

## **SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS REPORT**

**Lynise Conaghan**

ICPA (Aust) has continued to highlight and work towards reducing the barriers that are impacting access to an equitable education for students residing in rural and remote Australia with specific learning needs. There continues to be a disparity in allied health services in rural and remote areas with residents in these areas having access to significantly fewer allied health professionals than their urban counterparts. Students in rural and remote locations have limited access to services provided by speech pathologists, physiotherapists or psychologists due to geographical location. Visits by allied health professionals to rural schools are infrequent, which compromises educational outcomes for many students.

Utilisation of telehealth services can be of great benefit to families in geographical isolated locations who would otherwise have to travel considerable distances or encounter lengthy delays to access face-to-face consultations with relevant health professionals. Screening and assessment for speech and hearing conducted via telecare has been found to be as valid and reliable as face to face consultations. The use of technology within the school environment addresses barriers related to distance.

ICPA (Aust) has been lobbying for the provision of a Medicare rebate for services provided by telehealth clinicians to rural and remote families with children experiencing developmental delays. An ICPA (Aust) submission to the Australian Government Department of Health for the Medicare Benefits Schedule Review Taskforce consultation was forwarded in November. In this submission ICPA (Aust) recommended that an equivalent Medicare rebate be provided to families in rural and remote locations, who need to use telehealth clinicians for children with developmental difficulties under the 'Chronic Diseases Management Scheme' and similar item numbers, to those who have in-person consultations. ICPA (Aust) has also raised this recommendation with the Minister for Health, NRHA, and other relevant authorities.

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) provides all Australian schools, education authorities and the community with a clear picture of the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they require to enable them to partake in education on the same basis as other students. When the significant role of boarding schools is taken into consideration, it is reasonable to expect that additional resources are provided to facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database. ICPA (Aust) has corresponded with the Minister for Education and Training asking for details of any funding initiatives to support boarding facilities in the provision of additional resources for students identified on the NCCD. ICPA (Aust) is advised that support provided by a boarding facility would be considered the same as a parent providing the support and is therefore not counted as a reasonable adjustment for education purposes.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is currently operating in trial sites throughout Australia. The NDIS will provide about 460 000 Australians under the age of 65 with a permanent and significant disability with the reasonable and necessary supports they need to live an ordinary life. The NDIS helps people with disability to

- Access mainstream services and supports
- Access community services and supports

- Maintain informal group arrangements
- Receive reasonable and necessary funded supports

NDIS will fund support that includes personal care and support, transport to and from school and specialist supports for transition from school education to further education, training or employment. This could also be applicable to students who board at school.

For distance education students, who have no daily face to face access to appropriately qualified teachers and are reliant on often untrained distance education tutors, it is essential that professional development and support opportunities are provided to ensure that specific learning needs are catered for. Similarly, teachers and support staff in small schools in geographically isolated locations require training and support for students with specific learning needs such as dyslexia.

ICPA (Aust) has written to the Minister for Education and Training asking that teachers in rural and remote schools, including distance education teachers and distance education supervisors are provided training to recognise and cater for specific learning needs. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the “Good to Great Schools” initiative and that the piloted Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools programme is seeking to improve literacy outcomes through the introduction of explicit teaching approaches. The development of professional learning resources to support teachers working with students with dyslexia is also acknowledged. However, for distance education students who have no daily face to face access to appropriately qualified teachers and are reliant on often untrained distance education tutors, it is essential that professional development and support opportunities are provided to ensure that specific learning needs are catered for.

ICPA (Aust) completed a submission in August 2015 to the Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment on the current levels of access and attainment for students with disability in the school system and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.

The findings of this inquiry were released in November. Throughout the course of this inquiry, overwhelming evidence was received regarding the many barriers faced by students with disability and their families. Barriers including the failure of schools to make reasonable adjustments required by students and a shortage of services in rural and remote areas of Australia were listed. The committee also found that geographical location affected the level of education that students with disability could access and that those students with similar disability issues face very different education systems depending on where they live, leading to significant inequities between students. Students in remote or regional areas are likely to have considerably fewer options than their city-based counterparts. The limited engagement with professional services and supports particularly affects students with disability who may not have access to experienced early intervention or education support.

Based on these findings, the committee has listed many recommendations. Included here are those of particular relevance to our members:

- That the government heeds the warnings of witnesses that linking school funding to the Consumer Price Index will result in funding cuts in real terms and reduce access to education for students with disability
- That the government keep its commitment to use the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on School Students with disability to deliver more funding for students with disability based on their individual needs in 2016
- That the government release the results of the NCCD on School Students with Disability for 2015, and previous years, as a matter of urgency
- That a dedicated Disability Discrimination Commissioner be reinstated to the Australian Human Rights Commission
- That the government work with states and territories to establish a process for the collection and publication of information about levels of access and attainment for students with disability. This should include information about access to allied health and interdisciplinary support
- That the government works with states, territories and school systems to:
  - a) Make it mandatory for all initial teacher education courses to ensure beginning teachers enter the classroom with best-practice skills in the inclusion of students with disability. The government should also work with states and territories to ensure current teachers, principals and support staff are supported to develop inclusive education skills in areas such as universal design for learning, differentiated teaching and cooperative learning
  - b) Investigate the establishment of a national qualification standard for teacher aids and assistants to ensure they have the knowledge and skills required to support learning for all students. States and territories should also provide guidance on the role of support staff in inclusive classrooms.
  - c) Establish best-practice ongoing professional development for teachers, principals and others who work in the school system.

It is pleasing to see that some of the recommendations provided in the ICPA (Aust) submission coincide with several of the key recommendations published in the Senate Inquiry report.