

Mrs Kim Hughes, Qld President
Harrogate RICHMOND QLD 4822
E: QldPresident@icpa.com.au
T: 07 4741 8673 M: 0427 377 985
www.icpa.com.au

Mrs Gillian Semple, Qld Secretary
Dundee RICHMOND QLD 4822
E: QldSecretary@icpa.com.au
T: 07 4741 8506

Lobbying for opportunity, equality & support for all rural and remote students

SUBMISSION

to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education

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

ICPA Qld Inc. 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 Inc. welcomes the opportunity to provide insight into the challenges of education in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia.

CURRICULUM & ASSESSMENT

The curriculum opportunities for students in rural and remote areas are often compromised from the outset with limited direct access to specialised teachers, resources or support to supplement their learning. With the prevalence of multi-age classrooms in these areas, the curriculum continues to be overcrowded and students and teachers continue to feel the stress of trying to 'fit' everything in. The answer to these issues seems to be the utilisation of online programs and resources, however with satellite technology being the main mode of delivery for the majority of small schools and distance education classrooms, speed, latency (delay) and limited data plans have a huge impact.

The devolving of the curriculum content down from higher year levels has seen students in younger grades being exposed to much higher level information, and often this information is not relevant to students in rural and remote areas. With this lack of interest comes a struggle with learning.

NAPLAN testing remains a "point in time" testing tool and the data which is filtered from it is delivered in an unrealistic time frame with which to provide support to some targeted children. This issue is then reinforced with a lack of specialist staff to provide learning support and intervention available to rural and remote schools and their students on a regular basis.

Schools and their staff need to be encouraged and supported in integrating with their local community and its history. Incorporation of community identities and events into the curriculum of rural and remote schools will foster collaboration and positive learning experiences for all those involved and provide meaning for students.

TEACHERS AND TEACHING

Quality teachers are essential to the successful learning journey of rural and remote students. Small schools continue to be the training ground for inexperienced teachers wanting to climb the career ladder, often to the

detriment of the school community. Teachers require an early understanding of the various facets involved in teaching in rural and remote communities, and this understanding needs to be fostered prior to beginning their teaching career.

In order to retain teachers in these areas, quality housing needs to be available with access to internet technology. In today's society, a young teacher cannot be expected to move away from family and friends with no reasonable access to the digital world with which to maintain contact.

ICPA Qld Inc believe that all university courses for preservice teachers should include a core unit on teaching in regional, rural and remote areas. These schools provide endless opportunities for teachers in professional growth across the board, however often they are placed with little knowledge of the realities of teaching in a multi-age classroom and the skills required for such a setting.

The Darling Downs South West Professional Learning Hub (DDSWPLH) situated in Roma, Queensland is currently coordinating a very successful program with several universities and the Kelvin Grove Teaching Centre for Excellence in Brisbane, which aims to promote teaching in rural and remote areas and equips selected preservice students with the experience and knowledge to succeed in these schools. This model should be replicated across regions.

Many rural and remote areas struggle to find relief teachers and it would seem that regulations hinder this search with the Return to Teaching requirement. Adequate access to qualified teachers are unavailable due to return due to recency of practice issues – these teachers may only be required one day a week or fortnight, yet regulations insist they need to complete an expensive and non-relevant course in order to do so. This requirement is the same for teachers who have acted as distance education tutors in their own home classroom for several years!

LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

Rural and remote schools account for over 4000 of the 9000 schools across the country, and are among the most complex and challenging due to the tyranny of distance. Too often these schools are headed by first-time Principals who have little to no experience in country areas. Principals are often the main teacher of students in small schools and the juggling act between administration duties and teaching workloads is extremely challenging.

Currently the administrative workload of a small school teaching principal does not change whether they have 10 students or 80. The constant raft of policy updating, budget requirements, safety auditing and general administration duties are heaped on top of the needs of the students, staff, parents and community. Administrative requirements need to be streamlined or downsized in order to prioritise the learning needs of rural and remote students. Cluster schools need to work together in order to share the burden wherever possible, and mentors are vital in order to offer advice on what can be left for later.

In order to attract and retain more experienced leaders for country schools, governments need to be committed to ensuring staff have had previous placements in rural and remote areas, or small schools. The upskilling of teachers from an early stage in their career with a focus on the particular skillsets required to lead a country school is essential.

Programs such as "Take the Lead" (QLD) have been somewhat successful in preparing prospective principals for their role in a small school. However, there is a need for increased rigour around such programs to ensure individuals are absolutely prepared and appreciative of their role in the school and the community. In the absence of robust professional development, the frequent turnover of staff in these positions will continue to hinder growth and prosperity of small communities.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

A small school is the hub of any rural and remote community. It is often the meeting place, the sporting place and the socialising place – or at least the driving force behind much of this. Rural and remote communities are very protective of their school and their students and their support in school events and endeavours is essential to success.

Schools are increasingly engaging with community via social media and video sharing apps with appropriate security levels depending on the nature of the content.

Non-urban students are often motivated by a need to return to their home base and contribute to their region in addition to showing appreciation, through success, for parents', often considerable, investment in their education. Provision of readily accessible dedicated fiscal, social and mental support to help them with further education/apprenticeships post-secondary is tantamount to success as many will need to complete in isolation from family support.

Rural and remote communities are always keen to maintain youth in their towns and surrounding areas – they are necessary to retain essential services such as schools and bus runs. The facilitation of a program which supports students remaining in their community whilst they are studying wherever possible could provide a lifeline to a community, as well as stability and success for a rural student.

Philanthropic sector support in these areas could play a vital role in ensuring students continue down their chosen career path potentially assisting with accommodation, scholarships, internships and travel expenses.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

ICT is a vital factor in the education of students in regional, rural and remote schools and the gap between their metro counterparts continues to widen due to the unreliability of the internet connections in country Australia.

In order to ensure that ICT supports education in rural and remote schools and communities, as well as distance education classrooms, there must be a **priority** to ensure the reliability of internet services and realistic download and upload speeds. There must also be the provision of a sufficiently skilled technical workforce available to these rural and remote classrooms where technical support is not available just down the road, and this support should not be expected to come from a school's own budget.

The NBN Sky Muster satellite has gone some way to improve connectivity for rural and remote distance education classrooms. Due to security issues the satellite is currently unavailable for rural and remote small schools in Queensland.

There has been an attempt to connect small schools with mobile service where possible, however there remain several schools across Queensland which have no mobile service, or minimal mobile coverage with antennae and powered boosters.

In an ideal world, the use of video conferencing and virtual classrooms where a student in a rural and remote setting can virtually join a class in a large mainstream school has the capacity to revolutionise outcomes and potential. It would allow schools with low student numbers to offer a full curriculum therefore giving students and families a viable alternative to boarding school. This has the follow-on effect of families staying in small communities, which has many benefits.

The main barriers to ICT are a lack of reliable service, limited data downloads/uploads and slow speed, particularly for the satellite service. Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) is inadequate on satellite internet due to latency (delay) issues, which creates a significant barrier to fully interactive web conferencing educational opportunities. The vast distances and small population means that mobile service is not practical or economically viable to install in some areas.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND SCHOOLS

Facilitating engagement between entrepreneurial organisations and school/s to foster collaborative relationship and the establishment of common visions and goals will be a key to success.

In many rural and remote communities, opportunities for entrepreneurial education beyond the classroom will be limited due to small populations and current drought conditions. In order for these sorts of programs to be implemented in these communities, large businesses and organisations would need to focus on forming partnerships with schools which would then provide opportunities and financial assistance to aid students in their endeavours.

Often students from small rural and remote communities have to move into regional or urban areas in order to further their aspirations, be it through university, TAFE or a specific employment opportunity. These students can find it difficult to transition to such a different way of life, and support to smooth that transition is essential. The type of support would depend on what stream the student is entering, however living away from home for the first time, and in a larger urban centre, comes with a unique set of stressors which rural and remote students can often struggle with. These could be addressed with mentoring programs, partnerships between schools, communities and training organisations, financial and accommodation assistance.

IMPROVING ACCESS – ENROLMENTS, CLUSTERS, DISTANCE EDUCATION, BOARDING

Access to quality education in rural and remote communities is an extremely high priority to families, and often dictates where they will reside. Options for geographically isolated students to access their education varies depending on location, financial constraints and personal preference. While Distance Education and boarding school is the most viable option for some, the local primary and secondary schools are a vital component to educational access for any small community.

In order to improve opportunities for regional, rural and remote students, there needs to be a focus on curriculum provision and delivery in secondary schools – seven shires in Queensland do not even have a secondary school available to them. Low enrolments usually mean a full curriculum cannot be offered via face-to-face delivery, thereby hindering subject selection and curriculum opportunities.

Governments need to invest in the provision of a rigorous curriculum through a variety of modes – distance education and virtual classrooms are a possibility. A Year 11 student at Longreach SHS can be a part of a Physics class at Brisbane SHS through technological advances, if the internet connectivity is optimum. Partnerships need to be forged between larger metro high schools and those in rural and remote areas, whereby students are sharing knowledge and resources and experiencing valuable discussion with a larger peer group.

ICPA Qld Inc continue to support its federal counterpart in the lobby for an increase in financial support from the government's Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) program to bridge the widening gap between subsidies and actual boarding school expenses. Many rural and remote families still cannot afford to send their child/ren to boarding school as the out of pocket expenses are too high with growing fees.

DIVERSITY

The purpose and role of education in remote communities is that of a provider of a space where learning is valued, and where parents and community are welcomed as participants in all aspects of school life, as well as being the facilitator of a student's future hopes and dreams - *Giving a student the tools to become a responsible young person who is confident to strive for everything and anything they want*. Essentially, the Red Dirt findings are consistent with the values of many rural and remote communities.

Educational success means literate students – students who can leave school with the skills, knowledge and tools for the 'real' world. This means providing a curriculum which relates to all students from all demographics. For students in rural and remote areas, success equals outcomes and results which are on par with city counterparts.

Creating and sustaining a vibrant and high-quality learning environment in rural and remote schools is critical to retaining students within the classroom and maintaining their investment in their own education. Technology is essential in today's society and a topic which invariably interests almost all students – yet connectivity in rural and remote communities hinders accessibility to the latest digital advances for these students. STEM is now a priority in education across the Australian Curriculum, yet again these communities are hampered by poor internet service and speeds.

Rural and remote students need to see that their communities are valued and supported, and it is through that perspective that they can be encouraged to remain in these areas rather than moving to urban areas. Rural communities and students need to have access to adequate support services in the form of Allied Health, Learning Support and Mental Health Service to ensure the educational journey is supported and successful for all involved in the process. Support to the student and families living in rural and remote delivers the message that the community is important. It gives the student a willingness to participate and achieve whilst feeling valued.

TRANSITIONING BEYOND SCHOOL

Boarding options for rural and remote students at VET providers would encourage participation. 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. Provision of facilities assists in negating some of those challenges. The adoption of flexible approaches to the way the learning/practical components are structured could encourage participation, retention and course completion. Supporting students to relocate, due to a shortage of relevant businesses in their local area, through partnerships with relevant parties to allow the completion of practical course components would be welcomed.

Enshrining in policy, flexibility in assessment would allow greater engagement by students with disabilities allowing them to contribute to their own, and society's, communal and economic wellbeing. Building in support services to minimise the impact of their disability, where practical, would also promote uptake of VET opportunities.

Provision of affordable, on campus accommodation specifically for remote and rural students would assist these students who may need to move hundreds of kilometres for tertiary education. In determining eligibility for this accommodation weighting needs to be given to home location as well as level of extended familial support available, not OP score or course selection.

The establishment, and ongoing commitment, to decentralised learning centres whether they be for VET or Tertiary learning, alone or in combination, would reduce student costs, encourage participation due to the closeness of support and increase the chance of those students, once qualified, staying in the region all while strengthening the sustainability and liveability of the region. Mt Isa Centre for Rural and Remote Health (MICRRH) is a notable example of this.