

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Department of Education & Training

on the

Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

from the

Federal Council

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide the greatest challenges for improving provision of education options and pathways for children and families. Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote students requires a national approach that ensures educational delivery of a consistent high standard no matter where the education is provided. The financial cost to families educating children in rural and remote locations continues to rise and can be attributed to many leaving these areas.

Rural education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as fluctuating populations, economic influences, seasonal conditions and climate. It must be recognised that attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education would not be effective unless broader economic and social issues are also considered. In order to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of these students, inequity issues must be understood. Some of these children are not considered vulnerable because they are not impacted by extreme levels of poverty. Rather, due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to cover out of pocket costs for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education, which is not experienced by urban families.

While all Australian governments recognise the social and economic benefits of a high quality and equitable school education system, ICPA (Aust) continues to devote an enormous amount of volunteer hours holding relevant governments to account to address inequities. Much of this can be attributed to many programs not reaching locations where the programs are costly to administer and jurisdictions not providing additional funding to ensure program objectives are met. Poor communication services also impact greatly on what is available to students and while internet services continue to improve, access for rural students lags well behind that available in metropolitan areas.

Recommendations highlighting the need to focus on inequities in the educational outcomes of rural students which report them to be at least one and a half years behind their metropolitan peers, can be found in documents dating back many years. They mention the endemic problems facing rural and remote education, including significant studies providing guidance and direction to those formulating policy. Despite this, very little action has followed to ensure improvement in educational outcomes for all students in rural and remote Australia.

The direction which rural education must take is obvious if children living in rural and remote locations are to overcome the current educational inequities being experienced. Closing the rural and urban divide must be a priority focus for all children in our isolated communities, thus ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home.

Educational excellence in rural and remote Australia would see students engaged in their education choices, encouraged to pursue their educational aspirations, provided with adequate resources and the financial and emotional support to reach their potential and not be limited by their geographic location. Students, families, teachers and whole communities would work together with the support of government and policy makers, to ensure successful educational outcomes for all students.

Curriculum: ICPA (Aust) has welcomed a number of changes to the National Curriculum which have and will benefit rural students, including:

- **Phonics:** The mandated use of phonics and the introduction of the assessment of phonological awareness in Year 1 to enable early identification of potential learning difficulties.

- Agriculture in Education: The commitment to develop Agriculture in Education with the online teaching and learning resources being aligned to the Australian Curriculum learning areas, including science and geography.
- Work Studies Years 9–10¹

ICPA (Aust) members have expressed and supported the inclusion of driving practices in the curriculum including defensive driving practices, safe driving practices, car maintenance, basic first aid and obtaining a Learners' Permit.

Teachers should be teaching the subjects they have been trained to teach as the students rely on the knowledge and expertise of a teacher trained in that field.

Assessment:

NAPLAN Online: The fact that students will receive results to their tailored test in a matter of weeks, will benefit students enormously. The future ability of schools to determine when NAPLAN is taken will benefit rural and remote students as strategies may be implemented to address their needs early in the school year.

High Achievers: Equally important as addressing the needs of students who are performing well below the national benchmark, are the students being educated in rural and remote locations who are performing well above the school or national average. They should be supported in achieving their potential, particularly when there are very limited opportunities in small and often isolated communities.

Distance Education (DE): The success of distance education students reaching their aspirations and potential is reliant on the home tutor implementing DE materials on a daily basis in an effective, positive and competent manner. The value of the DE tutor needs to be recognised and acknowledged.

Care should be taken not to assume this platform meets the learning needs of all students in rural and remote locations. Learning via DE at the secondary level is not conducive to all learning styles. Students need to be independent, self-motivated learners if they are to achieve good results. Options for alternative teaching platforms must be accessible.

While the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) DE allowance assists with the setup and ongoing costs of DE schooling, families are required to fund the entire costs associated with providing a tutor. This may be a family member, often the mother who must forgo an income or necessitate the employment of additional staff for many years while the mother is in the classroom. The introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6 000 per family, per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a tutor performs, is a small cost considering for families who are filling a role the government cannot.

A common-sense approach in overcoming workforce shortages in isolated locations, would include:

- Child Carers able to work as DE tutors.
- Changes to the second year working holiday visas 417 and 462: rural work should include DE tutors/teachers or nannies in rural and remote areas and working for 6 months for one employer on a working holiday maker visa 417, they should be eligible to be granted another 6 months with that employer. These conditions would support the importance of continuity and consistency.
- A National Working with Children's Check (WWCC): The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check in every state is expensive and impedes teachers, volunteers and governesses from

¹ <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/work-studies/introduction/>

timely commencement of duties interstate. As per Royal Commission Report into Child Abuse², ICPA (Aust) recommends a National Working with Children's Check (WWCC) to enable workers to provide assistance to DE families interstate as well as providing assurance to families that these volunteers **can** be trusted on isolated properties with their children.

Teachers: The importance of preparing teachers for the rural and remote context cannot be underestimated. Preparation should include:

- mentorship
- rural and remote placements
- incentives to teach rurally
- leadership programs
- preparation for rural living and isolation from family, friends and colleagues

This is vital to ensure improved recruitment and retention of teachers and to achieve the optimum learning outcomes for the students. ICPA (Aust) believes education providers who offer teacher education courses, should implement a major in Rural and Remote Education and modules on teaching Specific Learning Needs such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders and Dyslexia. The course could cover a range of unique challenges requiring specific knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to rural and remote areas: multi-age classrooms, multi-age curriculum tools, web conferencing, online learning tools and strategies for coping with the unique dynamics that exist in small rural and remote communities and schools. As an adjunct, it is envisaged that students would complete rural and remote practicums ensuring graduate teachers would start their career with invaluable insight into the structure, practice and delivery methods of rural and remote education.

Specific learning needs and disabilities: Specific needs and learning disabilities require an appropriate level of skill, support and knowledge. It would ensure early recognition, identification, assessment and the implementation of specific learning needs education in small rural schools, DE schools and to support the DE tutors.

Rural and remote families require the following proposals to improve access to a high-quality education for students with specific education needs:

- Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties
- Universities that provide teacher training should include modules such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) and dyslexia in their curriculum. Training to include the recognition and delivery of curriculum adapted to these specific learning needs to build the teacher's capacity to assist and meet the needs and abilities of children with special needs or learning difficulties and assisting DE tutors.
- DE and small schools' teachers, support DE tutors with information and advice
- Workshops and seminars to assist students, families and teachers of children with specific learning needs, including for gifted children, to support gifted students emotionally, socially and academically.
- Ensure current funding models provide adequate funding for students with disabilities in boarding DE, and rural and remote schools.
- Regular, timely, affordable and appropriate access to special needs teachers and specialists such as speech pathologists, ophthalmologists and psychologists will further support rural and remote teachers in diagnosing and managing specific needs students. Ideally, having professionals who can straddle the health and education departments would allow access to professionals qualified

²<http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/getattachment/7ecd3db9-0b17-483e-9a0e-8fb247140f3e/Working-with-Children-Checks-Report>

to conduct assessments and make recommendations. Strong links between education and health sectors are vital for the best outcomes for students.

- Provision of incentives to attract and retain qualified professionals e.g. psychologists, behavioural therapists and speech therapists and specialised teachers to rural and remote areas to enable continuity of specific learning needs programs and assist teachers to develop management programs for students with specific needs.
- The cooperation of ALL relevant agencies (government, private and voluntary) is required. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) under-resourcing is likely to affect access to an appropriate education for rural and remote students. NDIS needs to cover reasonable travel and accommodation costs for geographically isolated families requiring away from home/school care/treatments/assessments. There needs to be clear guidelines around the parameters of these schemes and the responsibilities of the education system.
- Telehealth services are offering exciting opportunities for the delivery of services such as speech pathology, mental health consultations, occupational therapy intervention to aid fine motor skill development and even capacity building to support educators and parents dealing with children experiencing difficulties. Availability, accessibility and adoption of these technologies must be implemented as a matter of urgency to ensure excellence in rural and remote schooling and education.
- Medicare rebates – the expansion of Medicare rebates for online video conferencing consultations for rural and remote students to include Speech Language Pathology (SLP) via Telehealth delivery is a matter of urgency.

Retention of Teachers: The recruitment and retention of teachers including relief teachers in DE schools and small rural and remote schools is a long-standing issue. Teachers in rural and remote areas are often in a position to continue to provide relief and release teaching hours on a casual basis and to mentor new or young teachers.

However, the onerous requirements of education departments, often results in relief teachers being forced to let their Teacher Registration lapse, decreasing the availability of staff for relief or release teaching. Teachers should have simplified pathways to maintain their teaching eligibility and meet the requirements of ‘recency of practice’ for programs such as ‘Return to Teaching,’ particularly in rural and remote areas where availability of relief hours are small. These community members are essential for relief teaching, potentially more permanent positions in the future and to the viability of rural schools and rural communities.

Communications:

Mobile service coverage in rural and remote black spot areas: Mobile coverage is highly valued by rural and remote families who have it, as it affords a backup for the voice and data services of ‘On Air’ lessons when landlines or other internet sources are out and allows the continuation of distance education when travelling between home and town or away from their main schoolroom (i.e. in a stock camp).

Our member families also attend small rural schools and there are quite a few rural small schools which are not in mobile coverage areas and do not have access to adequate internet service for schoolwork, research, teacher assistance/mentoring, specific needs sessions or landlines for contact for teacher support, emergencies and general administration tasks of a school.

Education Port and Unmetered educational websites: The provision of an Education Port has been beneficial for those studying via DE however it needs to be extended to those studying at rural schools and to boarding school students during holiday breaks who are required to complete assessments.

The unmetering of educational websites by Telstra has assisted many families by reducing data usage significantly but needs to be extended to other providers.

Connectivity: Internet connectivity is the key to providing students with access to endless curriculum opportunities and extra-curricular endeavours. Students in rural and remote educational settings are not being provided with equivalent opportunities to virtual reality, afforded to urban children. Access to reliable and adequate internet, with regard to speed, quality, capabilities and cost of the service must be a priority for state and federal governments so that we can ensure the gap between urban and rural education does not continue to widen.

Telephony: Landline telephone services play a significant role in providing the voice services to accompany 'on air' lessons with teachers and classmates, additional lessons and liaising with teachers at the School of Distance Education Centre. For many geographically isolated DE students that live outside of mobile coverage areas, maintaining landlines is paramount to ensure continuity of education when internet services fail. Currently, VoIP is not considered to be a reliable or suitable source for audio in DE lessons and a reliable landline service needs to exist until an alternative, appropriate and reliable voice technology is available.

Small schools: Educational outcomes in small communities are continuously being hindered by the absence of adequate internet connectivity in their local schools. Curriculum offerings, which cannot be offered face to face due to the lack of specialist teachers (e.g. languages, music), and full senior curriculum, cannot be accessed consistently or at all due to inadequate internet for many rural and remote schools. Online access to services like speech therapy and other Allied Health cannot be relied upon to complement the sparse face to face services in small communities.

Rural and remote disadvantage: While small rural secondary schools provide an important opportunity for schooling for those who attend them, they will rarely meet the needs of *all* students living in that area. A focus on rural and remote education systems must consider the needs of *all* students being educated in these locations. All students need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their education and social needs, allowing them to reach their potential. Education is much broader than just basic academic subjects, encompassing life skills, experiences including cultural often not available locally and sporting opportunities.

It is imperative for rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions. One of the key factors cited, particularly by professional people, for relocating *from* rural and remote communities is the lack of affordable education opportunities for their children in the high school years. Most families indicate that they would stay in rural communities if they were able to access financial assistance to board their children in larger centres for their secondary schooling.

A small number of families are not eligible to receive the AIC Boarding Allowance for their children due to living in or near small communities with a small state secondary school. These high schools are considered by state education departments as providing an appropriate education and not eligible to be bypassed.

Small schools: Cluster school initiatives like the Outback Advantage and Literacy³ in Qld, and "Group schools" in the Northern Territory help to support and strengthen connections between one and two teacher rural and remote schools and enhance the quality and sustainability of initiatives in their rural and remote schools.

³ <http://education.qld.gov.au/staff/development/ideas/journeys/outbackadv.html>

Boarding Schools and School Term Hostels: Financial support is available through the AIC Boarding Allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate government school. Attending boarding school to access an appropriate education is a necessity (not a luxury) for many children from rural and remote areas due to the distance they are from appropriate, daily, face-to-face schooling. Rural and remote families are expressing a growing concern about the affordability of educating their children during the compulsory years of schooling when boarding is the only option. Alternatively, an increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating to allow their child to attend school on a daily basis. Other issues that may impact this option include social, learning difficulties and emotional/mental health issues. This drastic measure by families to reduce educational expenses negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools as younger siblings move away from the area as well. These issues were highlighted in the ICPA (Aust) report “Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students, April 2016”⁴.

Boarding school costs have increased greatly and rural and remote families are being asked to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children’s compulsory education. The disparity between the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) Boarding Allowance and the actual cost of boarding is widening exponentially.

Community connections: ICPA (Aust) often hears of new and innovative programs being conducted to improve the connection between schools and the broader community. These connections are valuable particularly for high school students when considering career opportunities. Programs that offer connections and mentoring through universities and local businesses who offer traineeships and apprenticeships are highly valued in exposing students to new career options.

Conclusion

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools from a rural and remote educational platform. Geographically isolated students need to be considered as a distinct disadvantage group in any discussions and consideration of education programs. An organisation such as a National Rural Education Alliance needs to be put into place to ensure that the effects of decisions and the implementation of educational programs on this cohort can continuously be discussed and reviewed to improve the educational opportunity and outcomes for families living in rural and remote regions.

ICPA (Aust) is more than happy to provide additional information on any of the topics that have been raised and look forward to the recommendations that will be presented to government following this review.

⁴ <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1021/federal-icpa-portfolios/federal-boarding-portfolio/boarding-school-survey-results-april-2016.pdf>