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Submission into Education in Remote and Complex Environments

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc. (ICPA Qld) advocates for equitable access to quality educational opportunities for children in rural and remote areas. ICPA Qld represents 45 branches, comprising over 1200 families throughout rural Queensland.

ICPA Qld is a voluntary apolitical parent organisation and is the only community based parent group with interests in all sectors and levels of education – state schools, independent, church or boarding schools, early childhood and care through to tertiary education and all methods used to facilitate access to that education.

The Queensland State Council of ICPA Qld welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into Education in Remote and Complex Environments focussing on the unique needs of rural and remote students.

- ***A child's journey through early childhood, primary, secondary, vocational and tertiary education in remote communities, like the tri-border region of South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory;***

As with any child's journey through their years of education, a student growing up in remote communities deserves every opportunity afforded to a student in a regional or metropolitan area.

State and Federal Governments must make readily available relevant, accessible and cost effective educational options to match the needs and circumstances of students and families. Students must be provided, at either nil or minimal cost or through an affordable scheme, equipment to enable full engagement with curriculum, teachers and their peers. Inability to access equipment due to cost must not be a factor in disengagement or refusal to uptake learning opportunities nor reduce opportunity to undertake post compulsory learning.

Students in remote communities must also be able to access equitable opportunities for support and guidance in regard to mental health and wellbeing. Remote communities are often unable to provide specific health services to their members on a regular basis, and this lack of continuity may lead to students in these communities feeling increasingly isolated and vulnerable.

- ***Key barriers to the education journey, including the effects of environmental factors such as drought on families and communities***

Distance is a fundamental impediment to learning. For geographically isolated families it limits choice across all levels of compulsory education. For students to engage with other students and develop their individual personalities through exposure to cultural and social activities there is a dramatic increase in expense. Distance necessitates the need for students to attend boarding school to complete their compulsory educational journey which has multiple effects on the family dynamic including increased emotional and mental stress upon all family members. In times of extreme environmental circumstances such as drought, fire and flooding, these stresses are compounded as families

and communities also struggle financially. Geographical isolation has also proven a disincentive for tertiary education due to significant costs associated with attending university and having little to no familial support.

Environmental factors place enormous pressure, mental, emotional and fiscal, upon families. These pressures are well documented. Appendix A outlines some of the effects which drought conditions may have on students from rural and remote communities, and therefore the potential impact on their educational journey.

At times, government legislation can act as a barrier to the education journey and consequently impact the financial situation of a family in remote environments. Recent legislation governing child care qualification requirements across the country have seen a shortage of suitably qualified educators to be employed as governesses on remote properties. A family's inability to access a governess, or capacity to afford one, means another job for a parent, usually a mother and adds dramatically to an already heavy workload. No home tutor to aide in educating students on remote properties means a parent has to step into the home classroom and is unable to commit to working outside. The flow on effect is that families are short-handed or forced to look to employ another staff member to take up the slack.

Due to increasing costs, geographically isolated businesses are being forced to reduce staff and this has resulted in families with students leaving the bush. Reduced numbers of families living on remote stations is threatening the sustainability of rural and remote communities and leading to the decline and closure of many businesses. Inevitably reduced numbers lead to reduced services such as health and education within these communities.

In some circumstances, parental attitude can be a key barrier to a child's educational journey. For a small number of families in remote communities, education is still not seen as a priority as parents see their child's future on the land and therefore see no value in seeking further opportunities for education.

The provision of reliable and affordable internet continues to prove a key barrier to the education journey of a student living in rural and remote parts of the country. Although there have been definite improvements in affordability and accessibility there remains no comparison to the prices offered to their urban counterparts. Constant dropouts and weather related interruptions are frustrating and hinder the learning journey of any student, in particular those studying via distance education which relies heavily on technology in its delivery.

- ***The role of culture and country in a child's learning***

Culture and connection to country plays a pivotal role in a child's learning and their access to education. Many students struggle emotionally and socially when they have to leave their home and family to move hundreds of kilometres away to access educational opportunities. The loss of connection to the land and their families affects their mental health and in some cases their academic journey. All too often educators and the facilities they work in within metropolitan areas have very little understanding of where the student has been brought up and the extreme differences in daily life that these students face. It is imperative that educators are trained in the specific skills and understandings required to work with these children and ensure their learning journey is not impacted by this loss of culture and connection to home.

- ***Community and family structures that support a child's education and their attendance at school***

Community and family structures in rural and remote areas are key to a student's success, however students are isolated from these vital supports when they have to leave their homes to attend boarding school or take up tertiary placements. The importance of education in these areas is generally high and therefore many sacrifices are made to ensure students have the best educational opportunities offered to them to ensure their choices are not limited.

Many communities in remote areas currently provide assistance in the transition to high school for their students so as to ensure their continued attendance. At the other end of the scale there are communities which provide free transport for their kindergarten children to encourage attendance at an early age when being immersed in a rich learning environment is so vital. Communities and families are best placed to know their children and what best suits their needs. Consultation with communities is vital in order to achieve success and provide positive support structures for our children at all levels of schooling.

- ***Effective government initiatives, past and present, that support remote communities to enable greater educational outcomes, including those that have improved attainment in literacy and numeracy***

One of the most effective programs previously delivered in Queensland aimed at providing equitable opportunities to rural and remote children was the Priority Country Area Program, better known as PCAP. For many years this program was highly successful in bringing instrumental music, technology, arts and sporting opportunities to small schools and their students. Funding allowed schools to enhance their literacy and numeracy programs with visiting specialists and excursions undertaken via a PCAP bus. PCAP funding was directed at small schools which were truly considered rural and remote and remains a great success story across the state. The current replacement program of RREAP has proven

less popular due to the number of schools involved being increased to include those in regional areas who are not truly isolated. Funding has decreased to schools as a result and the restructure of the processes involved have proved unpopular and difficult to access.

The Partners in Learning program was implemented in Queensland in 2018 by the Department of Education and involves the education of Distance Education Home Tutors. The program exists to 'train' Home Tutors in the vital elements of 'teaching' literacy and numeracy to their children in the home classroom. The program has proven hugely successful and has received positive feedback from parents who feel an increased confidence in their instruction at home.

- ***Innovative approaches to workforce, including recruitment, professional learning, retention and support, and lessons from communities that could be more generally applied***

Centres for Learning and Wellbeing (CLAW's) have been introduced in rural and remote areas in Queensland over the past two years with the purpose of providing support, professional learning, mentorship and a wellbeing focus for teaching staff. Each of the four centres has a different focus dependent on the needs of the surrounding communities but all work together to ensure that teachers within these rural and remote settings do not feel isolated professionally or personally.

- ***Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum (including STEM) in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students, including examples of innovative ways in which the curriculum is being delivered in remote schools***

Schools in rural and remote areas play a vital role within their community and must be able to provide a varied and quality curriculum. Subject availability, staffing issues and a lack of extra-curricular opportunities is behind rising concerns that rural and remote secondary schools in particular are becoming unviable for students. Families are looking further afield to find other options for secondary schooling due to the limited range of subject selection, (as well as sporting and cultural opportunities) in the later years of their child's schooling. With future career choices based on these decisions, rural and remote secondary students are being left with limited school based choices or distance education options.

As rural and remote schools remain the hub of small communities, the viability of these schools for secondary students is of great concern to ICPA Qld. The provision of a full curriculum through a variety of delivery methods, along with a broader range of extra-curricular opportunities provides a choice for families and works to keep these communities vibrant and attractive to live in. Technology and communications must play an important role in the sustainability of these schools with innovative use of virtual classrooms a potential solution to the problem. Forming partnerships with urban schools which have been resourced to stream directly into remote schools means that students can 'join' other classrooms to increase their subject options and the quality of teaching. Too often teachers in remote schools are not necessarily skilled or trained in the subject they are expected to teach. This lack of quality instruction impacts greatly on a student's academic success and ultimately their future career options. Technological advancements have increased the opportunities to bridge this gap in quality pedagogy and remote schools could access skilled professionals via virtual classrooms.

- ***Successful pathways to ensure students have the knowledge and skills they need to enter further education and the workforce***

There are many geographical barriers to students attending and upskilling in Vocational Education and Training. This has been further exacerbated by the closure of the Longreach and Emerald Pastoral Colleges in Queensland as there are no longer RTO's in these areas to provide courses such as a Cert III in Agriculture. Students must travel vast distances to complete the theory components of their chosen courses and the cost of accommodation in the larger centres is prohibitive and can mean completing their course becomes an insurmountable challenge.

There is strong evidence to show that one of the primary reasons rural and remote students do not engage in either post-secondary learning or upskilling via a trade is the difficulty in relocating to access those opportunities with no familial support. A non-government VET training provider in North Queensland has created a boarding environment that allows students to still complete subjects to qualify for their QCE but also undertake VET courses and potentially commence apprenticeships. Such an option has encouraged participation in courses by rural and remote students.

The adoption of flexible approaches to the way the learning/practical components are structured within courses would encourage student participation, retention and course completion. Supporting students to relocate and opportunities

to form partnerships with other schools to allow the completion of practical course components would be welcomed by the students and their families.

In rural areas the quality and capability of internet offerings may make online components of any programme challenging to complete. Furthermore, access to the place of business to facilitate the completion of the practical course components may not be readily available. To ensure that regional areas still have the opportunity for growth in priority industry sectors VET providers must be supported to build flexibility and innovation into their programme delivery to allow full engagement of VET students in their chosen location.

Appendix A: Letter to Queensland Boarding Schools from ICPA Qld

Dear Heads of School/Principals/Headmasters & Headmistresses,

After numerous discussions with our members who are preparing to return their precious children to your care both in boarding and day school, ICPA QLD State Councillors would like to take a little of your time as we move into a new year. We acknowledge what a wonderful job Heads of Boarding and their amazing staff do in supporting our children at their term 'home away from home', however concern has been raised about the depth of understanding and knowledge of teaching staff in regard to the experiences the children will have had over the summer holidays.

The media has aired snippets of the drought but the reality of what is happening in family homes often goes untold. We would appreciate the opportunity to share with you some of the stories our members are living which may provide perspective for those unfamiliar with life on the land as well as understanding that the greatest thing that can be given to these children is compassion and understanding.

Families on the land, parents and children of all ages, have been living this drought now for months and in some cases years. Families with livestock have been facing -

In the paddock...

- feeding - a hot, dusty, long process which can take hours on a daily basis;
- carting water in tankers to fill water troughs, or doing water runs to ensure water is available for stock;
- lifting cattle that don't eat and then seeing them pass away, or having to put them down when there is no hope;
- laying poly pipe to try and extend water supplies into other paddocks; and
- catching and taking home calves whose mothers are too weak to feed them

In the family home...

- feeding poddy calves;
- enduring numerous dust storms and the constant dust and endless cleaning up;
- making choices about the need to turn a tap on to have a wash;
- using "wipes" to clean benches as there isn't enough water to dampen cloths;
- recycling every drop of water possible;
- not having their clothes or sheets washed on a regular basis;
- having quick showers and not washing their hair;
- living with continual dust and flies;
- listening to and feeling the conversations about how the budget has to be stretched to pay the feed bill to keep the stock alive; and
- looking daily at a dead, brown landscape with not even a green garden to offer a glimmer of hope

Whilst families who rely on cropping may not have the animal welfare situation to cope with each day, they have their very own unique challenges.

- massive dust storms blowing away precious top soil;
- no prospect of income for at least another 9-10 months;
- ongoing budget discussions as the family try to work with managing machinery repayments;
- for some the angst of watching commodity prices and the uncertainty of whether contracts will be filled; and
- idleness on the property which can have a detrimental flow on effect for mental health and wellbeing

As families are making preparations to return their children to school, parents are also having to support and reassure the children that Mum and Dad will be okay at home and that the work will get done without the extra helpful hands that have made life a little easier over the past couple of months. Time has been taken to reassure them that, as parents, education is a choice that has been made so that the children can be just that, children. For many there is also the promises that wherever possible they will be visited during the term and if not there is still the telephone.

For some children going back to boarding and school will in fact be a relief as they can return to some form of normality, with routines, friends, showers, water and conversation about something other than the daily work load. It is at school that parents want them to see that they have opportunities and hope.

There are a lot of children who did not have a "holiday" as such with Christmas Day proving no exception - looking after stock was a daily chore no matter the date. It is concern for the mental health and wellbeing of these children that we ask you to please pass this letter onto your teaching staff. Please encourage these staff to have conversations with their boarding students should they wish to, in the classrooms, with their peers, so that our school communities have the opportunity to fully understand what life looks like for them at this moment in time. These children need to know that despite other recent devastations across the country, they have not been forgotten and that they are fully supported by their teachers and peers.

ICPA Qld State Council is always grateful for the amazing support that each and every one of our Queensland boarding schools provides to our organisation, as well as to our families. We know that our children are in very good hands and that their mental health and wellbeing is at the forefront of many conversations at the current time. Please feel free to get in touch with me if you have any queries in regard to the content of this letter. We appreciate your time.