

## Schools offer oasis to salve the suffering

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Amid the heat, dust and despair, schools across drought-stricken NSW are serving as an “oasis” for their local communities.

While livelihoods on the land in the worst affected regions may be at a low ebb — with many families making the heartbreaking decision to up and leave — regional schools are proving to be a hub of hope, both in and out of the school grounds.

From providing laundry and shower facilities — for students whose families have little or no water other than for drinking — to serving a welcome breakfast, public schools and their teachers have been lightening the load in their communities.

That “lightening” — and raising of morale — can also come from unusual quarters.

Agriculture teacher Adam Macrae at Coonamble High School is one of the diehards. He has seen the shire have one good cropping season in the past six. In 2016, rains were good enough for the school farm to grow 1000 square bales of barley hay for its cattle program. That feed ran out a couple of weeks ago.



The school’s ag program has a rich vein of success in breeding beef cattle for show, despite the fact its herd has had to be halved and variously agisted over the past three years to maintain the stock and bloodline program.

The program and its students have won many awards at the bigger Brisbane and Sydney Royal exhibitions, but a recent honour at a smaller show had resonance considering the current state of affairs in Coonamble.

Mr Macrae took a contingent of 16 students and steers to Scone for a livestock show and came home with ribbons — a third, two seconds and a first — for their entries.

“A parent who hosts the cows from the Speckle Park [breeding] bull, he’s one of the parents that volunteered to come on these excursions and he was able to be there and watch those cattle win in the ring,” Mr Macrae said.

“He had those cows on his place, and their mothers, and asked for nothing [in costs]. So that was, despite being dry here, a little bit of joy in his life, and obviously for the rest of the team.

“That joy kind of spreads out when we communicate it with the rest of the school and the community,” he added.

It’s a difficult row to hoe, but the sense of resilience in the community is what is keeping the Coonamble folk positive, even though the shire falls within the “intense drought” category as gauged by the Department of

## Primary Industries.

Federation is aware of other schools putting in the hard yards. A central school deep in the dry zone of the Northern Tablelands has had to completely de-stock its agricultural program over concerns for the welfare of the animals. But there are other concerns.

“The mental health of students has deteriorated and consequently counselling needs have increased,” a Federation Representative from another drought-affected school in the state told *Education*.

“However no adequate provision for a school counsellor is available from the Department.

“The school has resorted to using the services of a counselling provider once a week on campus.

“Mandatory reports have doubled at the school this year in respect of student wellbeing/ self-harm incidents. The mental health toll of the drought on farming families is harming children who suffer as their family circumstances deteriorate.”

However, Mr Macrae credits affected communities with a high level of cooperation and adaptation. In his area people have been making fodder and agistment available at low or no cost and offering their labour for free to aid the school’s program.

“The kids are really resilient,” he said.

He was on the ABC *Country Hour* with two of his students who were asked whether the drought they had seen in their lives had put them off wanting to work in the agricultural industry. “[A student said] ‘Well, I’ve also seen it pretty good too, and I love it ... This thing won’t last forever and times will be good again’.

“I think people are pretty resilient out here because we’re used to dealing with it and we’ve set up our businesses to be able to continue and poke along and mark time.

“Even though it’s frustrating and it does wear you a bit, I think people are generally able to do that. But again as this thing develops, we’re starting to look at summer now with no real forecast of a decent change in [weather] pattern.

“Every season that we have to put in, it’s having an impact on people for sure.”

— Scott Coomber