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SUBMISSION to the Review to Achieve Education Excellence in Australian Schools

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 make a submission to this review.

EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR ALL AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

Australian schools are now educating approximately 3.6 million students across the nation. Whether these students attend a large metropolitan state school, or a tiny rural country school, these students must be catered for as individuals.

Parent and community engagement is vital to ensure students are part of a culture which cultivates identity, pride and ownership of the school they attend. ICPA Qld believes healthy, vibrant schools are those where school leaders and staff work collaboratively with the entire school community, thereby developing mutual respect in a supportive environment. This can only be advantageous for all parties concerned, most importantly, students.

Out of approx. 9000 schools across Australia, nearly 4000 are in regional, rural and remote locations. Around 1.2 million students are being educated outside urban areas. Australian schools must be able to provide a quality, supportive educational system for these learners, regardless of location. ICPA Qld believes educators should be supported to be flexible with curriculum delivery in regional, rural and remote locations, utilising the community landscape (eg. industry, tourism, commerce) to promote understanding and comprehension. Where appropriate and practical, core curriculum subjects should be delivered in the context of real life learning to ensure students are engaged, and given every opportunity to reach their full potential.

It is imperative that teachers in regional, rural and remote schools have access to the latest professional development to ensure curriculum delivery in non-urban schools is not at a lower standard due to a lack of quality training. This professional development should include areas unique to teaching in smaller schools eg. multi-age classrooms, technology (and its challenges) and the delivery of online lessons remotely.

IMPROVEMENT AND SUPPORT IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

ICPA Qld believe there are currently numerous projects in Australian states and territories improving student outcomes in Australian schools with great success. It is important that these initiatives are shared across borders, providing opportunities for nationwide collaboration. Communication between states and territories is vital to promote continual improvement and success for all students.

Virtual Classrooms & Connections:

Queensland has a varied educational landscape. There are 1239 state schools in Queensland, with over half of these classified regional, rural or remote. Many students are considered geographically isolated as they do not have daily access to a physical school due to where they live. These students access schooling via distance education. Other students attend small rural schools. Internet connectivity and a lack of specialist teachers make accessing a full curriculum challenging in many instances.

ICPA Qld believes that a full curriculum should be available to all Australian students with the option of a multi-faceted delivery approach, ensuring that disadvantaged students have access to all subjects which are available to students in metropolitan areas. For senior students, access to subjects can provide pathways into chosen careers and local industry.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is currently working closely with several small schools across western Queensland to provide exciting and innovative learning opportunities through the ZOOM platform using virtual connectivity. University academics are able to share their skills with staff and students hundreds of kilometres away using this technology. The opportunities this program could offer all students across the country is endless.

Similarly, the IMPACT Centre is also providing virtual learning to students across Queensland. The Centre partners with schools around Queensland to provide web conferencing sessions on programs like Booster Reading, IT Design, Coding, Critical Thinking and much more. Groups can be formed from a combination of schools. For example, a Booster Reading class for Grades 4-5 could consist of 5 participating schools, so students from regional, rural & remote schools can interact in lessons with students from metropolitan schools. At present the program is a fee for service model, and is therefore reliant on school budgets and adequate internet connectivity.

Improvement in connectivity and communications across our nation is imperative to maintain equal access to educational opportunities for rural and remote schools and students. Improvement in student outcomes, particularly for senior students, could be facilitated through the provision of virtual classrooms in partnership with larger metropolitan schools. Virtual interaction with similar peer groups would enable rural and remote students to access a full suite of subjects and gain the advantage of discussion and collaboration with like-minded students.

Learning and Support Hubs:

The creation of more centres of excellence which are available to educational staff, students and parents, would provide opportunities to increase educational outcomes of students, whilst supporting families at home. A good example of this is the Queensland Education Department's Autism Hub & Reading Centre. The successful implementation of this model has meant that there is a one stop shop for support and knowledge that allows access for all types of educational delivery.

Since the creation of the Autism Hub and Reading Centre in Brisbane, ICPA Qld State Council has seen a marked decrease in the number of member concerns in relation to students already verified or exhibiting signs on the spectrum. Parents are feeling supported and more knowledgeable in how to 'teach' reading and provide support to their own children in the home context. Staff, students and parents who have needed assistance now have a central location for resources regardless of locality or teaching ability.

ICPA Qld supports the expansion of such Hubs to include a Gifted & Talented focus and believes that there is scope for Hubs such as these to be replicated across all states and territories. Such centres would allow support for all regional, rural and remote students and their teachers, regardless of whether they are at a state school or studying through Distance Education.

Teaching Excellence:

ICPA Qld strongly believe that a positive attitude to teaching, in particular teaching in geographically isolated areas, should be encouraged during pre-service training and supported after graduation by induction and in-service programs. Small schools across the country struggle to attract and retain quality teaching staff, and in turn struggle to maintain positive outcomes and relationships with their school community.

Further education of Principals is vital in ensuring positive relationships and school outcomes within communities. Communication is key in any school community and investment into educating staff in leadership roles and the importance of parent and community engagement should be paramount for all Education Departments across Australia. Students, staff and families work cooperatively and provide exceptional outcomes across the board when they feel valued and engaged with all aspects of their school and its decision-making processes.

Currently only a few Higher Education Institutions have made the distinction between rural and remote teaching and mainstream classroom teaching and adjusted their course offering accordingly. ICPA Qld believes these institutions should create a separate core offering so those teaching elements which are unique to small schools and Schools of Distance Education are practiced and experienced before preservice teachers are seeking employment. The skill set required when teaching multi-age classrooms and managing curriculum offerings and behaviour across several age groups is distinctly different to those of larger schools. Better preparation for preservice teachers can only increase attraction and retention figures for rural and remote regions

At present, the Professional Learning Hub in the Darling Downs South West region (DDSW), based in Roma (QLD), works with various Queensland universities to upskill and prepare student teachers for teaching positions in rural and remote areas. They provide training, tours, and assist with practicum placements with a view to students then taking up first year positions in a rural and remote school. ICPA Qld believes this model could be expanded across all states and territories where need is identified.

Distance Education:

Queensland has a vast landscape. Many students do not have daily access to a school due to distance, and therefore access schooling by distance education. Home Tutors play a vital role in the delivery of the curriculum in the home schoolroom, historically with very little training or professional development. Recently the Queensland Government announced funding for Distance Education Home Tutors to support their students in the early years to learn to read. ICPA Qld believes this is a positive start, and more needs to be done to support Home Tutors, not just in Queensland, but across the nation. It is imperative that Home

Tutors are provided with the tools to effectively and confidently play their role, alongside the centre teacher, in the delivery of their students' education.

Vocational Education & Training in Schools:

It is important that school leaders and educators are recognising and encouraging excellence in trade and training pathways at the secondary level of education across the nation. Many rural and remote students are well suited to a vocational pathway and these skills and professions are vital to the viability and progress of rural and remote communities. VET in schools is currently providing a welcome opportunity for many young teens to increase their confidence, experience success and be rewarded with a Certificate for their hard work. Under the new Tertiary Entrance system in Queensland, a VET subject can be recognised in the ATAR calculation for future tertiary entrance. ICPA Qld believes this is excellent recognition of the importance and relevance of the VETiS program.

BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Connectivity:

Australia continues to be plagued with connectivity issues despite the rollout of the nbn and the Mobile Black Spot Program. ICPA Qld acknowledges that connectivity issues are not always limited to rural and remote sectors, however, when coupled with the associated limited access to education and health professionals, insufficient connectivity can be crippling.

The inadequacy of connectivity in rural and remote communities is a major barrier to students' ability to access equal educational opportunities. With adequate connectivity, virtual learning opportunities could be accessed in any classroom to improve engagement and performance. Access to health professionals for verification and support purposes would be more streamlined and timely and improve student outcomes. Sufficient connectivity would also eliminate the time consuming and frustrating efforts of students and staff who are attempting to access daily lessons through distance education with continued dropouts.

ICPA Qld firmly believe that connectivity is a major barrier to the success of education across Australia and one which needs to be considered a vital element to ensure educational improvements for all students and staff. The national Mobile Blackspot Program should include additional loading in the criteria to allow for rural and remote schools with no mobile coverage to have priority.

Access to Professionals:

For student and school improvement across Australia, access to professionals in the education and health sectors needs to be better coordinated and more timely. In particular, schools in rural and remote Australia have continued difficulty accessing professionals due to geographical isolation, and this lack of access often means students are able to slip through the system without identification or support.

ICPA Qld believes Allied Health and Learning Assistance support should be more readily available and accessible, and relevant delivery platforms (such as Telehealth models) need to ensure that, regardless of geographical location, no child misses out on the needed assessment, programs and skilled delivery to allow for the best educational outcomes.



Allied Health and Learning Support options delivered virtually would provide a supplement to face to face services and decrease the difficulties in regards to distance. However, until connectivity is reliable and capable, these telehealth models are impossible to fully implement successfully.

ICPA Qld thanks the Federal Government for the Review into Achieving Educational Excellence and values the opportunity to highlight the needs of regional, rural and remote students.