

Back to **School**



Dwindling rolls, transient populations, meddling bureaucrats – rural schools are under threat from all directions. But **Kate Rivett-Taylor** finds they still provide a community focal point and a great education.



Nikita Buckley, right, and her sister Gabriella and calf Roxy at the Takapau calf and lamb day. Nikita goes to Norsewood Schools and Districts. She won 1st prize for leading.

Drive west from Napier towards the Kaweka Range and eventually you'll run out of road.

Before the mountains loom too large, keep an eye out for a small intersection that hints of a rural village.

Hidden in trees on your right will be the hub of the Patoka district – its primary school.

Find a parking spot – that's no hassle in the countryside – and walk in through the gates. Don't worry about finding the office. If you strike a country school at playtime a dozen kids will want to know who you are and what you're doing there (in the nicest possible way).

Having a cup of coffee with his staff and looking more like a teachers' college graduate than a principal, Adam Cels brims with enthusiasm for his school.

"You know everyone," he says. "You know the parents and many of the grandparents. I have found that's very important when working with children in the classroom.

"The teacher relationship is different (here) – a step down from the formality of city schools. If children play up in class, their parents will probably hear about it at a party at someone's house on Saturday night."

Adam, 34, has a son at the school, a daughter at the local kindergarten and his wife, Caroline, teaches at the school one day a week.

Most of the Patoka children have been through kindergarten together. The kindergarten is across the road, along with the community hall and squash club, just down the road from the community swimming pool.

With all the benefits of a small community, the unique nature of the school also presents its challenges.

Many families now supplement their farm incomes by working in town, or they work in town and live on lifestyle blocks, so flexibility is reduced when the school needs to call on people for help.

With 57 students, many people would call Patoka a small rural school, but up until last year it had two smaller rural schools on either side of it. Rissington School, with 22 students, is still open on the Napier side of Patoka, but after years of a falling roll, Puketitiri, towards the ranges from Patoka, closed its doors last year.

It was easier to become part of the Patoka family than try to exist with just three families – five students, all of whom are now at Patoka.

Farms are getting bigger and also need less on-site labour input, which means fewer families in remote rural communities.

Coming back down off the higher altitude, the growth of dairy farming in Patoka since the last generation went through the school has altered not only the population but its stability and also the attitudes and expectations parents have. There are still children whose parents and grandparents attended the school, but they are no longer the majority.

"If people are only around for a year they don't feel they need to get involved," says Board of Trustees (BOT) chairman Lil Poulton. "It also reduces the pool of people with a vested interest in the school."

Adam says the school is usually in a state of flux from the end of April until the end of July while its roll settles as people move around in their jobs. It's not just "Gypsy Day", as June 1 is commonly known.

In 2007, he enrolled 23 new students (not counting new entrants) but lost 11 (not counting Year 8s moving on to secondary school). In 2008, he enrolled 31 new students but lost 23. So far in 2009, seven new students have been enrolled with a net loss of two.

"We start the year as even as possible. If we have an influx in a particular year (age group), then at the start of term three we have moved kids from class to class to try and balance numbers. The kids are used to it happening but from a teaching point of view, we start the year twice."

Personality issues like friendship and team-building are built into the teaching programme at that stage. School assemblies are also arranged in houses, not classes, to allow for those changes to have as little impact on school spirit as possible.

"Instead of class sports we have house sports and we tie a lot of behaviour management into the house system as well.

"We make sure our children are accepting of new children – making their new environment as welcoming (as they can) or to make the transition as easy as possible."

It's harder to make the system work when children turn up unannounced, particularly after the July 1 cut-off date, which means the school won't be funded for that child. But Adam says many parents phone and some visit the school as soon as they know they are coming to the area.

"They're the ones who have selected dairy farming as their lifestyle and make it work for them and their family."

In rural areas, the same people tend to



be trying to raise funds, such as the Patoka School and kindergarten parents. Enter the Patoka Educational Trust – set up to do bigger fundraisers and gift the money back to local organisations for educational purposes. For example, this year it paid for buses to Wellington for a school trip and gave \$5000 towards the new \$50,000 playground.

Lil says rural people have no option but to be involved in school life. "If you want your kids to have a good education you've got to get involved with the school you've got and make it the best you can."

The senior students have to travel into Napier for technology classes, which she says is one of the downsides of being rural.



“But we make that up with all the other bonuses. We’re always pushing for the kids to get more opportunities. As a school and as a Board of Trustees, we have to constantly be thinking what the kids might be missing out on ... we constantly ask the community what it wants.”

The issues faced by Patoka School are common throughout the country: Drive a couple of hours south into the Taranaki district, east of Palmerston North, where six rural schools were recently earmarked for closure. Briefly.

A community appointed working group formed as part of a new process being developed by the Ministry of Education

proposed closing six rural schools in favour of keeping three larger schools open (with a total of 758 students) in Eketahuna, Pahiatua and Woodville.

The approach to redefine the schooling set-up apparently came from someone within one of the larger schools but in the end was scuttled by the emotional support for each of the rural schools.

One of those threatened with closure was Kumeroa-Hopelands, itself already a product of a 1993 merger and boosted by the voluntary closure last year of neighbouring Kohinui School. Along with the other schools, its parents and students demanded they be allowed the right to choose a rural education.

The fight ended with Education Minister Anne Tolley publicly stating she wouldn’t close the schools against the community’s wishes.

Dermott Miller is a Kumeroa-Hopelands trustee. His three daughters have attended the school (Mae is still there), following in the footsteps of his father and grandmother. He says the school has solid roll projections for the next 10 to 12 years, has great spirit, and gives the community a “real focal point”.

One of the students who spoke at the public meeting against the proposed closure was Gareth Cannon, 13, who said he appreciated the leadership opportunities and the increased chance a small school gave him to be chosen for special things. He also wanted

his younger siblings to experience the same great years at Kumeroa-Hopelands that he had.

One wall of the school office is dedicated to following the story of how the students saved their school from closure. It depicts newspaper articles with headlines like “Shock over bid to close schools”, “School fury simmers”, “Parents enraged over closures” and finally “Rural schools live another day”.

A letter to the Minister of Education from 11-year-old Laura Chapman said the little community revolved around their school and without it, it would be forgotten.

“In rural schools like Kumeroa-Hopelands, we all work together as one big family.

“Out here we can all trust each other.”

Laura had attended a bigger school before going to Kumeroa-Hopelands and had no intention of returning to one, saying she was much happier in the smaller setting.

While *Young Country* was visiting, Australasian exam results carried great news for the school with several distinctions and credits, including one high distinction.

Kumeroa-Hopelands students don't miss out on sport or academic opportunities. The school tries even harder to make sure that isn't the case, especially when it can join forces with other rural schools in the district to make up numbers. It has its own cross-country and swimming sports, for example, has another with the rural schools in its Bush Primary schools cluster, and the top students then go on to the interschool competition with the bigger schools.

There's no problem with parent support at sports events or weekend sports – they are the transport – and the biennial school camp is so popular with parents a ballot is held for the free spots.

“There's no problem with adult/student ratios, that's for sure,” laughs principal Jo Gibbs, who has been working at the school for two years.

“I've taught in rural schools before and they all have a lovely family feeling to them.”

Delve into ERO reports for most rural schools and you'll find mention of parent co-operation and support, and community involvement:

- At Crownthorpe School, west of Hastings, “school-wide behaviour guidelines are deeply ingrained and well-known to students, their families and the wider community”.

- At Sherwood School in Central Hawke's Bay, “parents' contributions to activities such as triathlon, a trail ride and camp are appreciated”.



Ben Sinclair, 10, from Makirikiri with his lamb Wiggly who won the Grand Champion and Champion Lamb Whiteface.

- At Otago's Heriot School, “Students and teachers learn and work in a caring and supportive environment. The local community supports school activities and contributes funding to provide an extra teacher to keep classes small”.

ERO is short for the Education Review Office. Their staff periodically visit every school in the country.

One parent said: “You know you're doing okay if they come to visit and their parting

comment is ‘See you in three years.’”

You have to drive off the beaten track to find Heriot School. It lies about 20 minutes off the main highway between Invercargill and Dunedin. Traditionally sheep country, it's an area that didn't experience much change until the past decade. Like Patoka, there has been a major swing to dairy farming in the rolling hills of West Otago and it is beginning to change the way the school views some fundraising and community involvement.



The roll of Heriot School has been steady in the 80s although its funding base has dropped from decile 10 to decile eight (the higher the decile the higher the socio-economic family base and hence the less funding received), which may be partly due to the influx of a new workforce – the more itinerant workers used by the dairy industry.

BOT chairman Todd Perkins is a product of a rural school, nearby Millers Flat. With two children now at secondary school, his youngest

daughter still attends Heriot thanks to a 45-minute bus ride.

He says one of the best qualities of Heriot School is that it is small, but not too small.

“When I say small, about 80 pupils is big enough to give the kids opportunities for sports, for example, as there are enough people in their age groups to make up teams, but small enough that everyone knows each other really well.”

Family involvement in school life is huge.

Alongside an open-door policy that means parents can come and go from the school when they wish and help where and when they can, rural parents are involved with regular school activities because their isolation means they have to (transport) and also because the nature of their work means they can.

It’s noticeable at event after event at rural schools – there are always plenty of parents, Todd says. Most kids would have at least one parent at a sports event or production.

“It’s very close-knit and something you don’t often get in town schools because often both parents are working and town work isn’t as flexible as farm work. The bulk of our children are from farms where the parents can organise their own time.”

But the arrival of dairy farming and its milking regime means some of the sheep-farm flexibility has gone because sharemilkers have more regular work commitments.

“I’ve taught in rural schools before and they all have a lovely family feeling to them.”

– Jo Gibbs

“They have to be there twice a day, like at 3pm for afternoon milking, and it doesn’t matter what they’ve been doing or where they are, they have to go home.

“One major change to society can be seen at the West Otago Show, where there is big surge of people leaving the show in the afternoon as dairy farmers go home to milk their cows.”

There is quite a lot of movement within the dairy industry (compared with sheep and beef), but some move on within the district so no change of school is needed.

The nature of the school’s community also means a rural twist to its fundraising. There’s catering at an annual trail-bike ride over local farms, as well as crutching and tailing days (tailing is docking for North Islanders).

Lambs and calves are donated to the annual stock drive. As well as the money raised from their sale, the school has its own competition, for example, for the heaviest lamb or the booby prize for the animal that looks the most like its owner.

“Raffles and small catering jobs are good,

but are worth a couple of hundred bucks compared to getting a few thousand for a good day's tailing."

The can-do attitude of rural parents also makes life easier at school in other ways.

"Fundraising, working bees and anything where parents can donate their labour when something needs doing around the school ... farmers are usually jack-of-all-trades, DIY, reasonably practical people, which is a plus."

Heriot's principal, Margaret Box, has always taught at rural schools. Her CV reads like a "Where's-where" of lower South Island place names – Riversdale, Strath Taieri, Allanton, Limehills, Kaitangata, Cromwell, Mossburn, Edendale, Willowbank, Dipton and Heriot (with one departure to Fiji).

Across the board, she says the family oriented nature of rural schools stands out. Many rural schools are themselves like one big family and the personal nature of

knowing everyone in the district leads to more personalised learning; each child's education has its own relevance.

"We know their families, we know what interests them, and we know how they operate in more than one setting ... it's easier to establish a home and school culture and nurture it in a smaller, rural school. And it's easy to nurture a smaller, rural school when it's the hub of your community."

While adding to its character, Heriot's

Seasonal spikes

About one-seventh of New Zealand's population lives in 97% of the country's land area - the area known as rural New Zealand.

The Ministry of Education classifies "rural" in two ways - rural centre (population between 300 and 999), and rural area. The following statistics have added these two groups together to give overall rural figures for the education of children from Year 1-8 (up to what used to be known as Form Two or Standard Six).

One of the worrying statistics mentioned by the schools interviewed by Young Country was the seasonal movement of students in dairy farming areas. The ministry supplied figures for 2008 and 2009 which showed a spike in students changing schools in the middle months of May, June and July (618 nationally in June, 2008, and 589 in June, 2009). There was also a rise each October, which seems unrelated to any seasonal farming activity.

Regionally, the dairy farming stronghold of Waikato experienced by far the greatest movement of students throughout the two years, followed by Southland, Canterbury, Taranaki, Northland, Bay of Plenty and Manawatu-Wanganui – all significant dairy farming areas.

The June spike in the number of students changing schools comes at a critical time of year for schools' funding. If a student is not enrolled at their new school by July 1, the school will not receive ministry funding for that student until the next roll count eight months later.

In the year to May 2009, 2097 urban teachers changed schools (4.6%).

During the same period, 299 or 6.2% of teachers in rural areas moved to another school. The Ministry of Education admits rural schools can find it more difficult to recruit and retain staff. Financial incentives, including allowances and the Government's voluntary bonding scheme, are used to encourage teachers to work in rural and isolated schools.

The voluntary bonding scheme gives eligible teachers an annual taxable payment of \$3500 for up to five years for working in areas of high need (described as decile-one schools, severely isolated schools or particular subject areas). More than 364 schools nationwide are either decile one or meet the isolation criteria.

Rural schools have a better teacher/student ratio than their town counterparts, but the difference isn't substantial - an extra three students per teacher. The pattern shows an increasing ratio from rural to urban - 13:1 for rural schools, 14.8:1 in minor urban areas, 15.8:1 in secondary urban areas and 16:1 in main urban areas.

Another statistic with a rural/urban difference was decile rankings. A decile is a group into which similar schools in New Zealand are placed reflecting the average family situations and socio-economic backgrounds of the students at that school. Poorer communities with fewer qualifications and lower incomes are likely to be in decile one, while wealthier communities with more qualifications and higher incomes are likely to be in decile 10. Ministry figures showed more urban schools had the higher or lower decile

rankings (either 10 or 1-3) compared with rural schools with a more even spread (mainly 4-9) probably due to the landowner or asset-rich nature of the families in farming areas.

Another obvious factor in rural schooling is the distance between home and school. An estimated 32,660 students travel on ministry-funded school buses to and from rural schools every day. How much time students spend on buses isn't recorded, but the ministry does put limits on travel time by not allowing students to be picked up before 7.30am or dropped off after 5pm.

There was no response from the ministry regarding a request for specific comment on the special nature of rural schools.

One organisation which fights for the rights of rural schools on a regular basis is Rural Women NZ. Education spokesperson Jacky Stafford says the pastoral care offered at rural schools is one of their outstanding features.

"It's a family atmosphere with kids of all ages, boys and girls, young and old, mixing together ... you've got the different levels where the older kids actually care about what the little kids are doing, whether it be in class or out on the playground."

She says multi-level classes also give teachers more room to tailor programmes to children's individual needs or abilities, not just based on what year group they are.

"It's really all quite special," she says.



Erin Trent, 2, from Ormondville wrestles with her lamb Dotty.

position out on a limb away from the state highway also causes problems.

It's hard to convince travelling shows and performers, experts or consultants to head off the beaten track to visit rural schools. Taking the kids out of school to visit museums, exhibitions or shows is hard, too. Even if

they're reasonably close, there are still wider issues to consider like weather, transport and where to stop for lunch.

But on the whole, schools like Heriot aren't as isolated as they once were, thanks to technology like the internet. They know what the big wide world looks like and are ready

for it when the time comes for secondary schooling, whether it is to the local college or a city boarding school.

"Rural kids have to be adaptable ... they are usually caring, fit, independent, enquiring and ready to soak up what a big urban school would give them."

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