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SUBMISSION to the Queensland Anti-Cyberbullying Taskforce

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 forty-six 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 make a submission to this Anti Cyberbullying Taskforce to address the unique needs of rural and remote students.

INTRODUCTION

With Year 7 now the first year of secondary school, our rural and remote children are boarding from the young age of 11. The move to boarding school, often thousands of kilometres away, is, without a doubt, one of the biggest transitions these children will ever make. The majority have either come from a very small school, or a distance education background where they have been taught in a home schoolroom by their mother or a governess. The adjustments to everyday life and culture are enormous - from dormitory's full of strangers, attending 'day-school' with peers, timetables, new teachers and rules and a new city – all while coping with homesickness and the reality that Mum or Dad won't be there in the afternoon. The transition is compounded by the relatively limited social exposure these students have in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts. The challenge these vulnerable children encounter increases the potential risk of cyber-bullying.

The connection parents have with their children once they go to boarding school is severely diminished at a time when the level of support required is the greatest. These children must come to rely on the pastoral care from the school and fellow peers. It is imperative they are set up for success from the very beginning with tools and strategies to help them deal with the challenges borne out of a world where social media is at the forefront of their lives.

PASTORAL CARE

ICPA Qld believes the unique nature of boarding necessitates the need for boarding schools and hostels to have an established pastoral care system. All staff, academic and pastoral, should be adequately trained to identify signs of a stressed child in their care. Just as a teacher is trained to identify the signs of a student

struggling academically, so too teachers and pastoral care staff employed by the school should be trained to identify students who are struggling emotionally, mentally and socially.

ICPA Qld strongly recommends that the Queensland Government formally adopt the national Boarding Standard for Australian Schools and Residence. This comprehensive Standard was prepared by the Standards Australia Committee, Education Facilities and Services Management. The objective is to provide owners, operators, managers and staff of boarding services with a framework of required topics that need to be addressed in order to deliver a safe, healthy and productive environment for boarders. The Standard addresses areas around boarder safety and child protection, boarder health and wellbeing, holistic development, competence and professional learning of boarding staff and parent, family and community engagement.

The adoption of this Standard would provide all Boarding Schools and Hostels across Queensland with a nationally accepted set of guidelines to base policy and procedure on, providing uniformity, accountability and consistency for schools, parents and students.

TRAINING/UPSKILLING OF STAFF

ICPA Qld believes each school/hostel needs to have incorporated operational/master plans, along with a mandate for ALL boarding school staff to undertake formal training in Probable Serious Mental illness (PSMI) and for regular refreshing of this training. Anecdotal evidence has shown that the Beyond Blue developed online questionnaire could assist staff to identify issues and assist those in their care. Ready access to, and utilization of, the K-10 Form by staff should be encouraged as an integral part of the toolkit used by schools in their student mental health and resilience programming.

To minimize harm and maximize positive interaction and support for students, in addition to formal training for its staff, ICPA Qld believes boarding schools /hostels should establish and entrench a real-time connection and frank, robust information flow between the boarding house/hostel and the school, as what happens in each location has a flow on effect to the other. Similarly, the establishment of a strong, compassionate pastoral care system in the boarding house/hostel is tantamount to success in effectively supporting students entrusted to their care. A vigorous communication flow between school, boarding house/hostel, child and parents is imperative in creating a safe, secure environment.

EDUCATION OF PARENTS AND CARE GIVERS

In today's digital society, it is vital that parents and carers are kept informed and offered extensive education opportunities surrounding the use of technology which enables anonymous bullying. Many parents feel they are out of touch with what their children are doing online and don't have the awareness required to monitor their child's usage and activities, especially if a child doesn't want them to. As a part of reducing the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying, we believe education of parents and caregivers is fundamental. Increasing the awareness of what is cyberbullying, how it can affect a child and where to go for help are all important elements which could form part of a parent education program.

In many parts of rural and remote Queensland, digital technology is limited in relation to internet availability. This issue also impacts on a parent's ability to ensure they are aware and knowledgeable of their child's world in relation to social media. In these areas an education awareness program would need to be made available by a variety of platforms such as face to face sessions, flyers, podcasts and YouTube videos, to maximize opportunity for parents to get the message where and when it best meets their needs and lifestyle. These should be backed up by hard copies that can be accessed regardless of location, especially for rural/remote or boarding school families who cannot attend face to face meetings. This also needs to be kept relevant to changing media and app trends. Whatever format is delivered it needs to be a simple step by step process. Parents and care givers need to be educated on how to set up protective measures on their children devices and how to check a child's usage. Parents of rural and remote children often experience feelings of isolation from society due to geography and poor internet connectivity. It is vital that this group of parents are specifically targeted in ways which they find easy to access in order to bridge the gap caused by their location.

As parents and caregivers become more aware of the digital world they can become more involved in their child's use of social media and work together to ensure the appropriate safety measures are enabled and age appropriate boundaries are set.

EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

ICPA Qld believe that schools play an important role in the education of children and social media. For many rural and remote children, the exposure to social media only comes into play as they enter the realm of boarding school, as poor internet connectivity and a relatively narrow social circle limits time spent on devices whilst at home. Therefore, Schools of Distance Education, small schools and then boarding schools have a responsibility to play a part in educating children and teenagers around the issue of cyberbullying.

ICPA Qld suggest that this education should center around working together with parents on building personal resilience within their children. This could include providing awareness of what cyberbullying looks like, it's potential effects and strategies to handle potential situations where children may find themselves involved in an online confrontation. Furthermore, educating children with information and support on what to do if they find themselves a bystander to a peer who is experiencing cyberbullying is also paramount.

Peer pressure is an enormous influencer of engagement in and reaction to social media. A child's peers are arguably the best influencers and modifiers of social content, "acceptability" of messaging around content and behavior leading to actions online/in the "real" world. They are also instigators in the consequences to those actions/reactions. ICPA Qld believes peer to peer mentoring and sharing of their real life experiences is a key strategy to effective engagement, potentially creating active rather than passive hearing of key messages.

ICPA QLD suggests that age appropriate programs could be built into P-12 Digital Technology subjects as a way to embed appropriate online behavior for students, and to ingrain the concept that the internet is an unrestricted public area.

Schools can also monitor the implementation of digital technology within their own individual school environment, making sure that the students and parents have been thoroughly introduced to all the safety measures available on their device for their protection. Simply requiring that the student has a laptop or iPad for school purposes is not sufficient and many children and their parents are unaware of the array of applications available which can assist with ensuring safety is not compromised.

Exposing the loopholes in social apps and the inadvertent ways children may expose themselves to risk, is also a key to helping them become self-aware of where, when, who and how they engage on social media platforms.

Knowledge is power!

ICPA QLD suggests that all boarding schools/hostels have in place an outdoor activity/ physical exercise program, especially for those children that do not undertake competitive sport.

There is increasing evidence in the mental health benefits of exercise in children. Studies provide support for the benefits of physical exercise in children and adolescents on executive function, brain activity and depressive symptoms.

Results from studies also show that children who have a better sense of self and wellbeing could balance out instances of cyberbullying with friendships away from school and the web. They are also less likely to be negatively affected by bullying and are better able to switch off or walk away. (*The Impact of High Speed Broadband Development on Youth Consumption of Internet (online) Interactive Services and Consumer Well-Being*, Dr Margee Hume and Associate Professor Gillian Sullivan Mort)

MOBILE PHONE USE

ICPA encourages consistency and cooperation between all schools in order to determine the appropriate usage of mobile phones and other devices during school hours.

Limiting the use of mobile phones during school hours, including break times, would encourage social interaction among students, and increase student engagement with the world around them. ICPA suggests that actively involving the parents/caregivers in the formation of a policy document at their school and explaining the reasons for these policies is an important step in the communication process.

SCHOOLS IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

Approximately half of the 1236 state schools in Queensland are classified as regional, rural or remote. Schools in small communities with under 50 enrolments frequently have composite classes eg. P-3, 4-6 and so on. Delivering an intensive curriculum to multi-age classrooms places a huge demand on teachers and teaching staff, as well as teaching Principals. The pressures of accommodating different learning styles and levels, administrative duties and under-staffing compounds these demands. A reduction in the ratio of teachers to students would allow classroom teachers more time to spend interacting with the students in their care in more meaningful ways, which in turn would increase the likelihood of these children reporting

any incidents of bullying while reducing the occurrences at the same time. ICPA Qld believes that in multi-age classrooms a teacher student ratio of 1:20 would afford teaching staff the extra time to invest in their students' emotional wellbeing as well as their academic.

The majority of teaching staff in rural and remote schools have a positive and trusting relationship with the students in their care. However, staff require support in the way of adequate staff to student ratios, along with adequate specialist support staff such as guidance officers, to ensure student's emotional wellbeing is supported along with their academic achievement.

Guidance Officers are well trained to recognise, respond and potentially prevent issues for young children, however in rural and remote areas most children do not see a Guidance Officer more than once a term unless there has been an extreme need. ICPA Qld strongly advocate for an increase in the number of Guidance Officers employed by the Department of Education, specifically in rural and remote Queensland. The distance travelled between the number of schools allocated to current staff means that young children are missing out on the care and attention they so desperately require.

Opportunities to educate students on social media and cyber bullying materials may also be diminished due to the time demands of delivering a vigorous curriculum to multi-age classrooms where attracting and retaining adequate staffing numbers is challenging.

MEDIA CAMPAIGN

ICPA propose that a National Media Campaign, involving the QLD State Government, should be established to prevent and inform the populace of the consequences of, in particular, cyberbullying and bullying and the impact that it has on society. This could be in a two stage campaign:

- A campaign directed primarily at youth, to influence their Social Media decisions; and
- A campaign directed to parents and other adults who influence youth, the adult campaign given the facilitative role of adult behaviour in Social Media use and the potential preventive effect of parental monitoring.

ICPA Qld suggest such a campaign would need to be implemented across a wide range of platforms in order to ensure such a campaign is reaching every one across Australia. Vigorous anti-smoking, drink driving and speeding campaigns have been extremely effective in the past, and could potentially be just as effective in dealing with this new threat to the wellbeing and safety of our nation's young people.

ICPA Qld thank the Taskforce for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.