headaches for future Canadian governments. Australia will face similar dilemmas with competition for limited funding from different sections of the population. Costs in rural centres will increase whilst depopulation is likely to continue. Changing demographics will impact voting priorities with an aging population demanding a greater share of the tax dollar. One wonders about the political will to ensure that rural centres both in Canada and Australia achieve an equitable funding policy into the future.

I believe the following recommendations would be practical and useful for Australian education providers to consider and I am personally committed to monitoring the Canadian education response:

- 1.** Aboriginal students in Canada continue to be most at risk of not completing Secondary school. Australia and Canada have much in common in establishing a

renewed commitment to Aboriginal education. The Action Plan 2000-2005 developed by the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee lists 17 recommendations that provide a useful benchmark for Aboriginal education in Queensland. In particular, the development of indicators of progress in the report provides a practical response that could be adapted for Queensland schools with local Indigenous perspectives incorporated.

2. Saskatchewan is supporting the development of Aboriginal schools based on a community school model with joint Boards of governance. This model of schooling has great potential for rural centres across Australia and its potential should be explored by education providers, communities and government.

3. Early years education is receiving greater attention across Canada with the establishment of pre-Kindy classes. The provision of pre-kindergarten/pre-prep programs integrated within local schools should be considered especially for indigenous communities.

4. Technology is an essential component in the delivery of education programs to rural and remote students. Canada has developed on-line learning with experienced teachers developing and delivering the programs. There is great potential for Canada and Australia to share expertise and knowledge in this field. Like Canada, Australia needs to have the commitment of government and industry in providing high-speed internet access and computers to low socio-economic families.

5. Canada promotes the concept that student success at school is a joint responsibility, shared among all citizens of the various provinces. The adage “It takes a whole village to raise a child” is integral to the Canadian approach to education. Australian rural communities are all very different and need to be well supported by industry and government in creating long-term and prosperous futures. Children in rural areas need to be assured there is a future in these areas. Community schooling as a movement should be pursued with appropriate resources in these centres.

6. Reporting to the public on important initiatives using an evidence-based approach to support informed policy making in the provision of education services is a recent initiative that Australian States could adapt with all school systems participating. I was provided with examples of published Education Indicators from three provinces.

7. Canada uses the most current educational statistical information and demographic information as an integral part of planning at all levels of government and community. This is also important in Australian contexts but could be extended. This type of

information should be presented to school principals and school communities as part of planning and community capacity-building.

Concluding Remarks

I would love to see a much stronger alliance established between Australian and Canadian education sectors as we have much in common and could establish strong partnerships especially with e-learning. I am recommending that teachers be given opportunities for extended paid sabbatical to spend time in Canadian rural settings, sharing and learning from the experience.

Whilst many Australian students go to Boarding schools as the means to access quality schooling, I believe Australia needs to put greater effort and resources towards rural towns and to do a great deal more than is currently being done in the area of community capacity-building. This includes economic development, managing difficult environmental issues, resource provision and resource management and most importantly community education. In addition to improving schools in these areas, I would like to see initiatives such as an equalizing tax benefit provided to people living in rural areas. People in urban areas could pay a higher premium for internet access to sponsor very small rural communities to get access to high-speed technology. Australian children in rural and remote centres deserve the best means of providing access to a good education whether they go away to school or choose to stay in their home towns.