SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS

Children with specific education needs require access to educational opportunities appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Access to such opportunities should not be compromised by living in a rural or remote location. Distance limits the choice of schools available to students in rural and remote areas, but for students with specific learning needs, this choice can be further limited. The challenges of having both geographic isolation and learning challenges can be seen as a "double disability". All students have a right to participate in education on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful and dignified learning programs, regardless of their geographical location.

ICPA members have highlighted issues impacting access to an equitable education for students with specific learning needs. These have been summarised below, together with recommendations for implementation that will improve educational opportunities and learning outcomes for children with specific learning needs who reside in rural and remote Australia.

Provision of Medicare Rebate for Telehealth Services

Utilisation of telehealth services can be of great benefit to families in geographically isolated locations who would otherwise have to travel considerable distances or encounter lengthy delays to access face-to-face consultations with relevant health professionals. Students with developmental difficulties require frequent and timely consultations, and these can be enabled via telehealth services for many families otherwise unable to access allied health professionals due to living in rural and remote areas. Some specialist consultations, such as speech pathology, can be satisfactorily delivered using telehealth services where the technology is available. These services are already providing improved delete access to health services for some children in geographically isolated areas. The cost to families to access such services should also be equitable.

Recommendation:
That an equivalent Medicare rebate be provided to families in rural and remote locations who need to use telehealth clinicians for children with development difficulties under the 'Chronic Diseases Management Scheme' and similar item numbers, to those who have in-person consultations.

Improved Staff Training for Teachers in Rural and Remote Locations

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 and autism spectrum disorders. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the "*Good to Great Schools*" initiative which will benefit the 33 remote schools located in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. However, funding for this initiative does not extend to students studying via distance education, or to the many other rural and remote schools in Australia.

Recommendations:
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, including dyslexia.

That universities that provide teacher training include modules such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders and Dyslexia in their curriculum.

Workshops for rural and remote parents of gifted students

Two Federal Senate Select Committees (1988 and 2001) identified gifted students as being the most educationally disadvantaged students in the nation; disadvantage magnified in rural and remote areas. Ten years ago, with (then) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training funding, a series of highly successful and well-attended workshops for parents of gifted students were held across rural and remote Australia. In small communities, teachers often attended as well. Now a new generation of students, parents and teachers need access to the personal and educational needs of gifted children.

Recommendation:
That the Federal Government provide funding for the delivery of workshops for parents of gifted students living in rural and remote areas.

Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties

The knowledge to diagnose 4-year-olds at the risk of learning difficulties is readily available. In their first term of compulsory schooling, screening for phonological awareness by teachers would identify students 'at risk' of having learning difficulties. Students in rural and remote areas have little or no access to screening and early intervention services, setting some children up for a school life of frustration and failures.

Recommendation:
That the Federal Government ensures all rural and remote students have access to early identification and intervention for learning difficulties.

Provision of Additional Resources to Boarding Schools for Students with Disability

The question of whether boarding facilities are well enough equipped to be able to cater for boarding students with special needs due to a lack of resources has been raised by ICPA (Aust) members. 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.

Recommendation:
That additional resources are provided to facilities, including boarding schools, where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.