Local links and learning: resilience in regional, rural and remote schools

Fostering community ties and harnessing learning opportunities to boost resilience

Contents

Cover: Community gathering in Tilba, NSW. (FiledIMAGE/iStock)

About JMI

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy (JMI) is an independent, non-partisan policy institute. Our mission is to bring government, academic and other experts together to develop practical solutions that address societal challenges and improve lives. JMI was launched in 2021, following a generous grant from the NSW Government, with matched funding from a group of NSW universities. Our university partners now include the University of Sydney, Western Sydney University, the University of Technology Sydney, the University of New South Wales and Charles Sturt University.

Acknowledgement of Country

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy acknowledges that it is located on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of First Nations Australians and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of Australia.

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JMI collaborative projects are unique. They are delivered by joint project teams, comprising of Institute staff, policymakers, and academic experts.

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JMI collaborative projects:

- tackle the big, multi-dimensional policy challenges facing governments
- leverage expertise from academics, policymakers, practitioners and the wider community to deliver innovative and pragmatic solutions
- forge dynamic collaborations between academic experts and government policymakers that enable ongoing relationships.

Glossary
of key terms

The following definitions are utilised with respect to this report:

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD): Refers to people, groups and communities who may be born overseas, have a parent born overseas, or speak a variety of languages. This definition is drawn from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.[1]

Disasters and disruptions: Internal or external events that affect or disrupt to varying degrees the normal functioning, infrastructure, service delivery or social cohesiveness of a school community. This includes proximate bushfires, droughts and floods or wide-ranging pandemics or pestilence.

First Nations: This terminology is used to respectfully refer to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and cultures.

Resilience: The ability to draw on resources and supports to withstand and manage what school communities are presented with and to develop strength and recovery going forward.

Regional, rural and remote: Defined by the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+ 2016).[2]

School community: The networks of people, places, assets and resources inside and outside the school gates that contribute to the school's functioning; people who support and benefit from this.

Social capital: The networks, relationships and resources that provide communities with a sense of shared identity, values and belonging that are used and relied upon for societal functioning.

Executive summary

In recent years, schools in regional, rural and remote NSW have been affected by floods, drought, bushfires, animal plagues and other major disruptions, including COVID-19.

In the face of this, they have overwhelmingly demonstrated strength and adaptability. About two-fifths of NSW public schools are in regional, rural and remote areas.

It is vital that a school community's local capabilities are leveraged and boosted, so that they are ready to deal with future disruptions.

This is what we call resilience: the ability to draw on resources and supports to withstand and manage what school communities are presented with and to develop strength and recovery going forward. Yet resilience is not just about managing disasters. It is about school communities being strong and able to deal with whatever is presented. When a school is resilient, so is the local community–and vice versa.

The NSW Department of Education has long recognised the unique needs and contexts of these schools (as distinct from metropolitan ones), reflected in the creation of the Regional, Rural and Remote Education Unit and targeted strategies, such as the *Rural and Remote Education Strategy (2021-2024)*.

This report focuses on **two ways** to boost the resilience of regional, rural and remote school communities:

- **improving links** between schools and their local communities; and
- opportunities for **contextualised student learning** and **professional learning** of school staff.

School communities with strong social capital and high levels of contextualised student and staff learning are positioned well to endure and recover from a disruption. **At their most effective, schools provide support, safety and continuity in times of disaster and recovery**; empower communities to participate and

look towards the future with confidence; encourage community health and wellbeing; and facilitate connections between the school and community groups, organisations and leaders. This creates the personal capabilities and social infrastructure to respond to present and future shocks.

This report is not intended as a comprehensive strategy; rather, we hope that the ideas which follow **inform discussions about education policy and practice to boost resilience** through local links and learning. The analysis and identified opportunities for policy and practice are based on desktop research, consultations and workshops involving more than 50 people, including academic experts, school principals, local councils, public servants, and service providers across NSW, Australia and internationally.

This report recommends **four policy focus areas** (Figure 1) to boost school and community resilience through local community links and learning.

Figure 1: Four policy focus areas to boost resilience in regional, rural & remote school communities

1 Student development & learning	2 Leadership capacity of principals & teachers
3 A whole-of-school resilience approach	4 Ties between schools & their communities

We have found that focussing on these policy areas can help school communities to build up and nurture the social, logistical, resource and knowledge supports that are required for them to contend with future disruptions, thereby strengthening their overall resilience.

These policy focus areas are **interdependent and mutually-reinforcing**. We believe that to shift the dial on the resilience of regional, rural and remote school communities, these areas should be progressed together to foster community ties and leverage learning and skills.

Building on this report, further research and policymaking should aim to develop specific and tailored approaches with respect to First Nations people and communities and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups, recognising their unique circumstances, interests and needs in building resilience.

Summary of opportunities

The following are policy and practice opportunities that have been identified through this collaborative project:

1

Student development & learning

Invest in helping to contextualise learning through community engagement:

- Provide guidance on engaging local communities to support teachers on contextually relevant learning.
- Develop an online repository of learning resources for teachers to draw upon that relate to resilience.
- Develop a best practice guide on technology-enabled learning in times of disaster.

Invest in helping schools boost student agency and sense of belonging:

- Ensure that regional, rural and remote students have local leadership and mentoring opportunities.
- Develop consistency in transitioning student cohorts between school stages (e.g., primary to high school).

2

Leadership capacity of principals & teachers

Invest in school leadership for resilience through specialised training and professional learning:

- Provide more opportunities for principals and teachers to undertake peer networking to share knowledge.
- Expand formal and informal mentoring and coaching opportunities for principals.
- Ensure that professional learning for school staff is flexible, adaptable to context, and modular.
- Collaborate with emergency services to develop joint professional learning with school staff and connect principals into local emergency management planning.

Showcase effective leadership in boosting resilience in regional, rural and remote schools:

- Develop a "showcase" program highlighting schools that demonstrate effective resilience-building.
- Develop a "roadshow" to run local celebrations, professional learning, and student learning on resilience.

Invest in, and create space for, strategic leadership in the community by principals and school staff:

- Assist school leaders to understand how to draw on administrative support during high-stress periods.
- Establish paid leave for school staff to do recognised local community- and/or resilience-building work.

3

Whole-of-school resilience approach

Invest in developing a whole-of-school approach to resilience:

- Develop a self-assessment diagnostic tool for schools to gauge their underlying resilience.
- Celebrate "learning alliances" between schools that enable resource pooling and sharing knowledge.
- Disseminate strengths-based language around regional, rural and remote schools.

4

Ties between schools and their communities

Invest in the capacity of schools to grow meaningful and enduring ties with their community:

- Develop a database collating all programs available to schools that support ties with their communities.
- Develop a fund for schools to host community celebrations and recognise contributions to school resilience.
- Ensure broader community use of school facilities is considered in their design and in planning their use.

Advise schools on how to expand their connections with key community stakeholders:

- Provide support to schools to strengthen connections to local First Nations people and CALD groups.
- Consider ways to ease the administrative requirements on schools to allow community use of facilities.
- Strengthen the role of "community connectors" in schools.

Note: A more detailed explanation of these opportunities is set out in Appendix 1.

Resilience in action

School communities practice resilience every day.

Regional, rural and remote school communities are already leading efforts to boost their own resilience through effective, locally led initiatives. Throughout the research for this report, we encountered many examples of school communities boosting their resilience through community ties and leveraging learning and skills. Figure 2 captures examples of "resilience in action" that we heard from school and community leaders from across NSW.

Figure 2: Resilience in action
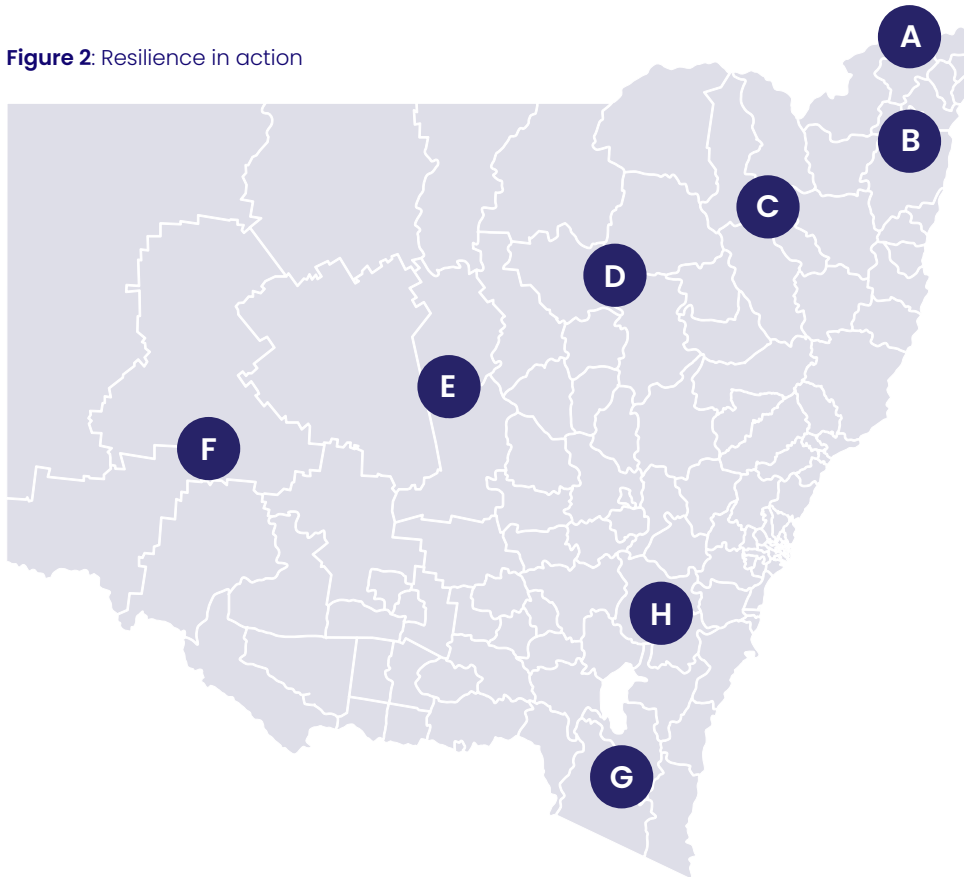
A "Traditional owners taking students onto Country to learn about its history and environment."
School in far northern NSW

B "Making classrooms 'community hubs' with local First Nations people and families."
Primary school in the Northern Rivers of NSW

"Bringing recent alumni with diverse career and life paths back to the school to mentor current senior students."
High school in the Northern Rivers of NSW

C "Students volunteering in a community clothing drive."
High school in northern NSW

"Holding community celebrations themed around the ocean in a drought-affected area."
High school in northern NSW

D "Schools combining their resources, knowledge and experience in a locally-led 'learning alliance'."
Schools in the NSW Northern Tablelands

"The local council working with schools to create a community resilience network, allowing students to volunteer in resilience-building activities."
Local government in northern NSW

E "Teachers from different schools sharing contextualised learning resources and sitting in virtually on each others' classes."
Schools in the NSW Central Tablelands

"Providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to meet and interact with parents and community members."
School in the NSW Central Tablelands

F "Encouraging and supporting new teachers in the area to participate in community events, such as the local show."
School in far west NSW

G "Sending teachers out to other schools across the State to see examples of effective contextualised student learning."
High school in the NSW Snowy Valley

H "Opening up the school grounds for regular use by the community."
Primary school in the Southern Highlands

Introduction

Recent disasters and a global pandemic have presented major challenges to the resilience of regional, rural and remote school communities in NSW.

Regional, rural and remote communities in NSW have long faced unique environmental, social and economic challenges. In recent years, disruptive events and chronic adversities, such as bushfires, drought, floods, animal plagues and COVID-19 have compounded this.

Indeed, regional, rural and remote school communities can be disproportionately affected by disasters relative to their counterparts in urban areas, for example, due to factors including:[3]

- **geography** (i.e., closeness and exposure to natural hazards);
- higher and more direct **economic dependence on the natural environment** (e.g., communities dependent on agricultural industries);
- **smaller scale** in population and economic terms; and
- **remoteness** from, and **scarcity** of, **services** for disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

For instance, during the floods in north-eastern NSW in 2022 and the bushfires in 2019-20 that severely affected eastern and southern NSW, hundreds of schools were impacted to varying degrees. These impacts included temporary school closures and badly damaged infrastructure, while some schools were also destroyed.

The challenges posed by disasters have compounded ongoing concerns specific to regional, rural and remote schools. These include, for instance, concerns about sustaining community connection and wellbeing, maintaining infrastructure, negotiating social, health and economic disparities, staff migration disruptions, and broader workforce challenges.

Focusing on resilience will help regional, rural and remote schools in NSW to build on their strengths in facing and overcoming major challenges.

Schools play a central role in regional, rural and remote community life, and are increasingly recognised as vital hubs in responding to, and recovering from, disasters.

Local schools are important spaces of connection and recovery as locations for the community to gather information, food, charity and other services in times of need. In the months and years following disasters, school grounds have also been used to regroup and commemorate community life. Schools and their infrastructure therefore play a significant role in recovery and enable the collective resilience of regional, rural and remote areas.

The NSW Government can help school communities by focusing on boosting their underlying resilience to ensure learning continuity and to celebrate the role of school communities in local life. This will benefit students through maintaining their learning outcomes and development, as well as increasing their awareness of and abilities to manage disaster threats. It will also help teachers and principals by further improving their capacity to deal with situations of high stress or adversity. At the institutional or collective level, a focus on resilience will equip school communities to further develop the systems, relationships, networks and routines they require to endure and recover from disruptions.

This report focuses on two key opportunities for boosting resilience to generate positive momentum.

This report focuses on (1) fostering community ties and (2) leveraging the learning and skills of students and staff for boosting resilience. These two focus areas were identified based on their importance and their potential to be leveraged via education policy and the administration of schools.

These two key areas exist within a broader ecosystem of opportunities and challenges that school communities face with respect to their resilience. While this report does not specifically address these broader challenges and opportunities, progress in the two areas identified above should be understood as a building block.

This report is intended as an overview of policy pathways which draw on good practice, and a set of strategic policy opportunities. It should be used to work with school communities to develop strategies that boost resilience in a way that responds to their local circumstances. It is not a roadmap for how to boost resilience in any one school community, geographic area, or in response to any one kind of disaster.

This report exists within the context of a large, complex and diverse education system in NSW. Regional, rural and remote schools make up approximately 45 per cent of public schools.[4] These schools differ by their local environment, size, student demographic and educational needs. To meet the variety of needs across NSW's diverse educational contexts, various parts of the NSW Department of Education and other agencies hold policy responsibilities and run numerous existing programs with a bearing on resilience. These include schemes for teacher benefits and incentives to help retain educators in the regions, and implementing learning reforms to accommodate individual needs and approaches.[5]

"Resilience" is a widely used term. When talking about regional, rural and remote schools, it is important to focus on what schools are doing well, and finding ways to enhance this locally, regardless of whether the use of this word changes over time.

Approaching resilience in school communities

Resilience in the context of regional, rural and remote schools

This report defines **"resilience"** in the context of NSW regional, rural and remote school communities as:

The ability to draw on resources and supports to withstand and manage what schools are presented with, and to develop strength and recovery going forward.

This definition builds on and contextualises an extensive body of literature on resilience that has been primarily established in the context of disaster risk reduction and recovery processes.[6] The definition used here was developed by adapting those used by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction[7] and the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience,[8] together with stakeholder and expert consultation.

A contextualised definition of resilience is important because of the unique or amplified challenges regional, rural and remote school communities face in terms of disasters, and the close relationship between school community members in these areas.

While this definition would likely resonate with school communities in other contexts, such as urban centres, it has been developed to reflect the regional, rural and remote context. Further, while resilience is not only about managing natural disasters, we stress that the stronger and more adaptable schools are, the better they are able to endure any kind of disruption.

Schools and the communities they inhabit enjoy a 'symbiotic relationship' where the strength and resilience of one supports the strength and resilience of the other – a resilient school supports a resilient community, and vice versa (Figure 3).

No two regional, rural or remote school communities are the same, and therefore each will have its own understanding of resilience. Ensuring the concept of resilience is always contextualised to local circumstances and the capacities of local stakeholders is vital. This will mean that the specific factors influencing school resilience are taken into consideration when implementing policy approaches.
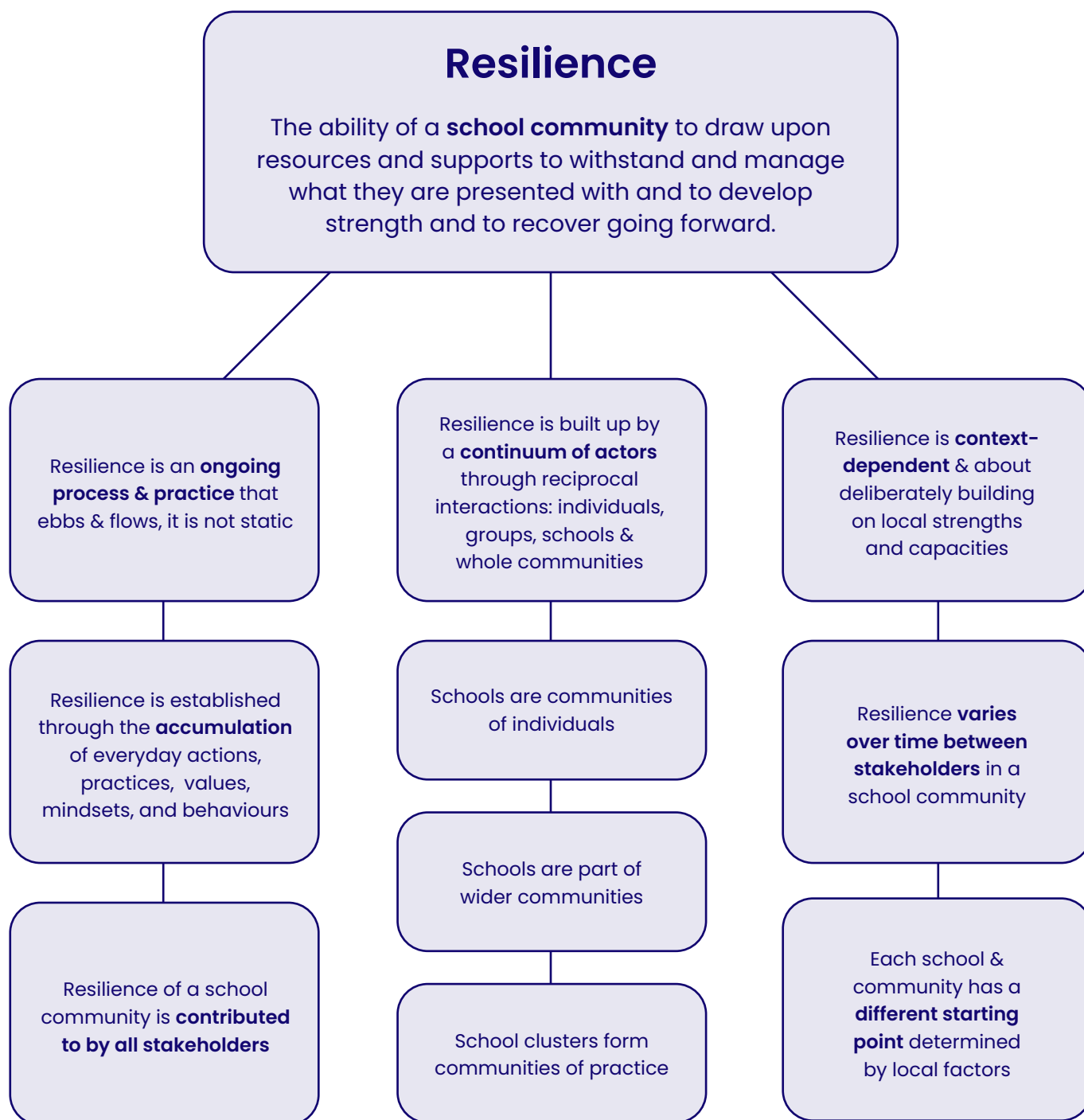

Figure 3: Mutually reinforcing resilience of regional, rural and remote schools and communities.

Three overarching factors should inform how resilience is thought about for regional, rural and remote schools:

1. **Resilience is a process and practice**. Resilience should not be understood as a definite "end-state" for a school or community to achieve. It instead is about the ongoing "ebb and flow" process of establishing and maintaining practices, behaviours and mindsets.
2. **Resilience exists across a continuum of actors**. Individuals and groups contribute to resilience building, in addition to the role played by schools as institutions.
3. **The concepts of "school" and "community" overlap**. Schools themselves are communities, yet they exist within and are part of the community around it. More broadly, groups of schools can form communities of practice and provide mutual support.

Figure 4 (overleaf) captures the factors informing how resilience should be conceived in this context.

Resilience

The ability of a **school community** to draw upon resources and supports to withstand and manage what they are presented with and to develop strength and to recover going forward.

Resilience is an **ongoing process & practice** that ebbs & flows, it is not static

Resilience is established through the **accumulation** of everyday actions, practices, values, mindsets, and behaviours

Resilience of a school community is **contributed to by all stakeholders**

Resilience is built up by a **continuum of actors** through reciprocal interactions: individuals, groups, schools & whole communities

Schools are communities of individuals

Schools are part of wider communities

School clusters form communities of practice

Resilience is **context-dependent** & about deliberately building on local strengths and capacities

Resilience **varies over time between stakeholders** in a school community

Each school & community has a **different starting point** determined by local factors

Figure 4: Definition of resilience in the context of regional, rural and remote schools

The key characteristics of a "resilient school" in regional, rural and remote NSW

Schools in regional, rural and remote NSW demonstrate resilience every day. But how do we know when they are doing well, or when they are facing challenges? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand what is meant when a school community is described as "resilient". This section provides a set of characteristics that are intended to describe a "vision" for a resilient school community – one that is positioned well to weather challenging situations, put in place recovery processes, and develop collective strength going forward. **Figure 5** (overleaf) outlines these characteristics.

The characteristics put forward are intended to be a flexible guide for how to recognise strength. They are necessarily general in nature, reflecting the context-dependent nature of "resilience", as outlined previously, which will look different in practice between different school communities across NSW. How these characteristics might be realised will vary between schools and communities based on their particular needs. This includes engaging with First Nations students, staff, parents and communities to ensure these characteristics are applied in a culturally appropriate way.

While these characteristics are important, many are not strictly measurable or quantifiable. This should not, however, detract from their significance. While effort should be made to measure "objective" characteristics, "subjective" characteristics such as a "sense of hope and belonging" should be taken seriously and, where necessary, demand remedial steps. To this end, a self-assessment diagnostic tool for school communities to use at their discretion to gauge their own strengths and challenges for resilience is a key opportunity (**see opportunity 3.1**) flowing from the development of this "vision".

Figure 5: Key characteristics of resilience in a regional, rural or remote school in NSW.

	Students	School Staff & Parents	Principals	School as an Institution	Entire Community
Support & Safety	Students are supported by their school community and the systems around them to pursue their aspirations.	School staff, parents and guardians are adequately supported by relevant social services and support systems	Principals are adequately supported by relevant social services and support systems.	School strikes a balance between maintaining quality and continuity of learning, and adapts effectively as circumstances evolve.	Services are accessible to those who need them, and the essential needs of the school community are adequately met by those services.
Empowerment & Future Focus	Students have agency in defining their own path and in contributing to their school community's resilience	School staff and parents are role models for resilience to others.	Principals are role models for resilience to others.	School has agency and feels empowered to make decisions about their future.	School communities have a shared sense of purpose, vision and ownership about their local place for the future.
Health & Wellbeing	Students have: • Positive mental health supports • A sense of their own identity and culture – especially First Nations students	School staff and parents have positive mental health supports.	Principals have positive mental health supports.	School operations provide a sense of routine and stability to students in all circumstances.	A sense of trust, hope and belonging exists between a school, its community, and its linked support services.
Connections & Readiness	Students feel engaged in their community and have a sense of belonging to it	School staff and parents are strategic and future focused: they think ahead, anticipate, plan and prepare for problems.	Principals are strategic and future focused: they think ahead, anticipate, plan and prepare for problems.	School facilities have some capacity to withstand disasters and can play a role in fostering community ties (where possible and relevant).	Strong and diverse community connections and partnerships between the school and community groups, especially First Nations communities.

Knowledge, Values & Learning

Experiences of disasters and disruptions are retained and learned from by the school and its community	All forms of knowledge are valued and utilised by a school and its community (First Nations, local, academic, etc.)	Schools and their communities have a strong shared sense of identity and purpose, with actions guided by collective values

Boosting resilience in practice: key stakeholders and influencing factors

Resilience is created through ongoing processes and practices undertaken by individuals and groups. Each has a stake in, and contributes to, the resilience of a school community. Boosting resilience, therefore, relies on leveraging the strengths of these stakeholders to address the challenges they face.

In order to implement effective policies that harness the strengths of stakeholders and address these challenges, it is vital to grasp the full spectrum of relevant actors and forces bearing on resilience.

The make-up of every school community is, of course, different – but there are relationships and features common to most regional, rural and remote areas which can be leveraged. **Figure 6** sets out key stakeholders and represents in a generalised way the relationships between various layers of stakeholders in regional, rural or remote school communities. The porous lines between layers represent the fact that stakeholders will overlap and interact. Some important features of this diagram:

- **Students are at the centre of a radiating network**. Students are positioned as the central stakeholder of a school, supported by a school community and system wrapped around them.
- **Stakeholders and factors are context dependent**. The quantity of, and relationships between, each stakeholder and set of factors in the diagram will vary between school communities. In smaller communities, for instance, many of the actors in the fourth layer might not exist, such as local tertiary education or particular social services. Similarly, the factors affecting resilience will manifest in different ways and to varying degrees. The impact and severity of disasters will differ across communities, and they might experience other factors acutely, such as migration.
- **Individuals can contribute at multiple layers**. A single individual might contribute to their school community's resilience in different capacities across multiple layers. A teacher, for instance, might also be a parent as well as leading a local community organisation, such as a Cricket club. Similarly, a local business owner might supply goods or services to a local school, while also volunteering at the school during community events. A student might also participate in a local arts and crafts group on the weekend, while during the week they interact virtually with teachers and students at other schools.

Note: Figure 6 is intended as a generalised, high-level conceptual framework for understanding the stakeholders, relationships and contextual factors with respect to the resilience of regional, rural and remote schools. The figure may assist in identifying which stakeholders exist, the relationship between them, and the factors that affect how they contribute to the resilience of regional, rural and remote schools.
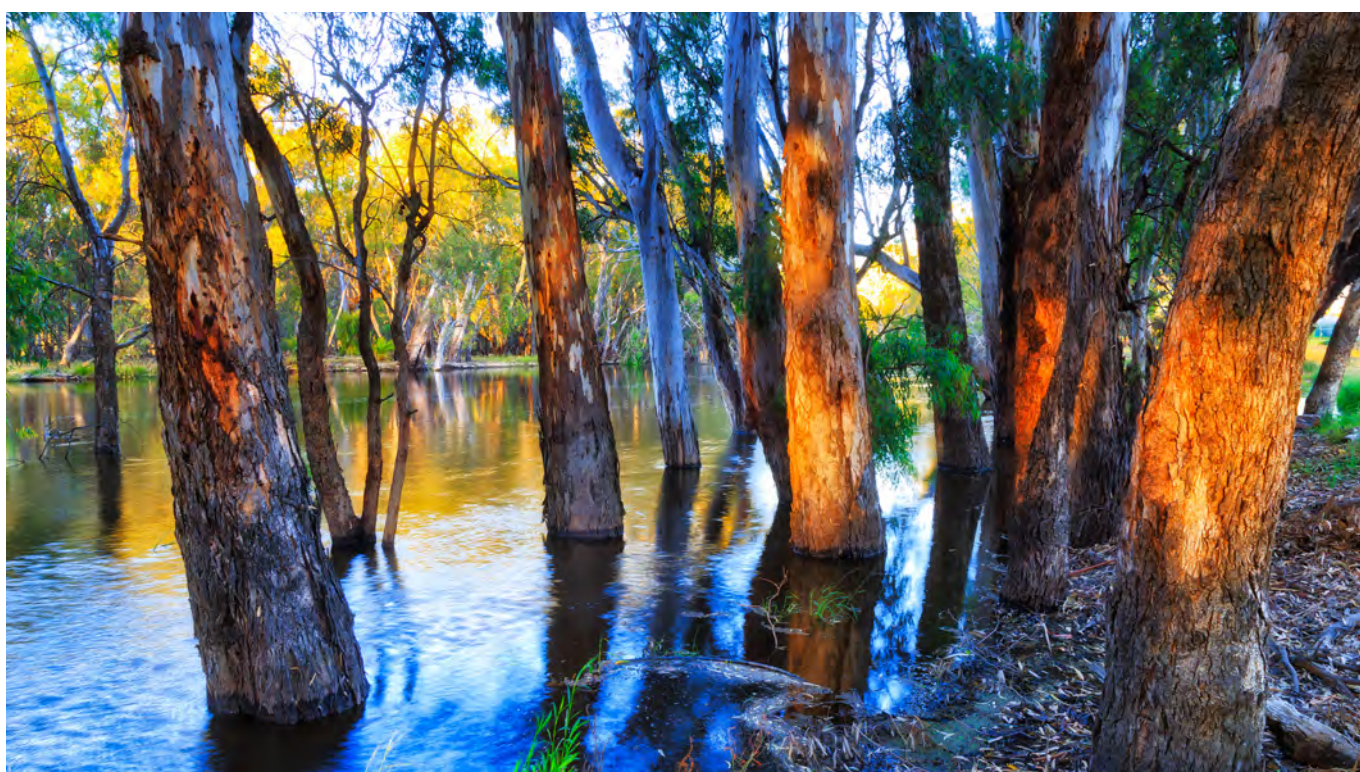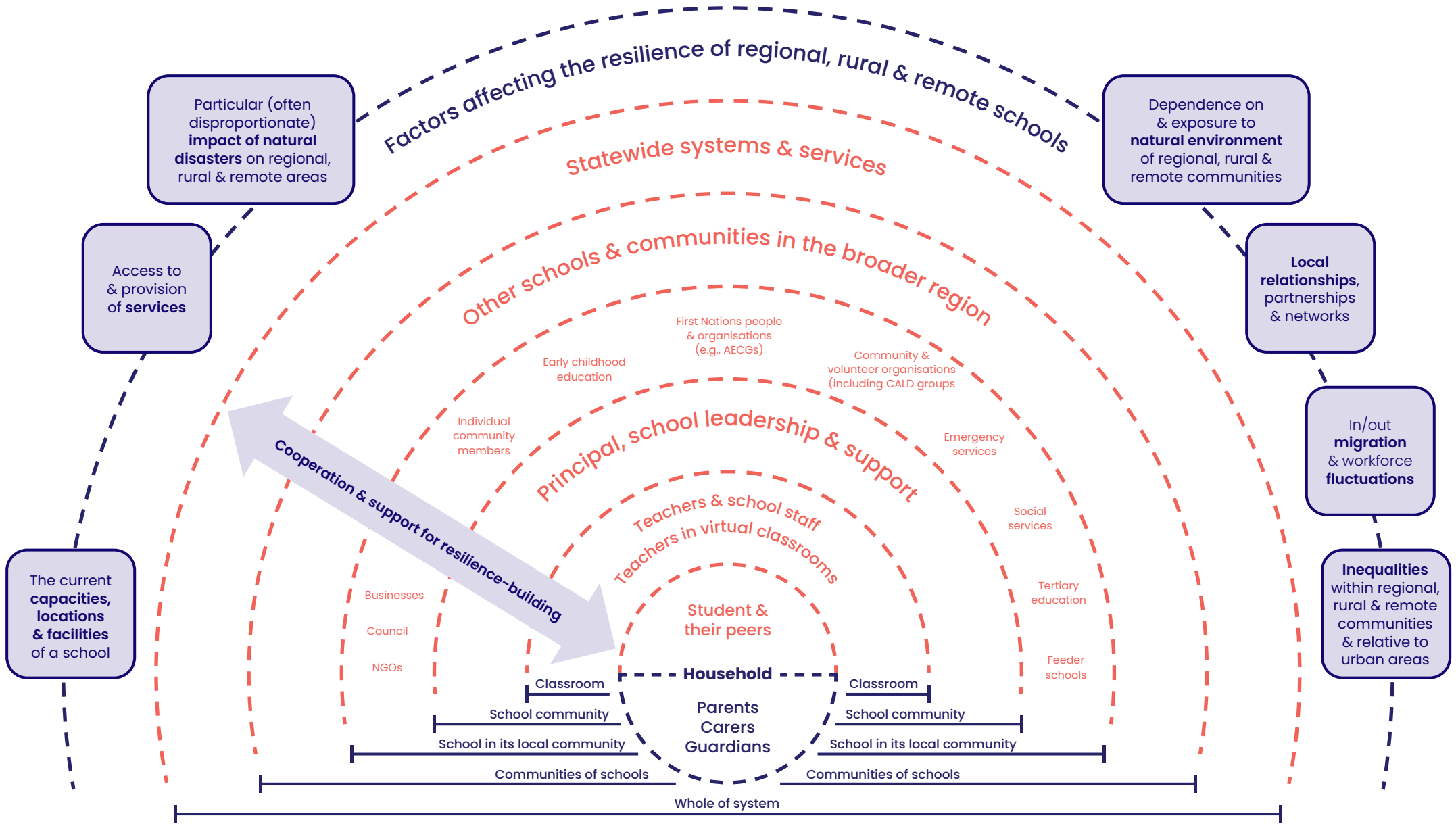
Figure 6: Stakeholders in, and factors affecting, the resilience of regional, rural and remote schools

Harnessing local links and learning

Four governing insights for how local links and learning can boost resilience

These insights are intended to guide policy development and the implementation of initiatives that utilise this report.

Recognise and build upon the existing strength of school communities

Regional, rural and remote school communities already demonstrate a high degree of resilience through everyday operations and interactions.

Key factors:

- The closeness and familiarity between people in school communities is a source of strong community ties and connectedness.
- First Nations communities demonstrate high degrees of strength and resilience, notably in the face of high-stress periods such as disasters.[9]
- "Virtuous" and "vicious" cycles can attach to school communities, affecting their resilience:
  - » Virtuous cycle: growth in a school community creates positive perceptions about its future which reinforce an upwards trajectory.
  - » Vicious cycle: contraction in a school community creates negative perceptions about its future which reinforce a declining trajectory.

Implications:

- Take a strengths-based approach that seeks to harness the existing capacities of school communities, especially the strengths of First Nations communities.
- Leverage existing programs, initiatives and resources for boosting resilience, where relevant and possible.
- Policies and initiatives for boosting resilience should feed into virtuous cycles of growth in school communities OR seek to disrupt vicious cycles of school community contraction.

Value and nurture student agency

Students can be central agents in determining how to establish their own resilience, and in building up that of their school community.

Key factors:

- The agency of students can sometimes be (unintentionally) diminished, especially in time of high stress such as a disaster.
- When students have agency and are listened to, they are more likely to meaningfully lead, contribute to and buy into efforts and initiatives to boost community resilience.
- Students from equity cohorts (e.g., First Nations, CALD, LGBTIQA+, disability) may face additional barriers to exercising agency and having their voice heard.
- Greater agency of students in their community and in their learning will contribute to their personal resilience by empowering them to make decisions about their own lives.

Implications:

- Make a conscious effort to value and involve students' agency in all decisions.
- Understand the resilience of individual students as contributing to the collective resilience of a school community.
- Make additional efforts to ensure the voice and agency of equity cohort students are valued and nurtured.
- The inclusion of First Nations students, and embedding their agency, increases the community's raft of resources and knowledges to draw upon.
- Learning should aim to empower students to understand their local context, contribute to resilience-building, and exercise agency about their post-school choices.

Schools can be important community hubs

The social and physical infrastructure of regional, rural and remote schools can often be central points of community meeting, organisation, and connection (during and outside of disasters).

Key factors:

- Schools and their facilities are important pieces of public infrastructure in regional, rural or remote communities. In many communities, schools might be the only or one of the few remaining pieces of funded public infrastructure.

- Social infrastructure and physical facilities include school grounds and buildings, learning resources, and the human and organisational capital and networks of the school and its staff.

- First Nations communities can have particular interests, and therefore needs, in a school acting as a community hub.

- The nature and extent of a school's role as a community hub will vary between places based on the capacity of the school, the needs of the community, and the availability and quality of alternate community hubs.

Implications:

- Take a purposeful approach to designing, resourcing, and using school facilities to enhance the ability of the school to act as a hub.

- Take into account any particular needs or interests of First Nations people when considering a school's role as a community hub.

- When a school is an effective community hub, a beneficial reciprocal relationship can exist: the school boosts community ties while also harnessing the strengths and assets of the community to improve its own functions, especially teaching and learning.[10]

Focus on local leadership and knowledge

Local leadership and knowledge are critical for effective, authentic and sustainable resilience-building that is genuinely community-led.

Key factors:

- Underlying community-led resilience takes a long time to establish and requires constant and consistent investment.

- Effective resilience-boosting initiatives will be contextually relevant, adaptable to local conditions, and locally led.

- Valuing, capturing and utilising local knowledge, history and culture – especially that of First Nations people and communities – is a priority.

- The continuity of school community leaders and staff, community partnerships, and local services and programs are crucial.

- Giving support and sharing knowledge and experience between peers is highly valued by students, school staff and schools at the institutional level.

- Both formal (structured) and informal (unstructured) interactions between school and community stakeholders are important.

Implications:

- Prioritise local leadership, local knowledge and contextualisation in policymaking and the delivery of programs or initiatives.

- While prioritising local leadership, ensure this does not overburden or isolate schools.

- Allow adequate time and space for informal and authentic interactions between students, staff and schools to complement formal (structured) engagements and interaction.
  - » Prioritise face to face engagement as much as possible.
  - » To meet the varying needs and interests of people in a school community, identify other means for interaction (e.g., virtual) that complement face to face engagements.

Fostering strong community ties and a shared sense of community belonging

Nurturing community ties on a regular basis reinforces underlying resilience and positions schools to deal proactively with disasters.
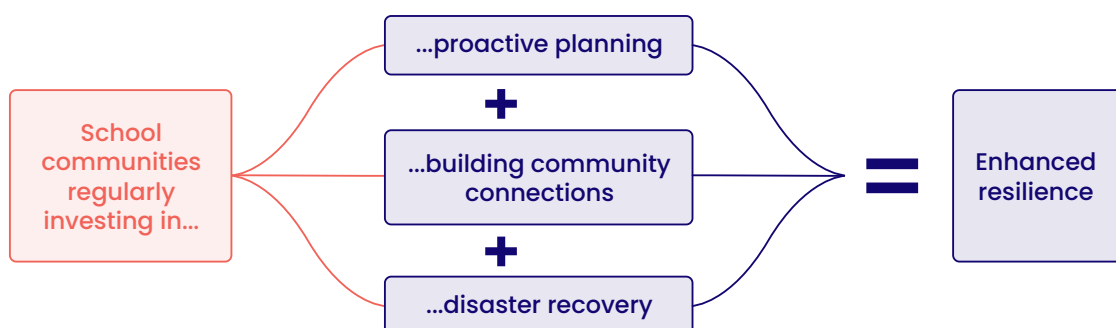
Regional, rural and remote schools have strong local community ties and enjoy a shared sense of connection and community belonging. Given recent adverse events, strong school community connections can be used to proactively reinforce underlying resilience.

It is well established in the disaster risk reduction literature that strong ties prior to disaster mean that people and communities are better placed to proactively respond to, and recover from, adversity.[11] Nurturing community connections and a sense of belonging can protect against the negative effects of disasters on the operations of a school and the resilience of its people.[12] Proactive school community planning and disaster response initiatives are central components of preparing for emergency events and are best undertaken in tandem with recovery planning initiatives.[13] This is summarised in the diagram below.

Schools have strong community connections because they are community hubs within a region.[14] In times of disaster, schools may be part of response and recovery processes. Outside of disaster, schools are places of education, employment, recreation, and social gathering. School infrastructure is also regularly used out of hours for sporting, cultural and community events. Amid disaster, schools may become places of shared support. They are used to provide critical information, resources, and charity, thereby linking schools, communities, government, emergency managers, NGOs and local services.

School communities regularly investing in... [...proactive planning + ...building community connections + ...disaster recovery] = Enhanced resilience

Schools foster strong community ties and belonging over time by utilising the specific social resources and shared social networks that are unique to them.

A school community's ties are developed over time—often over the course of generations—and are maintained through the everyday actions of people in a school's networks. The term social capital is used to describe these ties. A school's social capital includes its shared identity, values, knowledge, resources, specific behaviours, and communication links that comprise its social network, and which gives the school community its unique feel and character. Together, these attributes provide a social safety net and a common set of resources that enable school communities to function effectively.[15]

School leaders and staff play a role in resilience-building, but parents and the wider school community also play a significant role in building and contributing to the school culture. This is achieved through the value these actors place on schools in building up young people into contributing citizens:

"For students, a very important aspect of a school's culture is the messages they 'pick up' directly and indirectly about their worth and their ability to learn and be successful".[16]

A review of best practice strategies for maintaining and leveraging community ties and social capital is listed overleaf. [17] We use these strategies to frame the examples provided throughout the report.

Maintaining and leveraging strong school community ties

A range of factors influence how community ties can be maintained and leveraged

General factors for **maintaining** strong ties:	Specific factors for **leveraging** strong ties:
Community and contextual factors	
• Deep community familiarity and strong ties between a school and its community • Schools are responsive to the area's demographic and geographic profile	• People feel primed to respond to disasters • School communities know who possesses useful skills, knowledge and resources, and who are the most vulnerable people
Nurturing social networks	
• Schools are embedded in a range of formal and informal networks • Positive linkages between schools and their network are maintained both during and outside of emergency situations • Schools utilise the range of supports available to them: the more networks they are part of, the more supports available • Schools are part of civic life by supporting cultural and community events • Schools nurture connections to people and place through education and engagement, especially in relation to First Nations and CALD groups	• Schools can leverage links between the community, NGOs, government, and linked services networks in times of need • Formal networks are supplemented by extensive informal networks • All stakeholders have been embedded in a school's planning, response and recovery initiatives, taking into consideration groups who face compounding vulnerabilities • School communities understand that First Nations and CALD groups possess knowledge that can be an asset during planning, response, and recovery
Resources	
• Response and recovery plans are created, mapping key vulnerabilities and resources • Shared social resources are identified, mobilised and integrated into school operations to create efficiency and to buffer against the force of disaster events • Consistency in school staffing is prioritised (where possible) for workforce continuity	• Plans are followed and updated to reflect each school community's experience • External assistance complements a school community's local and contextual factors • Contingency plans are used to bridge geographic distances – digital tools can generate and maintain social connections and enhance learning continuity during short and lengthy disruptions

A school community's safety net and shared social resources can be drawn upon for collective action (e.g., in the face of disaster) or for **collective benefit** (e.g., when regrouping post-disaster).[18]

As part of this, schools may turn to their existing primary relationships to deal with challenges (known as **bonding capital**), such as parents and carers' groups and the inner-most areas of Figure 6. Schools may otherwise seek out new or existing secondary relationships for this purpose, such as emergency services personnel, NGOs and other middle stakeholders of Figure 6 (**bridging capital**).[19] Types of social capital are described in **Figure 7**.

Figure 7: Three types of social capital

1

Bonding capital: strong ties & relationships within a community or group who are already familiar.

2

Bridging capital: weaker more diffuse ties which link or cut across communities & groups.

3

Linking capital: relationships with influential authority, including links with individuals & institutions who can provide access to resources.

Additionally, school communities may leverage relationships to lobby and obtain greater external supports (known as linking capital, explored below). Critical to these relationships is **trust** among schools, community members, extended networks, and government officials, so that **feelings of connection and belonging** are built upon or further enhanced by working together to generate reciprocal benefits.[20] Developing community engagement plans or strategies to boost a sense of reciprocity is important so that a community "owns" the process. Engaging students in their community through a mixture of formal (structured) and informal (unstructured) activities is also important.

Supporting schools' planning and investing in linking capital are two ways to boost underlying resilience

Strong community ties can be used to enhance a school's understanding of its resilience journey and assist school leaders to build up the resilience of the school community. Given recent and projected incidences of disasters impacting regional, rural and remote schools, there is an opportunity to further support school communities' ambitions.

School flexibility to plan for and ultimately manage disruptions should be amplified so they can draw confidence from what they are already doing, and what works for them locally. However, rather than school leadership and administration teams singlehandedly managing risk throughout the school

year, primary and secondary relationships can play a role. For instance, school community stakeholders can contribute to annual **social audits** of school assets and resources, planning and response processes.[21]

Social audits involve mapping vulnerabilities, putting forward solutions, and establishing community targets to manage and recover from disasters – thereby increasing the effectiveness of wrap-around supports.[22] Giving time, space, and support to school community actors and their wider networks to undertake this work as part of their employment or voluntary roles has reciprocal benefit.

Assisting schools to invest in their linking capital can help in maintaining and growing social connections and can build upon school communities' core problem-solving and resilience skills. Schools that demonstrate resilience use ties to make connections with people outside their immediate network, or with groups and organisations who are gatekeepers to resources. Those ties can be used by both small and large schools to access resources when needed, thereby filling logistical, financial and resource gaps. Linking capital can assist schools to lobby decisionmakers (e.g., local MPs) for improved access to funding or resources, though success might look different across communities.[23] Promoting linking capital represents an opportunity to boost the capacity of school operations and scale the work they are already doing. Importantly, nourishing linking capital builds institutional connections for students as they move from early education to primary and high school.[24]

Social audits are local evaluations undertaken by school communities to assess, strengthen and align relationships, skills and resources and to set a school's agenda to boost resilience. Evaluations can be student-led and have built-in social and educational benefits or else involve vulnerable, less often consulted groups. Social audits typically result in relationship building by establishing or updating planning, response and recovery strategies and forming new networks or nourishing existing ones. Benefits include strengthening community priorities, identifying gaps, and deciding through consensus actionable next steps.

Investments in linking capital support the idea that schools are central community hubs[25] where solutions can be found for complex problems.[26] Informal and formal connections and networks play a role in helping schools to build resilience and capitalise on a range of strong and weak community ties. Students can be involved in this process. This may be of particular benefit when connections are built around different year groups and their stage of personal and educational development.

Marrying up formal community knowledge, especially about disruptions, with informal community knowledge (i.e., knowing who to ask and where to go for help) can further assist in building resilience. Strong relationships between schools and local services, especially emergency and social services, have shown how community is built in and around local schools.[27] An example is Our Place.

Local knowledge and perspectives, especially those held by First Nations peoples, are critical to boosting resilience

Using cultural knowledge and connection boosts the resilience of school communities. Cultural connections to people and place, especially those of First Nations people, provide a strong sense of belonging that has potential to cut across the whole community.[28] First Nations peoples have deep knowledge and experience for schools and the wider community to learn from in preparing for and recovering from disasters and disruptions.[29]

Among the wider school community, strategies to keep vital "community pillars" (i.e., key community leaders with specific knowledge sets) connected to schools is fundamental to resilience. This is especially important in the wake of high stress periods. Sharing positive experiences and hosting celebratory events with school communities can be useful for nurturing important connections. These events do not need to use the language of "resilience" but instead complement existing initiatives.

In addition, mentors drawn from recent school alumni can play a role in building and reinforcing community connection to boost resilience. This can include people who have remained in the local community, those who have left (but remain engaged with the community), and those who have left and then returned.[30]

Role model mentors should aim to empower current students to exercise agency about their own future with respect to the school and local community.

Programs should avoid imposing external initiatives and instead ensure continuity should key community members running these programs leave the community. Informal networks may play a role in continuing what others have started. Onboarding programs that specifically introduce new staff to the school community could ensure staff feel welcome and enhance social participation.

Throughout this research, several enabling factors – but also some barriers – were identified in schools' ability to foster strong community ties.

Our Place utilises the platform of regional as well as suburban schools in Victoria to reshape the local service system by influencing changes in policies and practices addressing disadvantage. Our Place see their role as 'the glue' facilitating cross-sector partnerships that enable schools to be central places for learning and for gaining appropriate access to support services, which can be used to then overcome barriers to educational achievement.

The Firestick project teaches students about fire management from First Nations elders. It was a useful teaching supplement after the 2009 Victorian bushfires and built understanding and intercultural relations.

The Fish are back and so are we: A ReCap Fire Recovery story explains how the Marysville community and marine species recovered after bushfire in the Yarra Valley of Victoria. The project was developed to provide effective community engagement for a suite of fire recovery projects supporting threatened fish.

Schools as community hubs: Research has demonstrated that schools play important roles as community hubs, noting their function as places of education, social gathering, and community infrastructure. When a school "engages with its social networks, partners with outside groups, and shares its facilities to meet community needs and improve student outcomes" it becomes "more than a school".

Enablers and barriers

There are **four enabling factors** for fostering strong school community ties to boost resilience:

1. Schools employ people with leadership capacities and who are effective networkers and organisers, especially within the ranks of school leadership and administration teams.
2. For the most part, schools engage in formal networks that provide operational and logistical supports. Many engage informal networks that supplement the support offered by formal ones.
3. The passion for teaching expressed by educators speaks to their commitment to provide students with quality learning and their ability to provide tailored and relevant materials.
4. There are a range of existing learning and engagement strategies linking First Nations communities to their local school communities, which promise to enhance stronger ties.

There are **four social and structural barriers** schools face in fostering strong ties to boost resilience:

1. While key school stakeholders act as linchpins in their communities, their removal or absence during periods of high strain can disproportionately impact community ties.
2. The closeness of tightly knit communities can throw up issues around exclusion. External service providers can lack local connections and community trust. This demonstrates how hard it can be for new people to break into existing social networks, including new teachers.
3. Staff attrition can have flow on effects for students who experience compounding vulnerabilities and require support during high-stress periods.
4. Teachers with strong community connections can be overwhelmed by a "low anonymity/high surveillance" dynamic, with it being hard for staff to switch off or take downtime in tightly knit communities, possibly leading to burnout.

Local festival in the Northern Rivers region. (Stanciuc/iStock)
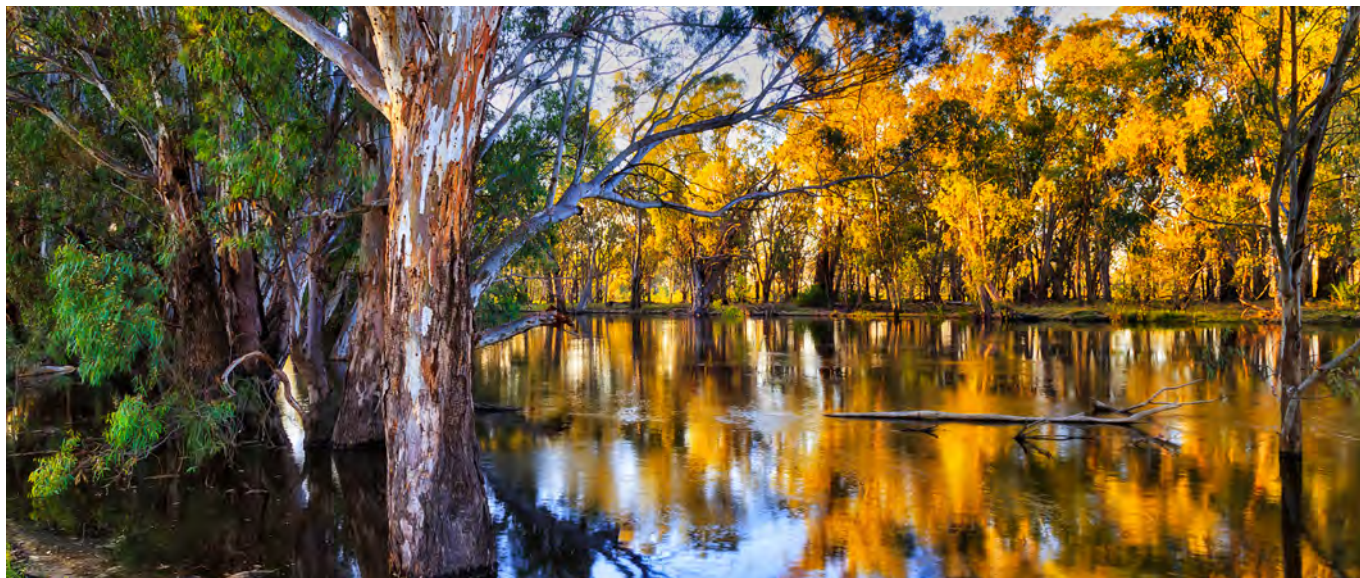
Leveraging learning & skills for staff and students

Opportunities to boost resilience already exist in student learning in NSW — but there is room for further contextualisation.

Education plays an important role in fostering resilience among school communities, especially when it is contextualised, risk-informed, equitable and culturally sensitive.[31] When education is delivered in this way, it addresses social vulnerability and promotes whole-of-community growth.[32] For this reason, resilience education can strengthen and support a school's **social capital** (i.e., their social connections and shared resources) by contributing to building skills, knowledges and capabilities.[33]

The curriculum allows teacher flexibility to contextualise learning experiences.[34] However, contextualisation can be difficult for time-poor educators, especially when affected by disaster. This means more resources, implementation guides, and support are needed. For example, the **Australian Institute of Disaster Resilience** (AIDR) has collated useful resources that may be useful for teachers who wish to use these guidelines, or examples of contextualised learning.[35]

Child-centred approaches drive contextualisation, diversify learning experiences, foster students' agency to contribute to resilience, and canvas their views. This positions students as active community members who have valid ideas, questions, thoughts, and assumptions about school community resilience and how to cope with and manage disruptions.[36]

Guidelines compiled by AIDR that frame how resilience education is applied include:

- **Placing the learner at the centre**: Ensuring the perspectives, priorities and wellbeing of students continue to be the focus of learning experiences in schools
- **Building capacity**: Focussing on skills and information building for conceptual and practical application across a range of subjects and situations linked to resilience
- **Reflecting local context**: Basing examples and case studies on phenomena likely to be experienced in a school community
- **Being inclusive**: Learning experiences should be strengths-based and inclusive of all perspectives and experiences
- **Building strengths**: Partnerships with and input from school communities should be sought (where appropriate) to encourage collaboration between diverse actors
- **Shaking-up content**: Content should seek to build on students' understandings and practical applications of resilience, and gently challenge them throughout
- **Focussing on action**: Learning should be practical and action-based

In addition, contextualisation can occur through community stakeholders contributing to students' learning experiences, which can help to cement strong community ties (as explored above). For example, volunteering opportunities with emergency services, local businesses and First Nations groups are particularly useful for **supplementing learning through practical and resilience-driven activities**.

In turn, local contexts are paired with learning materials to drive understanding and capacity, especially learning that promotes problem-solving skills. The *Girls on Fire* program is an example.[37]

Schools can best leverage contextualised learning via access to a range of best practice learning materials. This holds various benefits for students and the school community by increasing awareness of disaster threats and how to respond to them. In many NSW schools this is already underway. Australian researchers boast some of the most cutting-edge resources and programs.

Such examples of resources that teachers can opt-into work best when learning content is localised, risk-informed, equitable and culturally sensitive. Existing materials can be updated and adapted to be contextualised, rather than altering the existing curriculum. First Nations peoples' knowledges and perspectives can be incorporated, with a range of examples already used by schools to this end.

Models for culturally appropriate learning design are being championed across NSW. For example, the **Connected Communities Strategy** in NSW brings together 23 communities, 31 schools and their local First Nations cultures. It was co-designed and co-constructed by the NSW Department of Education and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) Incorporated. The strategy promotes linkages between schools, government and NGOs to support the education of students.[38] The NSW AECG is recognised by the NSW Department of Education as the peak community advisory body on Aboriginal education at all levels and in all stages of planning and decision making. Elsewhere, the NSW AECG provides advice and resources relevant to education and training. It has a mandate that advice and resources represent First Nations communities' viewpoints.[39]

Girls on Fire works with schools, emergency services and youth groups to introduce girls aged 15 to 19 to fire, emergency and disaster management skills. The programs combine practical frontline emergency experience with evidence-based research and training. This program has been rolled out in Dubbo, Newcastle, Mogo and the Hawksbury.

Bushfire Cadets Program aims to help high school students become volunteer firefighters. Piloted with students at Gingin High School WA, the program comprises a 16-week compulsory program for year 10 students that educates them about fire safety, firefighting, and fire management. It gets students out into the community to supplement classroom work with localised and practice-based learning.

8Ways pedagogy framework allows teachers who have received specialty training to include First Nations' perspectives in their teaching. It uses learning techniques from First Nations people of Western New South Wales, including: story sharing, map learning, non-verbal cues, symbols and images, links to land, links to community, non-linearity, and deconstructed-reconstructed learning.

Opportunities to embed resilience education across student learning

Educators can utilise existing opportunities to purposely include contextualised learning that boosts resilience. For high school students, PDHPE, science and HSIE are good vehicles to continue introducing students to resilience education.[40] Additional opportunities might be found in English and the visual and performing arts where resilience education could complement existing textual and creative pursuits.[41] There is flexibility to contextualise age-appropriate resilience education, for example across Years 7-10 and through all key learning areas.

Including cohorts of students in developing school emergency management plans or social audits is an idea for a collaborative process engaging all staff, students and interested school community members. When undertaken with sensitivity, this can help embed habits of cooperation and problem-solving into discrete exercises. Students can share their knowledge of managing adversity with their households and networks.

Formal and informal networks of schools, principals and teachers can also be used to share and exchange ideas and information. Such networks can also provide peer support for implementing examples through the work of teachers, parents, service providers and community organisations. Finally, the challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19 and online learning mean **there is scope to diversify learning experiences to encourage students to embrace the natural environment**.

> **Cool Australia lesson plans** aim to embed resilience education into learning across each year stage. They cover all areas of the Australian curriculum and include special topics such as conservation and Caring for Country. The materials prepare students and school communities for a range of disasters and disruptions, especially extreme weather.

> **Project Firestorm**, developed by the NSW Rural Fire Service in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, uses inquiry-based learning to teach students about bushfire awareness, including the causes and impacts of bushfires.

This research identified several enabling factors and barriers to teachers contextualising learning experiences.

Enablers and barriers to contextualising learning experiences

There are **three enabling factors** for contextualising learning experiences:

1. Passionate educators are already in the habit of updating and adapting learning experiences and take pride in using relevant and contextualised information.
2. Many schools already have strong existing school partnerships with local institutions (e.g., local businesses) who are willing and able to support contextualisation.
3. Formal and informal principal and teacher networks are already embraced by many educators and schools.

There are **two barriers** that schools face for contextualising learning experiences:

1. There is a tension between increasing teacher demands for learning to be contextualised and, simultaneously, placing pressure on the curriculum to cover more content.
2. There are many existing demands on the curriculum and regional, rural and remote schools, meaning "resilience learning" must be integrated into current learning, not added to it.

Principal and teacher professional learning can be leveraged to boost resilience, with flow-on effects for their school communities.

School staff regularly participate in professional learning and associated training events, with the aim of updating skills, capacities and familiarity with protocols and resources. Such opportunities demonstrate the ability for staff to be responsive to changing protocols, conditions and policies (especially when undertaken in accordance with the Department's High Impact Professional Learning (HIPL) framework).[42]

When school staff engage in professional learning, the school community benefits enormously, given that:

• Focusing professional learning on teaching and learning contributes to academic success.
• Regular evaluation and capacity-building strengthens school and professional performance.
• Professional learning encourages collaboration among educators.

- The wellbeing of school community actors can be bolstered through school staff who possess up-to-date knowledge and who feel at ease using this to drive learning and connection.
- School communities that regularly direct professional learning objectives into classroom and community life can solve their most complex problems by tapping internal expertise.[43]

Four ways to capitalise on the deep passion, commitment and agility school staff show toward developing students' learning to boost resilience emerged in our consultations, including supporting and resourcing:

- The establishment of learning alliances between schools that aim to connect and provide mutual support for teachers at similar career stages or teaching similar subjects or year groups
- Professional development and networking conferences to provide school staff with immersion and networking opportunities to hear from peers about programs and protocols in other schools which may have benefit in their home school communities
- Formal and informal mechanisms to share knowledge and experience about what works best for teachers in terms of utilising their professional development in schools
- Events and circulars that showcase what schools and principals are doing that is innovative and/or effective in terms of resilience-building work

Opportunities to pair school staff with coaches and mentors can be used to further develop the above ideas and, importantly, provide meaningful and tailored assistance to schools affected by disasters.

One idea includes mentorships for principals and Directors of Education Leadership (DELs), offered either online or face-to-face, that equip school leaders with the skills and capacities to promote personal and collective resilience among their school communities.

BTS Spark Australia's 'Developing educational leadership' coaching program was designed for NSW principals and DELs who have led their school communities through bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic. The coach's role was to support participants to reflect, renew their energy, and develop their skillset to lead their school community confidently.

Personal impacts reported by participants who undertook coaching included:

- Better self-management, health, energy levels and self-care
- Greater confidence (even as noted by others) and improved prioritisation
- Higher levels of self-awareness of both their emotional state and their impact on others, increased mindfulness and being present for others
- Clarity of vision for their school and their role as principal.

The **impacts for schools** following participation included:

- Better delegation to and empowerment of executive team, including setting boundaries with staff
- Introducing coaching models and strategies to school staff to help build their resilience and personal leadership
- Improved decision-making, consciously considering multiple points of view
- Developing and mentoring others, preparing people for succession
- Developing teachers to be more self-reliant
- Increased effective support for parents and staff using new strategies
- Greater staff involvement in curriculum planning and school improvement planning.

Information supplied by the NSW Department of Education.

Appendix 1
Detailed opportunities

This report identifies policy and practice opportunities in **four focus areas** for boosting the resilience of regional, rural and remote schools:

1. Student growth and learning
2. School leadership capacity of principals and teachers
3. Whole-of-school approach to resilience
4. Ties between schools and their communities

The table overleaf summarises opportunities by focus area. The opportunities are all framed as policy-level interventions and are not specifically directed at school communities.

Outcomes from these opportunities should be tailored to meet the diverse needs and ambitions of specific school communities, places and people. What resilience looks like and how it is assessed will have different meanings in different places—what is important is that this document can be used to leverage what works well locally. What's more, the opportunities should be read with a view to equity, diversity and inclusion and extend in their application to accommodate all school community stakeholders—including staff and students who identify as First Nations, are from CALD or refugee backgrounds,

have English as a second language, live with disability, are part of the LGBTIQA+ community, or who experience compounding vulnerabilities.

The proper take-up of these opportunities includes consulting and co-designing on programs and initiatives at both the state-wide and local level with relevant experts and community representatives.

About these opportunities

The table overleaf sets out some of the key characteristics of the opportunities, including:

- **Time period** for implementation (short-term versus long term)
- **Nature of the action** needed to implement it (noting that most opportunities would require both coordination and investment to varying degrees), where:
  » **"Investment"** refers to instances where a new or existing program or initiative should be generated, expanded or scaled-up.
  » **"Coordination"** refers to instances where existing resources, programs or initiatives could be better organised or brought together.

Core focus area 1: Invest in student development and learning

1.1 | **Provide greater resources and specialised advice to regional, rural and remote schools that enables them to contextualise learning, especially through engagement with the local community.**

	Opportunity	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
1.1.1	Generate guidance for regional, rural and remote schools on how to engage local community leaders and groups to support and contribute to teachers' work designing lessons and learning to be contextually relevant.	✓			✓	Provide guidance to help schools engage with local First Nations elders and groups (e.g., NSW AECG) in a culturally sensitive way on developing learning materials and resources. Guidance should be co-designed with school staff.
1.1.2	Develop, maintain and curate an online repository of easily accessed learning materials and resources that relate to boosting student, schools or community resilience for teachers in regional, rural and remote schools.	✓		✓		The repository should be curated to ensure quality of materials. This should be considered alongside opportunity 4.1.1.
1.1.3	Develop a best practice guide for teachers and principals on technology-enabled learning in times of disaster, response and recovery based on recent experience in regional, rural and remote schools. Guide should focus on how to balance continuity of learning with maintaining quality of learning.	✓			✓	Effective practice developed over the last three-four years by schools should be highlighted and shared to spread innovation. The guide should build on the NSW Department of Education report Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.[44]

1.2 | **Provide greater resources and specialised advice to regional, rural and remote schools that enables them to empower the agency and sense of belonging of students.**

	Opportunity	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
1.2.1	Ensure that all regional, rural and remote students have access to practical leadership and mentoring opportunities in their local community.		✓		✓	Includes volunteering, work experience, apprenticeships, and mentoring programs (e.g., with recent alumni of schools). These should be tailored to the regional, rural or remote context and aim to promote diverse post-school career and life paths.
1.2.2	Develop a consistent approach to managing transitions of cohorts of students between key stages of school (e.g., from primary to high school, and from Stage 5 to Stage 6 online learning) in regional, rural and remote areas. Transition plans should focus on understanding the particular needs and experiences of students as they move from one local context to another (such as memory of a disaster in their local context).		✓		✓	Many schools already manage these transitions effectively based on local context. This should be maintained. Focus on understanding and accounting for the specific experiences and context of cohorts of students as, for instance, they move from several smaller and geographically dispersed primary schools to a central high school in a bigger regional centre. Students that have experienced adversity in their prior school environment may, for instance, have unique experiences to share with other students.

ST: Short term   **LT**: Long term   **C**: Coordination   **I**: Investment

Core focus area 2: Invest in the school leadership capacity of principals and teachers

2.1 **Invest in effective school leadership for resilience through specialised teacher training and professional learning for teachers and principals, and peer support between teachers and principals.**

	Opportunity	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
2.1.1	Provide more opportunities for principals and teachers to undertake networking with peers to share knowledge, especially of their experiences of adversity and when the resilience of their school was tested.	✓		✓		Formal or structured networking opportunities should be complemented by informal and unstructured opportunities to remain connected. Teachers and principals can be brought together or matched based on geographic proximity or on the basis of similar challenges. Meeting peers from very different contexts can have benefits too.
2.1.2	Continue or further expand formal and informal mentoring and coaching for principals.	✓			✓	Mentors or coaches found through structured programs should be supported to continue to engage informally with principals. Important for trust-building and open exchanges that mentors or coaches are not supervisors or able to influence career progression.
2.1.3	As much as possible, make professional development opportunities for school staff flexible, adaptable to context, and modular (i.e., self-contained units of learning that can be completed in a flexible order or pattern).	✓			✓	Balance in-person and online learning to maximise participation and quality by providing options for teachers and principals in terms of format, timing, and location. As much as possible, courses should be contextualised for regional, rural or remote settings, bring together teachers and principals from similar geographic locations, and minimise urban-centric training.
2.1.4	Explore opportunities for collaboration with emergency services to: • conduct joint training and professional learning between teachers, principals, local services, and emergency services personnel; and • connect principals into local emergency management planning and response processes.		✓	✓		This would also serve as an effective social capital-building exercise for key leaders.

ST: Short term   **LT**: Long term   **C**: Coordination   **I**: Investment

2.2   Showcase effective leadership in boosting resilience in regional, rural and remote schools.

	Opportunity	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
2.2.1	Develop a state-wide "showcase" program highlighting teachers, principals and schools that have demonstrated effective or innovative approaches to building resilience in their community.	✓		✓		These individuals and schools should be made available for others to contact them, seek advice and share knowledge and experience.
2.2.2	Develop a "resilience roadshow": a travelling set of human, informational, and learning resources that can run celebratory events, staff professional learning, and resilience-building lessons to students, while also relieving usual school workloads.		✓		✓	Aim to showcase effective approaches to resilience that schools and leaders can then tailor to their own circumstances. The timing, schedule and content for the roadshow would need to be carefully planned to avoid burdening schools or being insensitive to post-disaster contexts. Its focus in each place should be determined in consultation with local school stakeholders.

2.3   Create space for, and invest in, strategic leadership in the community by school leaders.

	Opportunity	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
2.3.1	Assist school leaders in regional, rural and remote schools to be aware of and understand how and when they can draw upon administrative support from the Department during high-stress periods.	✓		✓		This will help school leaders to focus on resilience-building and recovery in the school community.
2.3.2	Establish a paid leave allowance for teachers and principals to do recognised community-building and/or resilience-building work in their local area.		✓		✓	State Emergency Service and the Army Reserve are key examples of community and resilience building work.

ST: Short term   **LT**: Long term   **C**: Coordination   **I**: Investment

Core focus area 3: Invest in a whole-of-school approach to resilience

	Description	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
3.1	Develop a **self-assessment diagnostic tool – a "resilience menu"** – for schools to use at their discretion to gauge their underlying resilience across various characteristics. • Use of the tool should be **voluntary**. Schools should be able to use the tool in an ad hoc manner when their leaders sense it is needed. • The tool should remain confidential to each school. However, engagement with key stakeholders across the school including students, school staff, and community representatives could be built into the assessment as a community-building exercise.		✓		✓	Given that what "resilience" means will vary between school communities and over time, the tool should be used for self-reflection and self-assessment by schools to understand their resilience journey. It should not be used to compare schools against singular static criteria or to each other. The "characteristics of resilient schools" listed in this report could be used as a starting point for this tool. Further research and development would be required to establish metrics (if possible).
3.2	Celebrate and promote instances of **effective "learning alliances" or "communities of practice"** between geographically proximate schools that facilitate resource pooling and the institutionalisation of sharing knowledge and experience.	✓		✓		Many alliances and communities of practice exist, with different degrees of integration and formalisation based on local needs. A range of alliances and communities of practice should be highlighted for others to draw on in a contextually-relevant way. Learning alliances and communities of practice that have had success in resilience-building should be prioritised for showcasing.
3.3	Develop and disseminate **strengths-based language and communications** around regional, rural and remote schools and the high-quality education they provide.		✓		✓	Focus on reinforcing positive perceptions of regional, rural and remote education. Help regional, rural and remote schools have agency over their own metrics of success and vision for future, without being defined by metropolitan benchmarks.

Core focus area 4: Invest in community ties to boost resilience

4.1   Resource regional, rural and remote schools to grow and boost meaningful and enduring ties with their community.

	Opportunity	ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
4.1.1	Develop and maintain a database accessible to schools that collates all programs and initiatives available to schools that might support them to grow ties and build resilience with their communities.	✓		✓		The database would be searchable by schools, allowing them to draw in resources at their own discretion and as needed. Scope should include all programs and initiatives available in NSW, whether provided by state, federal, or local government, NGOs, private entities, or other organisations.

ST: Short term   **LT**: Long term   **C**: Coordination   **I**: Investment

Opportunity		ST	LT	C	I	Considerations
4.1.2	Develop a fund for regional, rural and remote schools to draw upon at their discretion to run or host positive community events, celebrations, and to recognise significant contributions people have made to the resilience of a school community.	✓			✓	Schools and communities that have recently endured adversity should be prioritised. An online portal could function as a repository of good examples of such celebrations for schools to draw inspiration from.
4.1.3	Develop a fund for regional, rural and remote schools to draw upon at their discretion to run or host positive community events, celebrations, and to recognise significant contributions people have made to the resilience of a school community.	✓		✓		Ensure that broader community use of school facilities in regional, rural and remote areas is: • considered at the design phase for facilities; and • in planning for their use.
4.2	**Enable and advise regional, rural and remote schools on how to further connect with key community stakeholders.**					
4.2.1	Where relevant or needed, provide advice and support to schools to identify, work with, and strengthen connections to: (1) local First Nations people and groups; and (2) CALD people in the local area.	✓		✓		This could include local NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) organisations, Local Land Councils, or other groups.
4.2.2	Consider ways to ease the administrative and occupational health and safety requirements on schools to allow greater community use of their facilities.	✓			✓	This should aim to identify ways to streamline and reduce this administrative burden on schools to reduce practical barriers to community use of facilities. Consider how '**Share Our Space**' could be built on as a model. Communicating changes in policy around how school facilities can be used and administrative requirements is also important.
4.2.3	Strengthen, expand and fully resource the role of "community connectors" and "community concierges" for schools.		✓		✓	A dedicated person(s) in schools to link with local services and form mutually-beneficial partnerships with community organisations. Aim to institutionalise such ties and reduce the burden on teachers and principals to perform this role. These roles could be created or expanded via partnerships between the Department other NSW Government agencies, or NGOs.

ST: Short term   **LT**: Long term   **C**: Coordination   **I**: Investment

Appendix 2
Programs, initiatives and resources that can contribute to the resilience of school communities

This list of programs, initiatives and resources was compiled throughout the course of the research. The listing of a program, initiative or resource here does not necessarily indicate endorsement.

Programs, initiatives & resources			
#	Program / Initiative / Resource	Organisation	Location
1	**8 Ways**	Wagga Wagga Network of Schools, NSW Department of Education	NSW
2	**AECG teaching and learning programs**	NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG)	NSW
3	**Ambassador Schools – School Success Model**	NSW Department of Education	NSW
4	**Australian Disaster Resilience Handbook: Disaster Resilience Education for Young People**	Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience	Australia
5	**Australian Resilience Corps**	Australian Resilience Corps	Australia
6	**AVID professional learning and whole of school improvement programs**	AVID Australia	Victoria
7	**Brigade Kids**	NSW Fire & Rescue	NSW
8	**BTS Spark "Thriving for Tomorrow" program**	BTS Spark Australia	Australia
9	**Communities of Learning (Kāhui Ako)**	New Zealand Ministry of Education	New Zealand
10	**"Community Conversations" model** used by the Office for Regional Youth to facilitate youth-led community forums in regional, rural and remote areas	Department of Regional NSW; Harwood Institute	NSW
11	**Community partnership model of the school's facilities and social infrastructure being a community hub**	Aldinga Payinthi College	Aldinga, South Australia

#	Program / Initiative / Resource	Organisation	Location
12	"**Connect Program**" – Gingin District High School program on embedding resilience and leadership into curriculum **About lesson plans for resilience**	Gingin District High School and Minderoo Foundation	Gingin, Western Australia
13	**Culturally Nourishing Schooling (CNS) for Indigenous Education**	UNSW	NSW
14	**Education Plans** – Victorian initiative to identify and address community needs in partnership with schools, local government, regional offices and other departments	Victorian Government	Victoria
15	**School Leadership Institute programs** **Rural and Remote Leadership Development Program**	School Leadership Institute, NSW Department of Education	NSW
16	**Firestick Project** **"Parent Trees are talking" storybook**	Wurundjeri elders & Dixons Creek Primary School	Yarra Ranges, Victoria
17	**Girls on Fire**	NSW Rural Fire Service	NSW
18	**Journey of Hope**	Save the Children	NSW & Victoria
19	**"Know Your Country" educational resources**	Know Your Country	NSW
20	Minderoo educational resources: • **How to approach trauma in the classroom** • **Building resilience to disasters – primary** • **Building resilience to disasters - art**	Minderoo Foundation	Australia
21	**Our Place**	Colman Education Foundation; Victorian Government	Victoria
22	**Project Firestorm**	NSW Rural Fire Service in partnership with the NSW Department of Education	NSW
23	**Project Fleur-de-Lis**	Mercy Family Centre	New Orleans, USA
24	**Resilient Communities Framework**	Minderoo Foundation	Australia
25	**Rural Learning Exchange**	NSW Department of Education	NSW
26	**School Leadership Institute programs** **Rural and Remote Leadership Development Program**	School Leadership Institute, NSW Department of Education	NSW
27	**Schools Think Tank Challenge**	WA Water Corporation	Western Australia

#	Program / Initiative / Resource	Organisation	Location
28	**Share our space**	NSW Department of Education – School Infrastructure	NSW
29	**Sharing Schools, Building Communities: Schools as Community Hubs** – includes specific examples of regional, rural and remote schools as community hubs	University of Melbourne	Australia & New Zealand
30	**Snow Gums Learning Alliance**	Ebor Public School, Chandler Public School, Ben Lomond Public School, Black Mountain Public School and Bald Blair Public School	Northern NSW
31	**Statewide staffrooms**	NSW Department of Education	NSW
32	**Stormbirds**	Good Grief	NSW, Victoria & Queensland
33	**Strathewen & Arthurs Creek Fire Education Partnership – education resources**	Strathewen Primary School and Arthurs Creek & Strathewen Country Fire Authority	Strathewen, Victoria
34	**Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden programs and resources**	Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation	Australia
35	**Strong strides together: Meeting the educational goals for First Nations students**	NSW Department of Education & Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation	NSW
36	**Survive and Thrive Program**	Country Fire Authority	Victoria
37	"**The fish are back and so are we**" – A ReCap Recovery Story from the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires	Marysville community	Marysville, Victoria
38	**Turtles in Schools Program** (rolled out in NSW schools including Portland Central School)	Western Sydney University	NSW
39	**Water in the World**	NSW State Emergency Service	NSW
40	**Youth Affairs Council Victoria – disasters resource hub**	Youth Affairs Council Victoria	Victoria

About this report

Research approach

This project employed the James Martin Institute's unique collaborative research and policy project model. This model brings together government, academia, and other experts and stakeholders to work cooperatively on challenging policy issues. The core project team comprised Institute staff, two Department of Education representatives, and a university postdoctoral researcher. The team worked collaboratively throughout three-month period in mid to late 2022. Together, they established a plan to gather the requisite information to answer the research questions, conducted consultations with more than 50 individuals, analysed the evidence collected, and identified opportunities. Current and former school principals in regional, rural and remote NSW, leading researchers and community practitioners on resilience and education, policymakers, and stakeholder groups were consulted throughout. While the Institute managed the process around the project and took leadership over the report's final design, its content is a product of genuine collaboration between those involved.

Utilising the Institute's applied policy research approach, this project's primary information sources are:

- **Desktop research** drawing together academic sources, "grey" literature and other public information.
- **Consultations** with expert advisory group members, principals, researchers and practitioners on education and community resilience, community representatives, and stakeholder groups.
- **Workshop event** held on 23 June 2022 with key stakeholders and experts on regional, rural and remote education and community resilience.

The scope of this project meant that it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive survey of regional, rural and remote schools in NSW. Nor was it possible to meaningfully consider and engage with every existing program, initiative or other piece of work that might already be occurring in NSW – whether led by government, the community, or others.

The primary audience for this report is policymakers, with the insights and opportunities calibrated to focus on system-level reform and investments. At the same time, this report is also intended to be a useful resource for schools (especially principals), community leaders, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Contributors

Project team

- JMI project director and project manager
- Dr Timothy Heffernan, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of New South Wales
- Two representatives of the NSW Department of Education, Regional, Rural and Remote Education Unit

Expert advisory group (EAG)

- Two principals of regional, rural or remote schools in NSW
- Professor Rebekah Grace, Western Sydney University; Dr Pam Joseph, University of Sydney; and Professor Carol Mutch, University of Auckland
- Two NSW Department of Education representatives and one Resilience NSW representative

Consultations

- Nine units across the NSW Department of Education and Department of Regional NSW with responsibility for, or a policy focus on, regional, rural and remote schools or communities
- Twelve leading academic researchers
- More than ten current or former principals of regional, rural or remote schools
- Nine community or interest group representatives and resilience practitioners

Explanatory statement on authorship

The James Martin Institute for Public Policy is a nonpartisan, independent research organisation which does not adopt an institutional view on specific policy issues. The findings and opportunities identified in this report reflect the calibrated, collective view of the project team, which operated under a highly collaborative model.

Its view was formed on the basis of an evaluation of relevant academic research, stakeholder consultations, and engagement with relevant experts, including the expert advisory group (EAG). It does not necessarily reflect the views of the individuals or organisations involved, or of the James Martin Institute for Public Policy, its Board, funders, or other partners.

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