



**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (Inc)
"Access to Education"**

Submission

**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**

**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), supports the introduction of the 'More Support for Students with Disability' program and welcomes the opportunity to highlight issues that concern our members in relation to the current levels of access and attainment for students with a disability and learning difficulties in the school system and the impact on students and families associated with inadequate levels of support.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary.

The member families of the association reside in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Many of our families live on isolated stations, great distances from their nearest community with their only access to education, in the primary school years, being via a distance education program, while those living in a small community are able to attend small rural schools. Students generally board away from home, either at a boarding facility or at a boarding school during their secondary years of education.

In relation to the Terms of Reference for this submission, ICPA (Aust) responds to:

a. 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;

All students with a disability have a right to participate in education on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful and dignified learning programs, regardless of geographical location. The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the Standards are intended to give students with disability the same rights as other students, including the right to education and training '*on the same basis*' as students without disability.

Despite dyslexia being covered under the *Disability Discrimination Act* and as a result also being covered under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* made under that Act, there appears to be some discrepancy amongst Australian States and Territories with regards to recognition of dyslexia as a disability. Consequently, the majority of Australian children diagnosed with dyslexia miss out on targeted funding. The current government levels of support in the school system are inadequate and the cost to families accessing vital learning support for these students is becoming prohibitive.

While physical or obvious disabilities are more easily identified and resource allocation directed to meet the needs of those students, in the case of children who study via distance education, who have very little face to face contact with their teacher, there is an increased risk of students not being sufficiently screened or tested for a learning disability. Similarly, children attending small schools in geographically isolated locations have limited access to professionals experienced in the preparation and implementation of learning programs designed specifically for children with a disability.

In rural and remote areas, families are frustrated by delays in the assessment and diagnosis of learning disabilities. Families are personally funding diagnostic expenses and travelling extensive distances to access suitable services.

ICPA Australia believes that the Federal Government must ensure that all teachers, including distance education teachers and those working in small rural and remote schools, are trained to recognise and cater for children with specific learning needs. We acknowledge there has been much work by the Federal Government to address the needs of students with dyslexia and other specific learning needs

and of disadvantaged children in remote communities. The “*Good to Great Schools*” initiative is great news for the 33 remote schools located in communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia that will benefit; however, this funding does not extend to students studying by distance education, nor does it provide any options for the many other remote and isolated schools in Australia. Many ICPA members when their children reach high school age have no other choice than to send them to boarding school due to geographical location.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that;

- Dyslexia be recognised uniformly as a disability under the special needs section of the Education Acts in all states and territories so that adequate and additional disability funding is made available to all children, including those in rural and remote parts of Australia.
- Distance education supervisors (often the mother) with such students, are provided with relevant information and support.
- Professional development and support opportunities are extended to teachers and supervisors working with students studying via distance education and to teaching staff in rural and remote schools.
- Funding is increased for allied health professionals to work in conjunction with staff and students to develop and implement appropriate learning programs in rural and remote locations.

b. the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment;

ICPA (Aust) believes the lives of students living in rural and remote Australia with a learning disability will be greatly enriched with improved, appropriate and timely support. Currently these students are unable to achieve to the best of their ability, as they are either undiagnosed or unable to access adequate support. This negatively impacts on the child and can be attributed to many families leaving rural and remote areas.

c. the impact on policies and the education practice of individual education sectors as a result of the More Support for Students with Disabilities program, and the impact of the cessation of this program in 2014 on schools and students;

The cessation of the More Support for Students with Disabilities (MSSWD) is of concern as the program only ran for two years. Rural and remote areas across Australia have very high educational staff turnover rates. The concern is that with the MSSWD program not being extended or running longer and due to high staff turnover, rural and remote schools risk not being able to access educators who have had MSSWD training and the benefits that the program was bringing about may be in danger of being lost, particularly in small rural and remote schools.

ICPA members are strongly in favour of requesting the government to make dyslexia a high priority on the national education agenda. In implementing any of the recommendations made by the National Dyslexia Working Party, it is important to ensure that provisions are made for students studying by distance education.

The current recommended model for addressing poor literacy in our schools referred to as the Response to Intervention model (RTI), has become widely accepted practice in the UK, the USA and Canada. The model requires a three tiered approach to literacy teaching, intervention and assessment. Students identified as tier two or three require access to a well-trained teacher using high-quality, evidence based instruction. 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, lack of access to the RTI model means they will continue to slip through the net. Similarly, children attending small schools in geographically isolated locations have limited access to the appropriate and relevant support programs and services. This applies to all students, not just those diagnosed as dyslexic. It is vital that these children are identified and assessed early and then given appropriate interventions.

At a policy roundtable on dyslexia last year, it was indicated that, while states and territories are responsible for their own education departments, the Federal Government would like to work collaboratively with state leaders in an attempt to improve support for dyslexic students and ICPA (Aust) is greatly appreciative of this commitment. We ask that during these collaborations, the government must remain mindful of the unique circumstances surrounding the learning context of rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that;

- a representative from ICPA (Aust) be invited to participate in future policy roundtable discussions on meeting the needs of dyslexic students in our schools, to ensure provisions are made for dyslexic students studying by distance education.

e. the progress of the implementation of the needs-based funding system as stated in the Australian Education Act;

In this instance ICPA (Aust) requests that the Senate Standing Committee ensures that funding is provided to schools for students with additional needs whether or not the school's current funding is maintained under the new federal school funding model.

Small rural schools face the dilemma that the funding allocated under the needs-based funding program may not be adequate to offer significant assistance to the student/s requiring support. With student numbers quite low in rural schools compared to regional or metropolitan schools and the costs associated with providing appropriate assistance to students with disabilities and specific needs often higher, funding does not stretch as far in rural and remote areas. There are not usually as many students in a small rural school that attract sufficient needs-based funding, so it can be difficult to access what is required for the student/s. Parents have concerns that funds are being used in a "whole school" approach by being put towards providing a resource that will benefit all of the students at the school rather than being specifically directed towards the student/s with disabilities.

The current model of funding, where some schools have reached the limit of funding under the Gonski reforms, is acting as a disincentive for boarding schools to accept enrolments of children with additional needs. These schools will not receive any of the additional per student funding for students with disabilities that is available to other schools. Effectively this means that the schools bear the additional costs associated with accepting students with special needs and therefore have no incentive to give those students a place. Boarding schools are exempt from the Anti-discrimination Act if they

are unable to provide the necessary support to students. This leaves rural students with additional needs with very few options for schooling, particularly in high school.

Students with special needs have the right to access an inclusive curriculum that is broad, balanced and relevant, meeting their individual needs. This is very difficult to achieve in rural and remote areas, thus creating a need for boarding elsewhere.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that;

- Students identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with a disability who need to board away from home also require additional resources and funding in the boarding facility to cater for the complex needs associated with the education and care of these children.

f. the progress of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability and the findings, recommendations and outcomes from this process, and how this data will, or should, be used to develop a needs-based funding system for students with disability;

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the nationally consistent approach to data collection in providing all Australian schools, education authorities and the community with a clear picture of the number of students with disabilities in schools and the adjustments they require, to enable them to participate in education on the same basis as other students.

Again, ICPA (Aust) raises the concerns of families with children who board away from home during their secondary education, who require additional support when dealing with the student's category of disability (i.e. physical, cognitive, sensory or social/emotional).

Considering the significant role boarding schools play in supporting students who must board to enable them to participate fully in their education, it is reasonable to say that the additional resources required to support those with a disability should be allowed for when considering resources to be made available to these schools.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that;

- Boarding schools must be considered in relation to funding, to provide quality differentiated teaching practice, supplementary, substantial or extensive adjustment to support children with a disability in their education, who are not able to return home for family support.

h. what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools.

All students living in rural and remote areas have to live with the constraints imposed by distance, especially those in remote and isolated locations. Travel to school, teachers teaching multiple cohorts in small rural schools, opportunities for inter-school events, access to specialised support and teacher training, provision of school equipment and limited choice of schools are some of the issues confronted by students residing in rural and remote locations. These problems are often multiplied for students with disabilities.

Difficulties in the recruitment and retention of skilled teaching staff in both small schools and schools of distance education continues. Teacher support and training of teachers in special education is minimised due to geographical location. Teachers in small rural schools are often working with several year levels at a time. Depending on the disability and needs of the other children without disabilities in the classroom, a regular teacher will need varying degrees of specialist support. A regular teacher will also require training to meet the particular needs of a student with a disability in the class. In rural and remote schools, special education teachers may be irregular or non-existent.

Teachers and teacher-aides in rural and remote areas are not always able to be specialists in disability. In cities, specialist providers are more readily available. A better understanding of disability by those who provide the support would enable learning programs to be tailored and prioritised to improve outcomes for all students.

The utilisation of telehealth services is compromised by inadequate and unreliable telecommunications access. Video conferencing with specialist teachers and education providers would be an appropriate means of providing feedback and support to children and families and ensure that programs are updated and modified in a timely manner to maximise learning opportunities for children.

While this question asks what should be done to better support students with disability in our schools, ICPA (Aust) proposes that more needs to be done to ensure school readiness has been addressed prior to commencing school. Various forms of early learning are offered in small rural communities and for those living beyond these communities. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that these programs can be difficult to access in both metropolitan and rural and remote areas. ICPA (Aust) believes the impact of not being able to access early learning for children living beyond the metro boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. Much of this can be attributed to learning difficulties that are undiagnosed in the early years and having very limited opportunities to socialise and interact with other children.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that;

- Appropriate training is provided for those in rural and remote locations who support and work with students living with a disability.
- Improved telecommunications access to rural and remote locations, to enable consistent and timely on-line face to face interactions between students, teachers and all relevant specialist personnel who would otherwise experience lengthy delays in program evaluation and implementation due to distance and unavailability of support staff.
- The provision of high quality early childhood educational opportunities within rural and remote areas of Australia should be of high priority.