

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia Inc



Submission

to the

State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia

for the

independent review of public education in Western Australia

from the

State Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia Inc.

ICPA (WA)

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, ICPA (WA) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the SSTUWA commissioned independent review of public education in WA and highlight the challenges that are unique to rural and remote students, to ensure equity of education and support for these children.

ICPA (WA) is a voluntary, apolitical, not-for-profit parent organisation which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families (around 300) of ICPA (WA) reside in small communities in rural and often isolated areas of Western Australia all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to an appropriate education for their children and the provision of services required in achieving this.

Education sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, health and contribution to society, and experiences in education from kindy to year 12 will stay with individuals throughout their lives.

Schools throughout regional and remote WA are often difficult to source staff for due to many factors I will outline below. In recent times, the staffing structure of the government schools has put the onus back to schools to source, interview and staff schools rather than a separate department. This does have its advantages as it allows schools to choose staff to more closely suit their individual school. The main disadvantage is that rural and remote schools often advertise for positions and may not have anyone suitable apply. Principals spend days going through 'pools' of potential teachers who often are not interested in the placement. The time principals spend sourcing staff in small rural and remote school cuts deeply into time that could be used to support current staff and students and improve student outcomes. The stress that is placed on these principals is enormous and often impacts their personal lives greatly after hours and over holidays.

Teaching staff cannot always be found for rural and remote schools. This year we have become aware of a case of a teacher taking 18 weeks of long service leave and a principal not being able to fill that position after exhausting all avenues. As a result, there has been a series of relief teachers rolling through the class. The impact on the students has been immense. For effective teaching and learning to take place strong relationships must be built with consistent staff to provide the security and continuity that our vulnerable young people require.

The difficulties in attracting staff to our rural and remote areas is complex. Distance is a major factor. Moving away from friends, family and security of a known area is challenging and expensive for teachers. Living in rural and remote WA simply costs a significant amount more than Perth or Bunbury. Fuel and food are notably more expensive, and often extra fuel is required to travel to purchase food. Housing in many regional and remote areas is at times expensive, not available or of a standard that is not acceptable in 2023.

The expectations and workloads of a teacher in a rural or remote school is tremendous. Let's begin with multi-age teaching. In a small school you will undoubtedly be faced with a series of years in one class, not just a split class. For example, you may have K/P/1/2 or

3/4/5/6 in a single class and be expected to prepare and implement the curriculum for those year levels across the learning areas, without the support that larger schools have where there may be two or three classes of the same year level which allows the planning load to be spread.

In a rural and remote schools there may only be a principal and three teachers for example. These 4 people must take on all the responsibilities that are spread across many more in larger schools. These may include organising and running sporting carnivals, both faction and interschool, organising specialist programs, incursions, excursion, camps, NAIDOC Week programs, curriculum development, leaders for each learning areas, resourcing each learning area, Positive Behaviour School Team, Finance Committee, Occupational Health and Safety Officer, first aid officer, various community events etc. When teachers are required to take on so many different roles outside of actual teaching and learning and working with our children, it is inevitable that it takes away from planning and implementing the curriculum as required, and adds much more to work that is already being done in the evenings and on weekends.

Students in rural and remote schools may experience challenges in accessing developmental services including but not limited to speech pathologists, school psychologists, physiotherapists, paediatricians and occupational therapists. Wait times in regional areas is often excessive which can lead to delays in intervention, diagnoses and treatment or families travelling great distances. Travelling to appointments can result in great cost and stress to a family, and students missing several days of school. Although we do have Department of Education School Psychologists, rural and remote schools at times do not get adequate support time with small schools maybe only having two visits per term, and the time at the school can be cut into with travel time being included in school visit time.

COVID had a great impact on our rural and remote families who were already isolated to some degree. As services were removed from school, teachers were left to manage increased workloads and mental strain unassisted. During this time, there was no school psychologist or speech pathologist to visit, leaving many children with great delays in diagnosis and no intervention. Although it may look like things are 'back to normal', it is not for many rural and remote families. For example, there are some Schools of the Air that are not currently conducting all important home visits. These visits allow teachers to build a stronger relationship with students and their families that distance has obscured as they cannot meet face-to-face on a regular basis.

ICPA (WA) recommendations:

- The review needs to ensure equity of access to a quality public education with a rural and remote context
- Initiatives need to be put in place to provide appropriate and affordable or subsidised housing for teachers in rural and remote area
- Initiatives need to be put in place for professional development and support to assist with preparing and implementing the curriculum for several year levels at a time
- Extra money needs to be allocated to schools to assist with the workload requirements of a small school, and ensure it does not impact on teaching and learning time

- Modification of the staffing process to ease the burden on principals
- Introduce school based speech therapists to work with a cluster of schools similar to school psychologist model
- More initiatives to attract staff to rural and remote areas, for example, work for 4 years in a rural and remote setting and have a proportion or all of your HECS debt paid or simply a significant increase in pay
- Initiatives to decrease workload

EQUITABLE ACCESS

The key message which ICPA (WA) continues to promote across all components of our advocacy is equitable access to educational opportunities and support programs for geographically isolated students. The importance of quality public education is vital. It is imperative when considering the provision of public education that the implementation meets the needs of provides equitable to access to rural and remote families.