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Submission to:

The Inquiry Into Retaining Young People in Rural Towns and Communities

This submission is put on behalf of Donald High School Council.

1. Factors influencing young people to leave rural communities:

Donald High School's 2004 *On Track* data shows that 80% of students who completed year 12 went on to University; 5% went to TAFE; 10% to apprenticeships or training and 5% went on to employment. In 2004 only 2 students did not go onto Year 12: one went to another institution and one went to an apprenticeship. Of the two students who left post year 10, 1 went to another institution and one was seeking employment at April.

These figures are reflective of the usual pattern of students exiting this school.

Commentary:

- The high number of students going on to further study is reflective of student and parent wishes and the long history of this pattern has provided clear role models for the students.
- Those students from farming backgrounds are most likely to go to further study – this may be a reflection of the extended period of time where returns have been poor and encouragement given by parents to have their students have “another string” to their bow, or giving encouragement to pursue an occupation other than farming.
- Farms have been becoming larger and more mechanised, resulting in fewer farming families and the need for less labour.
- Many of the students who go onto employment and do so by going to larger population centres.
- While education, employment or training are the most significant factors in young people leaving, the “*life style*” factors play an important role – if not immediately, then they become increasingly more important over time.
- Employment opportunities in rural towns has been declining through business and government practices – this is particularly the case in relation to professional and white collar employment opportunities:
 - Banks no longer provide a source of employment for young people in rural towns, nor do they generally have managers who reside in the town with their families. In years gone by this provided a continuous source of white collar employment as the positions usually became vacant as a result of transfers every couple of years.
 - Local government amalgamations have had a similar effect.
 - Teaching and nursing staff have also been reduced either by amalgamation or reductions in funding.
 - Closure and rationalisation of government operations, such as road maintenance, rail transport, agricultural services, etc. have also had a similar effect on employment opportunities for young people.
- The decline in middle management and professional positions within rural communities (see above) has also had a disadvantageous effect on them in that these groups used to provide some of the *drive* and expertise within the community. There has also been a reduction in role models in these areas for young people.

2. Factors influencing young people not to return to rural areas:

Given the high proportion of Donald young people who go away to study at a tertiary level, or to undertake apprenticeships, the lack of employment opportunities, or the much lower income possible in rural areas, will always discourage young people from returning.

- Most of the young people who leave undertake training in occupations which require employment in the city or very large (by comparison) rural centres if they are to pursue their careers.
- There a lack of professional or managerial positions in rural areas to attract trained young people.
- Salary levels for trades people and professionals is generally lower than in urban areas.
- Having sampled the *life style* while in training or education, most young people feel an attraction, or need, to remain where they can continue to have access to that life style.
- Our experience has been that we have had young women leave this community because of the lack of availability of suitable male partners.

3. Strategies for getting youth to return:

The enormous advantage that rural communities have over large urban communities is a strong sense of community, and an outstanding place to raise young children. They are safe, secure and allow children to move with relative freedom – for example, they can transport themselves to sport, etc. by bicycle or foot with safety.

The aim should be to attract *young families* back to rural communities – there is more that can be used to attract them.

Given, however, the lack of employment opportunities and current business and government practices, incentives need to be put in place to encourage people with young families to risk starting, or continuing, businesses in rural areas. This is particularly possibly for those occupations that use, rely on or develop ICT.

- There needs to be a large campaign of positive publicity about the advantages of country living for young families (see above). This might help encourage young teachers, lawyers, nurses to move to rural areas – which they are currently not considering.
- The same campaign may encourage older members of the community to relocate to rural areas because of the advantages of safety, etc. If there was a drift in population of this nature back to the country, more opportunities for young people would be opened up.
- Since there is little prospect of suitable employment, incentives need to be given to encourage young people to start suitable business, or move their operations to rural areas:
 - Ensure ICT and telecommunications systems are adequate, and charges are comparable to cities.
 - Provide cheaper transport, either by more reliable and accessible public transport, or by developing a petrol pricing/taxing system that allows for equity in transport costs.
 - Provide *start up* incentives for business to begin, or relocate.
 - Provide high quality professional support and advice services for those businesses commencing in rural areas.
 - Ensure that *decentralisation policies* are applied consistently and remain a point of focus in government decision making.



Ron Corrie
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