



# ICPA Briefing Papers

## Specific Education Needs

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# Introduction

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation working on behalf of our members for equity of access to appropriate education for children living outside of metropolitan areas.

Children with specific education needs require access to educational opportunities appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Living in a rural or remote location should not compromise their access to such opportunities. Distance limits the choice of schools available to students in rural and remote areas, but for students with specific learning needs, this choice can be further reduced. The challenges of having both geographic isolation and learning difficulties can be seen as a "double disability". All students have a right to participate in education on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful, and dignified learning programs, regardless of their geographical location.

ICPA members have highlighted issues impacting access to equitable education for students with specific learning needs. These have been summarised below, together with recommendations for implementation that will improve educational opportunities and learning outcomes for these children. Please note the wording children and student are synonymous throughout.

## Summary

### **1. Provision of Medicare Rebate for Telehealth Services**

There is a need to expand subsidised telehealth services to cater for students with disorders directly affecting their ability to succeed at learning. Accessing Allied Health professionals and Medical specialists via Telehealth would provide another level of support to rural and remote children with specific learning needs.

### **2. Provision of travel and accommodation assistance for travel to face-to-face specialist services**

Availability of travel and accommodation assistance for rural and remote families travelling to access face-to-face specialist medical services for students with specific learning needs is imperative to increase the accessibility of services and improve health literacy outcomes for children in rural areas.

### **3. Improved staff training for teachers in rural and remote locations**

Teachers and support staff and distance education tutors in geographically isolated locations must have access to professional development which ensures children with specific learning needs are adequately supported through their school years.

## Summary cont.

### **4. Workshops for rural and remote parents of gifted students**

Parents of gifted children require improved access to appropriate workshops and support which enables them to effectively assist their children's personal and educational needs.

### **5. Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties**

All rural and remote students must receive early and comprehensive screening for disorders which will affect their ability to participate fully in the school environment. Early screening can ensure children's educational needs are appropriately catered for throughout their schooling years.

### **6. Provision of additional resources in boarding schools for students with disability**

It is imperative that additional resources are provided to boarding facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) database.



# Recommendations

## ISSUE 1

### Provision of Medicare Rebate for Telehealth Services

Utilisation of telehealth services can be of great benefit to families in geographically isolated locations who would otherwise have to travel considerable distances or encounter lengthy delays to access face-to-face consultations with relevant health professionals.

Students with learning disabilities and disorders affecting learning require frequent and timely consultations to enable a successful start to their school career. Providing appropriate support through their education, especially the early years, can be assisted via Telehealth services for many families who are unable to access ongoing professional care due to living in rural and remote areas. allied health professionals due to living in rural and remote areas.

There are Allied Health and medical specialist consultations which can be satisfactorily delivered using telehealth services where the technology is available. These services are already providing improved access to health services for some children in geographically isolated areas. The cost to families to access such services should also be equitable.

### Recommendation

**That geographically isolated children with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Aphasia/Dysphasia, auditory processing disorder, language processing disorder and visual processing disorders be provided access to subsidised telehealth consultations with Allied Health professionals and medical specialists to support their specific educational needs and learning difficulties.**

## ISSUE 2

### Provision of travel and accommodation assistance for travel to face-to-face Allied Health and medical specialist services

Children with specific learning needs require access to appropriate professional support services which requires travelling for consultations. Financial assistance should be available to support geographically isolated families accessing face-to-face consultations with expenses such as travel and accommodation to attend these consultations.

## **Recommendation**

**That travel and accommodation assistance be made available for rural and remote families travelling to access face-to-face professional support services for students with specific learning needs.**

### **ISSUE 3**

#### **Improved staff training for teachers in rural and remote locations**

Distance education students often have no daily face-to-face access to appropriately qualified teachers and are reliant on distance education tutors who lack the necessary training to provide the support required. It is essential that professional development and support opportunities are provided to tutors to ensure that specific learning needs are catered for.

Similarly, teachers and support staff in small schools in geographically isolated locations require training and support for students with learning challenges such as Dyslexia and disorders affecting learning such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the "Good to Great Schools" initiative which will benefit the 33 remote schools located in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. However, funding for this initiative does not extend to students studying via distance education, or to the many other rural and remote schools in Australia which also teach children that have learning difficulties and require extra support.

Pre-service teachers should also be equipped with appropriate training to identify and provide the required support and assistance to children with specific education needs in the classroom. Modules on the identification of and how to cater for children with specific educational needs should be a component of teacher-training courses. The provision of a Rural and Remote major in pre-service teaching courses should also include instruction in recognition of specific education difficulties such as ASD and Dyslexia.

## **Recommendations**

- **That teachers in rural and remote schools, including distance education teachers and distance education supervisors, are provided training to recognise the signs of, and cater for, medical and learning disorders in students which impact their learning.**
- **That universities which provide teacher training include modules to help teachers better support students with disorders which affect their learning in their curriculum.**





## ISSUE 4

### Workshops for rural and remote parents of gifted students

*Two Federal Senate Select Committees (1988 and 2001) identified gifted students as being the most educationally disadvantaged students in the nation; disadvantage magnified in rural and remote areas.*

Ten years ago, with (then) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training funding, a series of highly successful and well-attended workshops for parents of gifted students were held across rural and remote Australia. In small communities, teachers often attended as well.

Now a new generation of students, parents and teachers need access to the education and support to cater for the personal and educational needs of gifted children in rural and remote areas.

## Recommendation

**That the Federal Government provide funding for the delivery of workshops for parents of gifted students living in rural and remote areas.**

## ISSUE 5

### Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties

Children in rural and remote areas often have little or no access to screening and early intervention services, setting some children up for a school life of frustration and failures.

The knowledge and resources to diagnose 4-year-olds at the risk of learning difficulties is readily available. ICPA (Aust) believes this knowledge would be best implemented in the first term of compulsory schooling. Access to early screening for phonological awareness by teachers in rural and remote contexts would identify students 'at risk' of having learning difficulties.

## **Recommendation**

**That the Federal Government ensures all rural and remote children have access to early identification and intervention for learning difficulties.**

### **ISSUE 6**

#### **Provision of additional resources to boarding schools for students with disability**

Boarding facilities need to be equipped with adequate resources to cater for boarding students with specific education needs. The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) provides all Australian schools, education authorities and the community with a clear picture of the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they require to enable them to partake in education on the same basis as other students.

When the significant role of boarding schools is taken into consideration, it is reasonable to expect that additional resources are provided to facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.

## **Recommendation**

**That additional resources are provided to facilities, including boarding schools, where student requirements have been clearly identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) database.**

