

What can we learn from country kids? Children’s Commissioner Helen Connolly seeks to find out

Many are driving by 8 and show resilience kids in the city lack – now country students are delivering a message to the state worth listening to.

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Tintinara Area School’s Jack Wait, Charlie Vandeleur, Eva Zadow and Tansu Mpandamabula chat about what they love most – as well as some of the challenges – of country life. Picture: Tori Connor.

There’s a special mission underway in South Australia to find out what matters most to children across the state, no matter where they live.

This week, the Commissioner for Children and Young People’s Student Voice Postcard initiative reaches the grain-growing and sheep-farming area of the Murray Mallee.

It’s the third year the project, which involves delivering postcards to every SA primary school to invite insights from students, has been rolled out and

Commissioner Helen Connolly is hoping it'll be the most successful yet, attracting responses from 70 per cent of kids.

“This will enable us to really get an insight into the changing situation with nuance and detail related to the state’s diversity of locations and experiences ... it’s important to capture and understand unique differences between children living in different communities so that my advocacy can focus on the most important issues, which aren’t always the same across the state,” she said.

“So far, key themes include the importance of being listened to, having family, friends and kind adults, being healthy, looking after the environment and animals, and making sure everyone has the support they need at school and money to afford school.

“While these key themes are similar to those from previous years, other responses show children’s knowledge and concern about more recent global events, including some comments about the situation in Afghanistan.”

Tintinara Area School principal Jacqui Vandeleur said it was vital to consider the views and perspectives of country kids.



Tintinara Area School students Charlie, Tansu, Jack and Eva chat with principal Jacqui Vandeleur about what matters most to them. Picture: Tori Connor

“The voice of children in country areas is very different to our city counterparts however what we do see and hear is just as important as city students,” she said.

Mrs Vandeleur said regional and [rural students faced unique challenges](#).

“The accessibility to services that city children can access is drastically reduced (and) we face this daily with a lack of agencies coming into country areas,” she said.

“The availability to access the wide range of sports that are available to city children ... children who want to pursue more than the local football and netball competition need to travel large distances for these other sports.”

However, she said her students had skills many city kids didn't.

“The level of resilience we see from our country kids is amazing and their ‘can do’ attitude to just get in and do the job is something they should be proud of,” Mrs Vandeleur said.

“It is not uncommon for an 8-year-old to tell us how they can drive the ute while getting sheep in ... or, help their parents out during shearing time, collect honey from the bee hives.”

“In our school everyone knows everyone and can put a name to every face.”

What country kids say

The best thing about living in regional SA?

Charlie: Everyone knows each other which is kind of cool. There are lots of opportunities for us to play sport.

Eva: The best thing is that we live in the country and it is a good community. Everyone is happy and it is very spacious.

Jack: There is a lot of room to run around.

Tansu: The best thing is probably seeing all of my friends and being able to do all of the things I like doing.

What do you think city kids could learn from country kids?

Charlie: To go outside more and have fun. Be more creative with what you've got around you.

Eva: That it is really nice in the country and you can see all of the stars at night.

Jack: To get outside and enjoy being outside.

Tansu: I think that they could learn that life isn't always just about going to parks and zoos in the city, but it is also about learning about your culture and who you are.

Is there anything you feel you miss out on, living in the country? What are the things you would like better access to?

Charlie: You can't just walk to the shops or the footy oval. I wish we had a sports shop closer.

Eva: We don't have all the shops and facilities so if you are running out of clothes the closest place for us is Murray Bridge which takes us an hour and a half. It would be good if we had more shops.

Jack: No, I don't miss out on anything because we live in the country. Having more shops near us would be good.

Tansu: I feel like I miss out on going to exciting places as it is quite a long drive from here to the city. I think that I miss out on some of the sports that happen in the city as we can't always do them in the country.

If you were premier for the day, what would you do?

Charlie: It would be awesome if Australian cricketers, Adelaide Crows and Port Adelaide players could go into schools for a whole day and kick the footy and teach kids how to play these sports. I would also open the borders into Victoria so I can go and see my Nan and Pop and be able to go to NSW to see Aunty Hayley and meet my new cousin.

Eva: I would promise more money to country towns and communities because everything is focused on the city.

Jack: I would let people travel anywhere in Australia to see their families because at the moment they can't because of Covid.

Tansu: I would make sure that everyone gets to do whatever they want and do what they feel like doing. I would make them make their own rules and not be told to listen to the rules of other people.

Eva Zadow is 10, and in year 5; Charlie Vandeleur, 11, year 6; Jack Wait, 8, year 3 Tansu Mpandamabula, 9, year 3. All are in primary school at Tintinara Area School.

Commissioner's findings from previous postcards

What insights have you been able to previously glean from 'country kids' - how have their responses varied from region to region?

Children across regional South Australia value opportunities to play, to be heard and to spend time with animals and being active outdoors in the environment. Their hopes and dreams for the future are often tied to their own region and reflect their passion for sport, animals, 'making a difference' and keeping their families and communities healthy, happy, safe and fun. They want to help other people, as nurses, teachers, mechanics, police officers and firefighters; help animals, as vets, zoologists, animal protectors and rangers; and combine their digital skills with their desire to help others as gamers, game developers, and Twitch or YouTube streamers.

Murray and Mallee:

Children across the Murray and Mallee wrote about helping out around the house, on their farms, and in their communities. Fairness and kindness came up a lot, with many children wanting to make sure everyone can have 'a good life' and do anything 'no matter how much money they have'. They wanted to build local swimming pools, parks and other 'fun places', improve transport and bring more sporting events to the region. They also wrote about 'speaking up for kids' and allowing kids to vote, making sure everyone has good friends, and finding out what help they need to learn and have a good life. They were worried about drought and bushfires, and they drew pictures of their friends, wheat, and other crops, as well as of their pets and the animals they want to help.

In terms of the future, it was common for 8-12 year olds in the Murray and Mallee to want to 'have a YouTube channel', often alongside their 'day jobs' as chefs, business owners, tradies or builders, sports players or physiotherapists, police officer, hairdresser, teachers and vets.

Adelaide Hills:

Tweens in the Adelaide Hills care deeply for the environment and they enjoy having the freedom and energy to play with their friends and family. They wanted to see some of the 'city entertainment' come to the hills and more regular and affordable transport to help children participate in fun, active and creative activities. Their top job aspirations reflect their passion for the environment and animals, with many writing about living, rescuing, or working 'with lots of animals' as vets, doctors or scientists.

Yorke and Mid North:

Children in schools across the Yorke and Mid North region wrote about following their dreams, learning new skills and doing well at school. They treasure having time to play, particularly having 'water fights' and 'fun in mud' and 'out on the farm'. Making South Australia a better place involved upgrading roads and helping kids be physically and mentally healthy, including by giving them more freedom and more of a say - 'in parliament' as well as in their subject choices and library books.

Far North: Among the most important things for children across the Far North were 'getting a good education', 'exploring life', 'being cared for' and 'having all sorts of sporting opportunity'. They were concerned about drought and they wanted to see a big water park. They placed importance on making sure everyone had enough money to go to school, and they wanted to see changes to schools to improve buildings and better respond to bullying.

Barossa, Light and Lower North:

Community is very important to 8-12 year-olds in the Barossa, with their visions for a healthy community focused on greater connections to facilities, the internet and public transport. This included making roads safer and reducing traffic around congested areas and schools, as well as providing better public transport and better access to faster wifi, fun activities and sporting facilities.

Limestone Coast: Children in the Limestone Coast were keen to address unemployment and make school more affordable to ensure everyone's right to an education. Beyond school, many were keen to follow in their older family members' footsteps and run the farm or be a shearer. Sporting careers were also popular with many wanting more 'opportunities' and more 'help to pursue dreams'. One 11 year old suggested a 'country day for all of us kids to get outside with the cattle and sheep'.

Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island: Children in schools across the Fleurieu and Kangaroo Island wrote about helping the environment, animals, and people, particularly those affected by the bushfires or experiencing any kind of disadvantage. They also thought that improving roads and internet access, giving kids cheaper school uniforms and more of a say, and making it 'easier for people to play sport' would make things better for kids.

Eyre and Western: Hanging out with friends and family, particularly swimming, going to the beach, climbing trees, was important for children in schools across the Eyre and Western Region. Many children shared aspirations to help others in their community, particularly farmers and small business owners, as well as children and families who are struggling financially. Their top dream jobs ranged from tuna farming to professional footballers and builders, farmers, mechanics and miners.

- regional insights from Young People's Student Voice Postcard initiative in 2019 and 2020