

## **Regional secondary school consolidation: A rationale and study protocol**

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This paper describes and justifies the protocol for a research project investigating regional secondary school consolidation reforms in New South Wales, Australia. The study is designed to describe the experiences of those directly involved in the transition to a consolidated school in a way that has so far eluded educational leadership researchers. Identifying five themes from the international literature on school consolidation (leadership and governance; staff and student wellbeing; teaching and learning; curriculum and pathways; community satisfaction), the paper then articulates a systematic research protocol for examining the transition from individual schools through to a consolidated school. Previous studies have not systematically examined this transition and how it shifts practices and perceptions from different stakeholder perspectives. Using a purposeful merger of quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence, this study protocol has the potential to play a defining role in the area of school consolidation reforms. The applicability of the study design holds promise as an adaptable, focused, and sustainable protocol for generating understanding of school consolidation transitions and developing an empirical evidence base that is localised, internationally benchmarked, and critical for school decisions about investments and outcomes for educators, students, and communities.

### **Introduction**

Research methods texts, be they special issues of journals (e.g., Brooks & Normore, 2015) or books (e.g., Briggs, Coleman, & Morrison, 2012; Lochmiller, 2018), demonstrate the diversity of research approaches in educational administration and leadership as a field of inquiry. Despite this body of work on research methods and approaches, there are very few papers published in educational leadership journals that argue for and articulate research design and protocols for projects without necessarily reporting empirical data. This is not to say that such information is excluded in papers reporting empirical work rather, that it remains peripheral to the reporting of research. There is some recent evidence in the broader education research community (e.g., Gore, Smith, Bowe, Ellis, Lloyd & Lubans, 2015) and in more experimental / interventional research (e.g., Lubans et al., 2017), but an absence in educational leadership. This paper is explicitly aimed at this gap by articulating, justifying, and defending a research design and protocol for a study of regional secondary school consolidation in Australia (but applicable to other contexts).

### **The research**

#### **Aims and background**

Educational equity, access and quality in regional, rural, and remote centres have emerged as serious social problems in an age of economic and social disparity and instability

(Corbett, 2016). Ten per cent or 392,559 students attend schools in regional, rural and remote Australia (Halsey, 2018). Ensuring a quality education for these students is important to improve not only educational outcomes but also health, employment, wages, social inclusion, and reduce crime incarceration and teenage pregnancy (Sullivan, McConney & Perry, 2018).

Recent analysis has shown that closing the human capital gap between metropolitan and regional, rural and remote Australia would increase national gross domestic product (GDP) by 3.3 per cent, or \$56 billion (Holden & Zhang, 2018). That is larger than the contribution of the entire tourism industry. The Australian government has recognised this potential and budget estimates show an increase of 74.6 per cent in funding, from \$3.9 billion to \$6.8 billion in the period 2017-2027 to explicitly target improving education in regional, rural and remote locations. However, the OECD notes that increasing funding alone is not enough. What is required are targeted and tailored interventions to achieve maximum return on investment.

Throughout Australia, and hastened courtesy of the *Review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools* (Gonski et al., 2018) and the *Independent review into regional, rural and remote education* (Halsey, 2018), governments and school systems are currently engaging in substantial activity designed to improve equity, access and achievement in rural, regional and remote education (e.g., CESE, 2013a, 2013b; Halsey, 2017). Much of this activity involves attracting and retaining teachers and leaders (CESE, 2013a; Downes & Roberts, 2018), personal and professional challenges (e.g., Drummond & Halsey, 2013), and educational opportunity (Williams, 2013), but it is informed by research on equity and access compared to metropolitan centres (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). Analysis of 2017 *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) data shows that regional outcomes in Year 9 are equivalent to what urban students achieve in Year 7 (a two year gap) and for more rural / remote the gap is even further (equivalent to Year 5, a four year gap). Higher School Certificate (HSC) data has regional and rural students ranking in the top bands of performance at one third of the rate (5% and 4% respectively) of their urban peers (14%). Regional secondary students are 10.6% behind on attendance and enrol a higher proportion of disadvantaged students than major cities (see: Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, [cese.nsw.gov.au](http://cese.nsw.gov.au)). This project focuses on how these problems are being redefined via education reforms seeking to 'lead' under-engaged and/or under-achieving populations through regional secondary school consolidation.

The study aims to:

1. Investigate the relative impact of, and relationship among, leadership and governance, staff and student well-being, teaching and learning, curriculum pathways, and community satisfaction factors that influence the consolidation of regional secondary schools in contemporary Australia (and elsewhere);
2. Understand how school consolidation interventions shape, and are shaped by, organisational practices and educational outcomes;
3. Develop principles for school-based and systemic interventions designed to increase equity and excellence outcomes for students in regional locations.

School consolidation can mean many things. Killeen and Sipple (2000) argued that consolidation refers to the 'process of dissolving or reorganising one or more schools/school districts into one new unit' (p. 4). Focusing on schools currently undergoing the transition of separate to consolidated schools this study goes beyond an analysis of factors associated with school consolidation to illuminate *how*, *why*, and *when* such reforms shape attitudes and outcomes during the process of consolidation. The research questions are:

- Q1. What is the relative impact of, and relations among, leadership and governance, staff and student wellbeing, teaching and learning, curriculum pathways, and community satisfaction on newly formed regional consolidated secondary schools?
- Q2. To what extent do school consolidation reform practices solidify or transform at key tipping points in the consolidation process?
- Q3. Do different groups (e.g., school leadership, teachers, staff, community members) solidify practices earlier than other groups, and if so, in what ways?
- Q4. Is there a different interplay between the case study schools and published empirical research from longer serving consolidated regional secondary schools in the USA, Canada, and China?
- Q5. In light of findings Q1-Q4, when and how should systemic interventions address equity and quality issues relating to the consolidation of schools, and what principles should guide these interventions?

Despite a volume of literature on school consolidation: (i) relatively little is known about how school consolidation interventions recast school practices; (ii) there are few longitudinal studies that have determined at what point/s practices take shape or solidify during school consolidation reforms; (iii) little attention has been paid to the interplay of factors; and (iv) few investigations of regional secondary school reform, nationally or internationally, have been undertaken in collaboration with schools, with a view to designing interventions aimed at addressing equity and excellence in educational provision.

This study is designed to address these gaps in knowledge and practice by focusing on recent policy moves to consolidate regional public secondary schools in New South Wales, Australia (NSW). No study nationally, or internationally, has explicitly focused on the five themes of leadership and governance, staff and student wellbeing, teaching and learning, curriculum and pathways, and community satisfaction in schools currently undergoing the transition to school consolidation. Through the longitudinal approach to this under-researched area across the period of pre-consolidation and through the first three years of consolidation this study is designed to address these evidence gaps in knowledge and practice with the goal of informing the design of equity-based interventions.

## Literature review

There is a long history of school consolidation in the USA dating back to the 1800s (DeYoung & Howley, 1990; Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011) and a recent significant trend in China (Haibo, 2013; Xianzuo, 2013). It is however a global phenomenon with examples from Denmark (Beuchert, Humlum, Nielsen & Smith, 2016; De Haan, Leuven & Oosterbeek, 2016), Canada (Green, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), and Australia (the focus of this paper) among others. The challenge, despite the breadth of examples is that the configuration of consolidation and its role in the ongoing generation of rural and regional communities is very particular and attempts to transfer knowledge across time and space is highly problematic.

School consolidation in all locations has been, and continues to be, a controversial topic (Mei, Fang & Yuanyan, 2013; Sell & Leistriz, 1997). Historically, school consolidation has resulted in the loss of a local school for one or more communities and increases in travel time for students – if not relocation (Holland, Baritelle & White, 1976; Sell & Leistriz, 1997). This is made more problematic for public schools as the notion of public education is based on the ideal of educating the masses irrespective of background or status (Alsbury & Shaw, 2005). The image of the local school is of great importance in rural and regional education (Elliott, 2012) as it is central to the history of townships and any loss impacts on community identity, particularly where changes in agriculture and commerce have driven many people into cities (Blauwkamp, Longo & Anderson, 2011; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

Early debates on school consolidation in the USA centred on transport costs for families (Holland et al., 1976), but more recently debates have focused on the optimum school size (Monk & Haller, 1993) and issues of quality, educational opportunity, financial burden, dropout, and risk (Ailei & Zhihui, 2013). Irrespective of global location, school consolidation is a broad term applied to describe the combining of schools and has had a significant impact on the landscape of public education in regional, rural, and remote locations (Nitta, Holley & Wrobel, 2010).

School consolidation is a complex and long process (Hongyong & Fenfen, 2013). Often the rationale for consolidation is framed as the contemporary paradox of providing equal educational opportunity while reducing spending (Blauwkamp et al., 2011; Nitta et al., 2010; Williams, 2013). Increasing students' educational opportunities and reducing fiscal burden on the state has been central to school consolidation dialogue and debate, however since the 1970s in the USA there has been mounting evidence of no significant advantage for school consolidation on either measure (Streifel, Foldes & Holman, 1991).

The analysis of school consolidation and its effects is challenging due to the contextual factors differing so much between cases (De Haan et al., 2016). While there are some attempts (e.g., Berry & West, 2010; Liu, Zhang, Luo, Rozelle & Loyalka, 2010), regional, rural, and remote education research exists on the periphery of education research literatures (Schafft, 2016).

## **Leadership and governance**

A key point of interest is how school leaders make decisions that support the educational needs of students and are financially responsible. The re-organisation of schools through consolidation processes means the reallocation of resources for the purposes of school improvement (Xianzuo, 2013), and for regional schools there is a need for school leaders to be carefully attuned to the education role of schools and the ways in which schools represent a critical element of communities, economic development, sustainability, and social wellbeing (Schafft, 2016).

We therefore know that school size matters – although there is no perfect size – and has significant implications on how decisions are made and who gets consulted. The overarching tension is in balancing increasing educational opportunity with responsible financial decisions. As a consolidated school, there are challenges and opportunities that are distinct from traditional secondary schools – particularly during the transition to consolidation – and this has a major impact on how school leadership and governance is perceived. What is important in studying the consolidation process is a need to understand how the existing schools operate in relation to decision making and consultation. This includes the relations between the principal, executive leadership team, teaching and support staff, students, and the broader community (e.g., Aboriginal Education Consultative Group). This is necessary to describe changes during the transition to a consolidated school and its early years of operation.

## **Staff and student wellbeing**

With substantial attention dedicated to what school consolidation means for school organisation and its impact on communities, relatively little is known about how consolidation affects educators and students (Nitta et al., 2010). There is some evidence that consolidation leads to improved working conditions for educators (DeYoung, 1995). However, there is conflicting evidence that consolidation raises stress, turnover, fear, and uncertainty in staff (McHugh & Kyle, 1993). These issues are particularly prevalent in the first few years of consolidation. Key factors include the perception that consolidation was top-down reform rather than necessary, and perceived increases in work, work pressure, and more diverse duties (Qingyang, 2013). There is a small evidence base that students adapt better to the new school environment than teachers and are more likely to participate in a greater diversity of social and academic opportunities (Nitta et al., 2010). The first few years appear to be a major hinge point in staff and student wellbeing during school consolidation reforms, especially with an underlying ‘us and them’ orientation between the school groups coming together that takes time and effort to break down.

To understand any changes in staff and student wellbeing, it is important to ascertain baseline data in the lead up to school consolidation. This is required for measuring changes in feelings of support, identity, sense of belonging, and pride in the new school. Additionally, it is important to match this data with demographics (e.g., original school site) to engage effectively with interventions and any underlying issues.

## Teaching and learning

Well-rehearsed arguments in the literature stress the lower levels of student performance in regional, rural and remote schools, and the difficulties of attracting and retaining quality staff (Bauch, 2001; McKenzie, Weldon, Rowley & Murphy, 2014; Monk & Haller, 1993). As a result of differences in the availability of staff, regional schools tend to have younger and less experienced staff. This raises many questions about how best to support the development and ongoing learning of teachers. Regional schools tend to be smaller than metropolitan schools. This school size issue, or more specifically the effects of school size, are unequal across areas of the curriculum, making the pursuit of equity through school size problematic (Monk & Haller, 1993). There is a lack of research examining the effect of school consolidation on student achievement (Mei et al., 2013). Some research from the 1990s in the USA found that consolidation gives differing results across subject areas. For example, they found that consolidation gave greater benefit for remedial groups in mathematics but in English it was of most benefit for high achieving (gifted and talented) students.

A key rationale for consolidation is to improve the educational outcomes for students. However, mixed results have been reported as to whether school consolidation achieves this end. This may be the result of not addressing the underlying reasons for under-performance. To better understand changes in teaching and learning during the consolidation reform, there is a need to engage with school and system level student performance data. This will provide the basis upon which any changes in performance can be measured. In addition, it is important to gauge the degree of support staff feel towards improving student performance outcomes. In this way, interventions can be tailored and targeted towards improving student outcomes rather than an assessment of individual teachers – something which a substantial body of literature indicates has a negative effect on staff morale.

## Curriculum and pathways

With improved educational outcomes so too follows increased opportunities for students through enhanced curriculum and post-school pathways. There is an evidence base that post-consolidation schools can offer a broader curriculum for students than if not consolidated (Monk & Haller, 1993). Some evidence exists that conflicts with the positive reports of curriculum enrichment post-consolidation in arguing that the underlying issues of educational disadvantage are not addressed through consolidation (Nitta et al., 2010; Self, 2001). This is particularly the case when schools are consolidated but nothing changes other than school names and/or sites. What becomes problematic is when consolidation is done for efficiencies or economies of scale, therefore reducing fiscal matters, but educational issues become peripheral. Further, complicating such matters are the enduring problem for regional (rural and remote) education where schools are often exporters of talent (Schafft, 2016). There is evidence from the USA that transition programs (work-integrated learning) with local businesses can be effective in reducing out-migration of youth (Bauch, 2001). In particular, this trend has been focused on investigating how local businesses can provide programs that provide opportunities for

youth to transition into work locally. The overarching goal is to ease the school to work transition and the skills and motivation necessary to stay local for post-school employment.

Increased pathways, if matched with student performance, are reported to increase the educational opportunities for students and post-schooling destinations. In addition, consolidating schools allows for an economy of scale in investment on facilities. Improved facilities have been found to benefit both students and the broader community, increasing the attractiveness of the consolidated school and helping to build a positive school-community relationship. To understand changes in curriculum and pathways requires data on current offerings and enrolment in subjects and school / system data on post-school destination. This is vital for mapping any changes in offerings, and uptake, achieved through consolidation and any shifts in post-school destinations for students.

### **Community satisfaction**

Economic and political pressures often overshadow any understanding of cultural or community orientated satisfaction and/or loss during school consolidation (LaRosa, 2013). The intersection of school and community is important, particularly in non-urban centres. Regional schools are just one of several types of services and businesses considered important to a community's infrastructure (Sell & Leistriz, 1997). Significantly, school and community partnerships are an appropriate means by which regional school communities can improve their educational processes (Bauch, 2001). Although there is substantial research on school-community links, less attention has been devoted to seeing schools as development catalysts (Schafft, 2016). It has long been recognised that a good school is an important factor in the possible future economic development of a community (Sell & Leistriz, 1997).

The perception of the broader community regarding the quality of education provision is a key factor in the employability of graduates and the recruitment / retention of students. To better understand changes, if any, in the perception of the broader community there is a need to explicitly seek their thoughts and opinions via appropriate public forums.

### **The NSW consolidation reforms**

The NSW public school system (the largest in Australia) is currently undertaking experiments in school leadership and governance in rural and regional education through school consolidation. The remit and responsibilities of those working in these schools varies in terms of organisational structure, scope, and scale making comparison between the schools currently in transition within the system difficult yet alone across systems and countries. Despite this, the NSW government has committed \$300 million to regional education and considerable infrastructure and personnel costs to school consolidation experiments. The current reforms are distinct from previous collegiate reforms (frequently multiple 7-10 campuses and a single 11-12 campus) which remain in existence in a number of regional and urban / metropolitan locations across the state. The current version of regional secondary school consolidation in NSW takes three forms:

- (i) A new purpose built school. Undertaking considerable infrastructure expenditure to build a new purpose-built high school bringing together the two current public high schools in a regional town.
- (ii) A refurbished school. Bringing together two previous schools into a significantly refurbished build on the site of one of the existing schools.
- (iii) The two sites one school model. Reforms bringing together two existing public high schools into a single school operating over two sites (existing high schools). The new 'one school, two sites' model will operate with a single name, uniform, an executive principal, and will enable all students to have access to a wide range of subject options and school facilities.

In whatever form of consolidation is proposed, there are considerable implications for the organisation of schools and that is the focus of this study. Combining the literature on school consolidation and the specific NSW reforms, the conceptual framework for this study is depicted in Figure 1. It integrates the five areas of: leadership and governance; staff and student wellbeing; teaching and learning; curriculum and pathways; and community satisfaction.

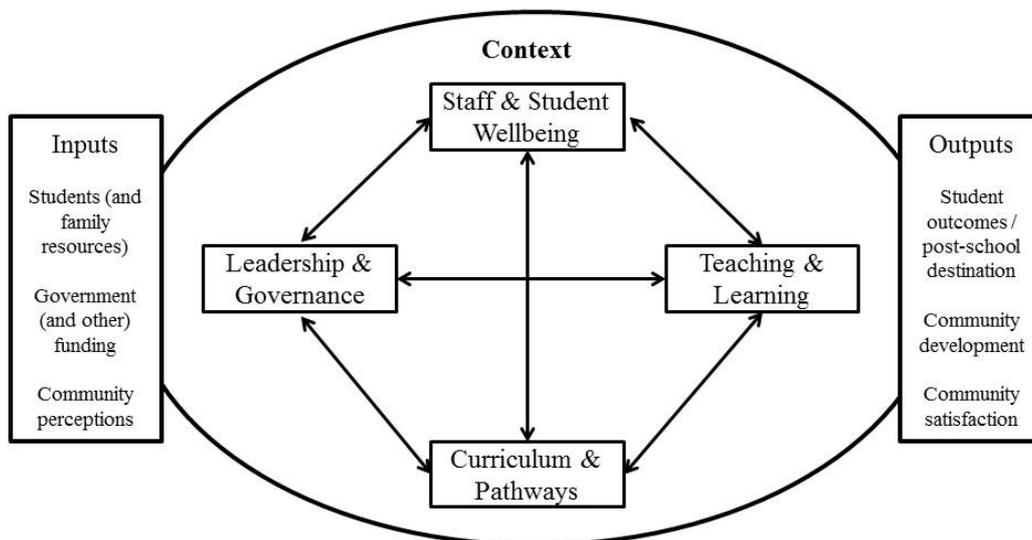


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the reform

## Study design

This project is designed to understand regional secondary school consolidation and how it plays out in different forms in NSW, for the purpose of developing principles for school-based and systemic interventions to increase equity and excellence in outcomes for students from regional locations. The study will take place in NSW regional secondary schools currently transitioning to consolidation. As an overall approach, the goal is to achieve a wide (quantitative) poll of students and teachers from existing systemic data and



Table 1. Overview of research design, data generation, and timing

Theme	Key evaluation question	Information required	Data sources	Method of data generation / retrieval	Strength of data
Leadership and governance	What is the perceived efficiency and effectiveness of the practices of the school leadership team?	Views from a wide range of stakeholders on the effectiveness and efficiency of school leadership	Primary source (principal, executive, teachers, systemic staff, P&C, SRC, AECG)	Interviews (using existing protocols developed by the researcher) Focus groups	Interview / focus group schedule include test for internal validity to maximise quality of data
	What is the perceived effectiveness and efficiency of the new governance model?	Views of a wide range of stakeholders on the governance of the new school model.	Primary source (principal, executive, P&C, SRC, AECG)  Secondary source (organisational charts, school plans, meeting minutes)	Interviews (using existing protocols developed by the researcher)  Document analysis against rationale for consolidation	Schedule includes test for internal validity to maximise quality data  Test of coherence between espoused approach and plans / reports
Staff and student wellbeing	To what extent do staff feel supported, engaged, and empowered in the decision making of the school?	Views of all staff on the level of support, engagement, and empowerment	Primary source (teachers, support staff, administrative staff)	Questionnaire (demographic data). What do you think of school [TIMSS], Sense of belonging [PISA], Academic motivation [PISA], Perceived teacher support [TIMSS])	Use of validated scales from PISA / TIMSS  Benchmarking against national and OECD averages
	To what extent do students feel a sense of belonging, pride in school, and personal achievement?	Views of students on sense of belonging, pride in school, and personal achievement	Primary source (students)	Questionnaire (demographic data, Working with other teachers [TIMSS], Emphasis on academic success [TIMSS], Being a teacher [TIMSS])	Use of validated scales from TIMSS  Benchmarking against national and OECD averages

Teaching and learning	To what level do teachers / support staff feel supported by an explicit performance and development model?	Views of teaching and support staff on the level of support through performance and development model	Primary source (teachers, support staff) Secondary source (compliance data and annual reviews)	Questionnaire Focus group Self-evaluation Accreditation data School-based data	Multi-source data to triangulate claims of levels of support, performance, and impact on educational outcomes
	To what extent do improved assets and facilities deliver better pedagogy and student outcomes?	Resource usage data and evidence of changes in pedagogy	Primary source (resource usage data, teachers)	School-based data Focus group	Trend data to correlate with curriculum offerings, student performance data
	Have levels of student performance data changed following consolidation?	Data on student performance	Primary source (student performance data)	School-based data Systemic data <i>MySchool</i> data	Data will enable benchmarking with sector on value-added measures
Curriculum and pathways	Does the provision and uptake of subject choices change following consolidation?	Data on subject offerings and student uptake	Primary source (subject offerings and enrolment data)	School-based data Focus groups	School and systemic data will enable benchmarking with sector and trends overtime
	Is there a change in the post-school destination of graduates following consolidation?	Post-school destination data	Primary source (post-school destination data)	School data System data	School and systemic data will enable benchmarking with sector and trends overtime
Community satisfaction	Is there a change in the retention of students following consolidation?	Student retention data	Primary source (student retention data)	School-based data	School and systemic data will enable benchmarking with sector and trends overtime
	Has the perception of stakeholders on the quality of provision changed following consolidation?	Wide range of views on the quality of provision	Primary source (parent, business community, local government)	Focus groups Phone survey ( $n=100$ )	Trend data to correlate with enrolment, performance and post-school destination data

## Outcomes

This project will deliver empirical knowledge exploring newly consolidated secondary school in contemporary regional NSW. This project will bring rigorous and robust data generated with school staff into conversation and international comparison with cases from the USA (e.g., Bard, Gardener & Wieland, 2006), Canada (e.g., Green, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), and China (e.g., Ailei & Zhihui, 2013) to map similarities, dissimilarities, and transformations in the organising of regional schools. In the case of Canada, it is particularly timely given moves in Ontario – as part of its Plan to Strengthen Rural and Northern Education – to allocate \$600,000 in 2016-2017 and then a further \$1.2 million to support consolidation projects. This will deliver comparative empirical knowledge that can be leveraged to better organise regional secondary schools for the reality of contemporary society.

## Discussion

By investigating the interplay leadership and governance, staff and student wellbeing, teaching and learning, curriculum and pathways, and community satisfaction, using a purposeful merger of quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence, this study has the potential to play a defining role in the area of school consolidation reforms. Previous studies have not systematically examined the transition from individual schools through to consolidated school and how it shifts practices and perceptions from different stakeholder perspectives. Even long-term studies tracking outcomes from school consolidation (e.g., Beuchert et al., 2016; Saxi, 2017) have not captured the problems and possibilities of transitioning in situ. Without such evidence, reforms and policy interventions are based on correlations of school consolidation and various outcomes such as student outcomes (Liu et al., 2010; Mei et al., 2013), per-pupil expense (Cooley & Floyd, 2013; Cox & Cox, 2010), travel times (Zhao & Barakat, 2015), and adult wages (Berry & West, 2010). Somewhat removed from the changes throughout the transition process, policy makers, systemic authorities, and school leaders do not have the evidence for how best to achieve sustainable reform and improvements in outcomes. This is of heightened interest and importance given that school consolidation has been a controversial reform agenda (Bard et al., 2006; Nitta et al., 2010) and there is no compelling evidence that it brings about desired outcomes at scale.

The approach offered in this paper is open to appropriation in other jurisdictions nationally and internationally to further advance the evidence base for consolidation reforms. As large-scale projects in educational administration and leadership such as the *International Successful School Principalship Project* (Drysdale & Gurr, 2017) have shown, the development of robust project design can facilitate the growth and expansion of research to a global scale (and overtime). There is nothing to stop this project from expanding to include other schools and systems engaging in school consolidation. Furthermore, the interview / focus group schedule could be adapted to accommodate other forms of school reform. The ongoing development of such an evidence base is critical for government, system, and school decisions about investments and outcomes for educators, students, and communities.

## Conclusion

This paper describes and justifies the protocol for a research project investigating regional secondary school consolidation reforms in NSW, Australia. The study is designed to describe the experiences of those directly involved in the transition to a consolidated school in a way that has so far eluded educational administration and leadership researchers. For the NSW Department of Education and other potential end-users, the applicability of the study design holds promise as an adaptable, focused, and sustainable protocol for generating understanding of school consolidation transitions and developing empirical data that is both localised and internationally benchmarked (through the use of scales from PISA and TIMSS). In doing so, it offers a productive means of contributing to whole system and school level reform initiatives.

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