

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT

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At the 2017 Federal ICPA Conference, two specific education needs motions were presented:

“That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the Minister for Education and Training to ensure all rural and remote students have access to early identification and intervention for learning difficulties.”

“That ICPA (Aust) lobbies the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education and Training to collaborate for equitable subsidies nationally for accommodation and travel for children with specific or special learning needs to attend appointments with qualified specialists.”

The number of motions is not a true reflection of the magnitude of the challenges of educating children with specific needs in rural and remote areas. Broadly, issues include: early identification of learning difficulties, access to services and the cost of accessing services. These issues have been pursued by ICPA (Aust) in submissions to Inquiries, delegation briefing papers and by correspondence with relevant Ministers during 2017/18. While successful in raising awareness of these issues, much work remains to be done.

A teleconference was held between Federal and State Specific Education Needs portfolio holders in November 2017. The meeting served to reinforce the view that the issues above are nation-wide and very serious for affected students and their families.

Early Intervention

Students in rural and remote areas often have little or no access to early intervention services and therefore families have no indication of why their child continues to struggle at school. For Distance Education (DE) students, undiagnosed learning difficulties lead to stress and frustration in the DE schoolroom. Through submissions and further correspondence, ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for screening of phonological awareness by teachers to identify at risk students to be done in their first term at school and to stress that the single most important factor and predictor of successful literacy acquisition is phonological awareness.

In May 2016, the Australian Government released Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes (QSQO), an evidence-based approach to school reform to improve learning outcomes for all Australian students. As part of this reform, a national Year 1 check of all children in the areas of reading, phonics and numeracy was announced. This reform aims to ensure that students who are behind in their schooling are identified early and can receive the extra support they need. QSQO stated: *Reforms such as assessing children in reading, phonics and numeracy during Year 1 and reporting annually to parents against agreed national literacy and numeracy standards for every year of schooling, will ensure students who are behind are identified early and can be targeted with interventions before the achievement gap grows.*

The Federal Government indicated it is looking at working towards implementing that recommendation. Many states implement early years' assessments. For distance education students, access to testing, timeliness and then management if required, can be problematic.

Travel and accommodation assistance for students with specific learning needs

Rural and remote families can incur considerable costs accessing face-to-face consultations with allied health and other professionals for the diagnosis and management of specific learning needs. Telehealth enables remote consultations in some instances. Medicare rebates are now available for video-conferences with mental health professionals and occupational physicians but not for speech therapists. The NDIS does not even cover travel and accommodation for NDIS-qualifying students. State health departments may assist with travel and accommodation for medical issues but not learning issues. State education departments may assist with travel and accommodation to access education but not for learning difficulty related travel. This issue highlights a glaring inequity for which ICPA (Aust) will continue to seek redress.

Specific Education Needs and the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE)

Please find following some excerpts from the IRRRRE Final Report, Halsey (2018), relating to specific education needs. The recommendation and actions are well-aligned with ICPA (Aust) policy.

Students with specific learning needs (p49)

Responding to RRR students who have specific learning needs and interests continues to be a very topical and often problematic issue. Government, the community and community organisations play a very important role in this. Notwithstanding efforts made by governments to provide a strong foundation for at-risk students when they commence schooling, consultations confirm that more needs to be done.

Of particular concern is obtaining timely, appropriate and affordable early identification of potential learning difficulties, and disabilities, as well as exceptional talents and abilities. Some of the forums held in small towns stated that it could take 12 months or more from the time a school lodged a request for advice to receiving a first visit and a report on how to meet a specific learning need. As is well known, the early years are especially critical in terms of a child's cognitive and emotional development. It is unacceptable that a 6-year-old, for example, has to wait a year or more for an initial diagnosis so that targeted learning and support can commence.

Related to ensuring that individual situations are addressed in a timely and affordable way so students can optimise their learning and experience success from a young age, issues around 'readiness for school' were often raised during consultations. There is quite widespread concern about the level of readiness of some school commencers, particularly in relation to children starting school with undiagnosed 'basic' health issue problems like vision, hearing and poor nutrition, and the impact these have on 'getting the grounding' needed to enjoy life and be successful.

[Consultations found health services where nurses worked with families and] helped link families into specialist services such as occupational therapists and speech therapists. Such services were dedicated to working very pro-actively with families, often in partnership with pre-schools, schools and volunteer community support groups run by churches and others, to ensure children were healthy and well prepared to start school. As one person commented, "investment in the early years is really building the foundations for life."

Recommendation: Ensure RRR children start school with a strong foundation for learning.

Actions to progress this recommendation:

Ensure that early intervention trained personnel and programs are in place to help families and to connect them to relevant support agencies substantially reduce the waiting time (say to a maximum of three months) for specialist assessments of students with learning difficulties and disabilities and the subsequent development of specific learning plans for them.

The full IRRRRE Final Report can be found at:

<https://www.education.gov.au/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education> .

Specific learning needs and mental health

ICPA (Aust) made a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Accessibility and Quality of Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Australia. The ICPA submission provided information under the following headings:

- A National Rural Mental Health Strategy
- Mental health and rural and remote boarding school students (including student hostels)
- Bullying, cyber-bullying and mental health
- Special Learning Needs and mental health
- Medicare rebate item number attached to relevant Telehealth providers
- Rural hardship and mental health – Education perspective.

In relation to specific education needs, ICPA (Aust) stated:

Students with special learning needs, including gifted children, are especially vulnerable to mental health problems, and those in rural and remote areas even more so because access to diagnostic and management support services is notoriously difficult. Difficulties obtaining a diagnosis is probably due to a shortage of staff in rural and remote areas and bureaucratic processes. Families who can find the resources will often end up seeking help in major centres from private consultants, at considerable cost to the family. Once a diagnosis has been obtained, access to ongoing consultations for management is likewise difficult.

The full submission can be found on the ICPA Federal website under

<https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/browse/96/federal-submissions> .