

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

**“Access to Education”**



**Submission to the Nous Group**

**on the**

**Universal Access National Partnership Review**

**from the**

**Federal Council**

**of the**

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

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Nous Group's Review of the Universal Access National Partnership on behalf of all Australian Governments in their aim to ensure a quality preschool education of 600 hours per year is delivered to all Australian pre-compulsory school students.

*QUESTION 1:*

*To what extent have the UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?*

The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting formal schooling has never been better. This can be attributed to the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, ICPA (Aust) remains concerned about the affordability and accessibility of programs for those living in rural and remote regions. The issue of accessing affordable early childhood learning and care for families living in rural and remote areas has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to either: no services being available; no staff available to fill positions; no flexibility within programs to allow for individual family's needs; high out-of-pocket costs exceeding the family budget especially during times of drought and floods and the concern of future funding for previously Budget Based Funded Mobile Early Childhood Services.

ICPA (Aust) believes the impact of not being able to access affordable early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. There are a variety of reasons for this, however a major reason is due to learning difficulties which are undiagnosed in the early years due to lack of access and having very limited opportunities to socialise and interact with other children.

*QUESTION 2:*

*What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?*

As preschool/kindergarten is delivered in so many ways in Australia, it would seem difficult to target and measure preschool attendance particularly in rural and remote areas. One way to help combat this would be to place all Early Childhood Education and Care in rural and remote areas under one umbrella or have an Early Childhood Education and Care Branch dedicated to including the following:

- Standalone geographically isolated Preschools/Kindergartens (3-4-year olds)
- Preschool/Kindergarten studied by distance education through Schools of Distance Education or the Remote Isolated Children's Exercise (RICE), (as in South Australia)
- Long Day Care Centres (that provide preschool/kindergarten as well as child care)
- Playgroups in small rural and remote communities
- Mobile Early Childhood Services that provide early learning in the form of regular playgroups and sometimes preschool in areas that do not receive any other form of early learning.

A motion supporting this was carried by our members at our recent ICPA Federal Conference.

Preschool/Kindergarten numbers vary from year-to-year and thus may provide inaccurate temporary attendance data which may signal viability issues from time to time. Data should be collected over many years and trends noted.

**QUESTION 3:**

*Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?*

**Extension of Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance for 3-4-year olds**

All States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education (though more preschool distance education places are needed in New South Wales) and this is the only avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, around 200 children access recognised 3-4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education, which today includes a mixture of hands on play-based learning and teacher-led structured lessons which involve the use of technology for communication. As with every other early childhood program for three-to-four-year-olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task, to use the technology required for distance education, to appropriately interact with their peers and teacher and to understand the formal concept of school.

It is vital that young children have opportunities to socialise face-to-face with other children of their age. Distance education early childhood programs often require families to travel great distances to attend school functions which provide an opportunity for the children to participate in group activities, such as sport, practise conversation skills and socialise with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

Accessing these early childhood programs and activities comes at a significant cost to rural and remote families. However, geographically isolated families undertaking preschool distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (AIC), Distance Education allowance which other distance education students receive because 3-4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Federal Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care.

**Increased Use of School Buildings**

The flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural communities with adequate infrastructure to include preschoolers, such as the current 'Remote Kindergarten Program' in Queensland has been welcomed and families have requested that a similar program be expanded in New South Wales. ICPA (Aust) is pleased to see that the new Gidgee Preschool at Weilmoringle (NSW) has been well received. However, facilitators are required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. The Australian Government's extended transitional provisions for Early Childhood Teachers for the next two years allow qualified primary school teachers to teach preschoolers where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access, but this may not apply in every state and territory. Where the small school has only one teacher to teach all grades, including an extra younger cohort several days a week may prove too much. The half or 0.5 payment for an extra Early Childhood Teacher required in a small rural school to teach preschoolers (in Queensland) is not enough to attract such a teacher to a remote town nor would a one-teacher state school have the accommodation required to house this additional teacher and the teacher would therefore need to rent an alternative property, which may not be available in a small remote community.

### **More Support for Standalone Preschools/Kindergartens**

Some standalone Kindergartens are struggling to survive due to low numbers of kindergarten children attending them. For example: Glenmorgan Qld Kindergarten has recently closed, and Texas Kindergarten Qld is fundraising every week in order to retain staff and keep open despite the low numbers of children. Every child deserves a quality early education, so every effort must be made to keep these organisations supported with adequate funding and provision of qualified staff.

[https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-07-15/kindies-schools-struggle-through-drought/11299426?sf215743657=1&fbclid=IwAR2i9NFt25LQxr7zJUYacM30AxVObw8LLa7Q4B7KwHtGrshKvRCtsGGvJ\\_Q](https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-07-15/kindies-schools-struggle-through-drought/11299426?sf215743657=1&fbclid=IwAR2i9NFt25LQxr7zJUYacM30AxVObw8LLa7Q4B7KwHtGrshKvRCtsGGvJ_Q)

### **Better funding for Long Day Care Centres**

Long Day Care Centres in some small towns also provide preschool but have viability and affordability issues for the organisations as well as families, especially during the current drought. A motion recently carried at our recent Federal Conference listed the following barriers which have been identified by families, early childhood providers, and professionals: the difficulty of obtaining qualified staff, viability of services where numbers are low, cost of long day care to disadvantaged families and low attendance because of lack of transport.

ICPA would seek to address these barriers through:

- Waiving the high level of qualifications required for long day care service managers where the numbers are small.
- Providing financial incentives and support for people living in rural and remote areas to obtain qualifications, including support for accommodation and travel for practical work and residential training.
- Accepting a flexible approach to achieving the required qualifications including a longer timeline for this.
- Providing a more flexible approach to the application of ratios, for example through allowing mixed age groups in a variety of ways, to enhance viability for providers.
- Subsidisation for providers who are willing to set up services in rural and remote areas to meet the needs of isolated families through a Remote Area Allowance.
- Subsidisation of fees for disadvantaged families in rural and remote areas, through increased Child Care Subsidy payments, as these are the children who are most likely to gain long term benefits from such a program and these are the communities where economic and social outcomes will be achieved.
- Develop ways that providers in rural and remote areas can encourage and support attendance at long day care centres through the provision of local transport.

### **Provision of further funding for Mobile Early Childhood Services**

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, playgroups and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face-to-face interaction for children of similar ages in rural and remote areas. Flexibility and surety of funding for these services is vital in providing the much-needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. ICPA (Aust) has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the new package, where, Mobile Playgroups in particular, have only been provided with funding for 12-18 months until December 2019 and need to access future funding through the Department of Social Services or the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) in order to continue providing their valuable service. There is also no funding available for existing Mobile Playgroups such as the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) in the Northern Territory to expand and provide a

much-needed similar service to surrounding pastoral properties and communities around Alice Springs.

### **Transport Affordability Support**

Transport affordability problems abound particularly in New South Wales where families with preschoolers (3-4-year olds) should be also eligible to claim the 'School Drive Subsidy'. A national preschool transport subsidy for preschoolers might help to alleviate this problem.

<https://apps.transport.nsw.gov.au/ssts/assets/documents/application-school-drive-subsidy-5427.pdf>

#### **QUESTION 4:**

*How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?*

Preschool/Kindergarten is delivered in a variety of ways in rural and remote Australia but is still not available to all pre-compulsory students. An example of this is shown in this article:

[http://www.nswfarmers.org.au/NSWFA/NSWFA/Posts/The\\_Farmer/Community/Western\\_NSW\\_preschool\\_filling\\_a\\_gap\\_in\\_rural\\_education.aspx](http://www.nswfarmers.org.au/NSWFA/NSWFA/Posts/The_Farmer/Community/Western_NSW_preschool_filling_a_gap_in_rural_education.aspx)

The Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) <https://kics.org.au> provides a valuable early learning service to both indigenous and non-indigenous communities and pastoral stations around Katherine and wishes to expand their services around Alice Springs where there is no current service.

#### **QUESTION 5:**

*Based on your experiences, should changes be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before fulltime school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?*

Changes are still required in rural and remote Australia to improve preschool attendance rates, see suggested improvements under Question 3.

### **Conclusion**

The Australian Government recognises the importance of ensuring that children are not disadvantaged in terms of their early physical, social and educational development, therefore continued monetary support for the education of pre-compulsory students from the Australian Government to support states and territories would be most welcomed. Researchers throughout the world report that the social and developmental gap in children's functioning and achievement can be significant by age six. These differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills are strong predictors of later academic, occupational and life achievement.

Students commencing formal schooling need to be school-ready, especially as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects (as Early Learning STEM Australia (ELSA)) have also been introduced as trials and pilots to the preschool curriculum. ICPA (Aust) believes rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very beginning if preschool has not been experienced even at a basic level in their early years.