

**A critical issue  
for rural  
medical families  
is the education  
of their  
children.**

*The choice:  
  
Local  
Boarding ....or,  
Home schooling.*

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## EDUCATION

A crucial issue for rural medical families is the education of their children. Many make the decision to educate their primary aged children in local schools and then move back to a city for secondary education. Others 'bite the bullet' and send their children off to boarding school.

This education issue is often a topic of discussion at RMFN events and at one meeting a number of issues were identified. A discussion of these issues formed the basis for this paper.

1. The **variety of educational opportunities**, particularly at a secondary level, in small rural schools is either limited or must be accessed other than through the local school, as might be the expectation in many city schools.

### **How families can choose to address this issue:**

#### **(a) Local Strategies: to enhance your child's education at a State Secondary College - again these are drawn from the experience of rural medical families and they have worked for them.**

- *Get yourself on the school council and promote the development of new opportunities within school - parents have a very powerful voice in schools nowadays*
- *Distance education (through the school) to provide a wider variety of subject choice.*
- *Pick up local TAFE course (evenings) if available*
- *Local private teachers for tutoring or assisting with distance education*
- *Local tutors / mentors with special skills*
- *Community / youth groups access special programs*

### **A rural medical couple comment on their decision to keep their children at local schools:**

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*We decided to send our children to local schools.*

*We chose a private primary school with religious leanings, good morals and ethics, small class sizes and a happy family atmosphere. For this we paid moderate fees and were extremely pleased with the results.*

*For secondary education we also chose to send our boys locally. Neither they nor we wanted boarding school. Nor did either of us want 2.5 -3 hours daily on a bus to a neighbouring town. The local school we chose is an ecumenical school of a reasonable size, which again charged moderate fees.*

*The benefits of having our boys close meant our availability to be involved in extra vocational educational training. They received a good academic education as well as access to sport and music. We were then able to enjoy having them at home and to be involved in their lives and activities easily. We may wonder if they may have achieved higher academically if we had sent them away to school but as this wasn't an option for us, we are happy with the balance we have provided.*

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(b) **Boarding Schools** are widely available in both rural and urban Victoria and although considered expensive are not necessarily all out of the realm of possibility for GPs. This option has and is being widely used by rural GP families.

The following are some comments from children of rural medical families:

- **Take heart from the experience of others - it's not as bad as you may think!**

*At boarding school after I had been there for a few months, I learnt to appreciate the things you take for granted at home. Just the small things that we forget are important like having people that you feel comfortable talking to, home cooked meals and flexibility in your life that is not so based on a strict rule system (e.g., no specific time for lights out etc).*

- **Boarding school children learn valuable independence skills early and make the transition to tertiary education more easily.**

*I found that I gained skills in my independence. I was certainly not independent at first but I was definitely more so than day students.*

*Boarding school was presented to me as a great opportunity to get out in the big wide world, not get stuck(!) in a little country town the rest of my life, so I looked forward to it rather than feared it.*

*Living in the country has always meant leaving town to go to uni, so boarding school was a step in that direction, making the final move (interstate in my case) a whole lot easier.*

*Overall I think boarding school gave me independence and better opportunities, and if I found myself in the same situation I wouldn't hesitate to send my children to boarding school*

- **Boarding school children make long and lasting friendships.**

*The friendships that I did make were very strong ones and boarding students tend to always have a strong feeling of unity.*

*It was challenging to be sent away from friends to a foreign place full of strangers, but everyone was in the same boat and you can't help but make friends when you live with the people you go to school with.*

- **Boarding schools are usually located in larger centres where there is better entertainment, shopping, restaurants, theatre etc. You may find you really look forward to your school visits and the area may have more to offer your child.**

*Living close to school, may sound horrible to some but at least I didn't lose 1-2 hours stuck on a bus in the afternoon. This is great as you have much more time in the afternoon for things you enjoy. I couldn't think of anything worse than returning home from school at dusk with all of 10 minutes outside before it got dark.*

- **There is an opportunity to meet another group of parents who may offer you an extended social circle outside that of your own town.**

- **Your child may have the chance to develop skills you may not even have anticipated.**

*I think you certainly learn good skills such as putting up with people you don't particularly like. If you have a problem with someone you have to deal with it because you live with them 24/7! It doesn't seem important until you start in a workplace where someone has something against you. It is a great skill to be able to ignore someone without them realizing!*

## 2. Limited Subject Choice

The smaller rural schools can often only offer a relatively limited **range of subjects and special interest subjects**, which may not always suit your child. This does not have to mean that they will be ultimately disadvantaged. Some small schools may choose to specialise in at least one area e.g. music and may offer a more dynamic programme than some bigger schools - and at limited extra cost!

### Addressing this issue:

Take advantage of and hunt out the extra curricular opportunities - outside school activities that supplement academic/educational opportunities

- needs to be collaborative - with the parents involved and if something (such as a language/musical instrument) is not available in your town be prepared to travel more widely to access these services -you may be able to combine this with shopping/library visit/other interests for yourself
- access facilities outside of school such as a local library or computer facilities available in the town e.g. at a Neighbourhood centre, usually available in even the smaller towns.

3. **Standards of education** vary between the states and internationally. Clearly international differences are to be expected, as even the timing of the school year is different. It is more frustrating that all the Australian states and territories have different calendars and different approaches to teaching and examining. This can make it difficult for families planning interstate moves.

### Addressing this issue:

Lobby your politicians!

Information and planning is the key. RMFN plans to provide links to each state's Board of Studies or equivalent so that interstate and international GP families can become informed prior to their move.

4. **Culturally specific education** is an issue for medical families coming to Australia from other countries and is limited in its availability in rural Australia.

### Addressing this issue:

- use of the internet, local knowledge, word of mouth, to obtain information about extra curricular culturally specific activities which may take place in holiday time or on weekends.

5. Children **isolated in class** - a social issue for children of doctors particularly in small towns where they may 'stand out' socially or,

- Teacher's expectations can be unfairly high i.e. the 'doctors child should be clever'.
- Like-minded children - in smaller schools a lack of children with similar opportunities or very different background can lead to problems.

### Addressing this issue:

- Always talk to the school first. This can be a form of bullying and this is an issue that schools are addressing carefully and effectively
- Talk to other parents and seek support from other rural medical spouses - many have 'been there' before you
- Use the facility offered by RMFN counselling service to discuss strategies to help the family

6. Children of **high intellectual potential** (which is common to all rurally schooled children and families) may not be well provided for in a rural school where there are no special programmes set up.

- If you have the drive, approach the school and advocate for change.
- Use local mentors/private teachers to provide additional stimulation.
- Look out for special interest programmes in your town or close by towns, which may offer your child with greater challenges.
- Remember that in smaller schools with the right personnel the teacher to child ratio may work in your child's favour.