

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia Inc



Submission

to the

Legislative Assembly, Education and Health Standing Committee

for the

Inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools

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 Inquiry into support for autistic children and young people in schools and to highlight the challenges that are unique to rural and remote students, to ensure effective 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, trade and training. The majority of member families (approximately 300) of ICPA (WA) reside in small communities in rural and geographically isolated areas of Western Australia, and 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.

Distance from service and the isolation that this causes is a major factor impacting support for children with autism spectrum disorder. Before extra support for a child with autism can be granted through the Department of Education, an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis must be made. This requires a team of health professionals including a paediatrician, a psychologist and a speech pathologist to work together. Wait times for all of these developmental services in regional and remote Western Australia can be in excess of a year in many places. If an appointment can be secured in another place in Western Australia, it can cause much distress to travel for these children to attend appointments. Delays in diagnosis results in delays in evidence-based practices being put in place, support being available and poorer outcomes for our children.

Although school psychologists are employed through the Department of Education and all schools have access, there are many reports that the time allocation is well below the requirements of the school community with the increasing mental health care needs. In many small regional and remote schools it can be difficult to even get a psychologist to visit the school once a term as their services may be shared amongst a group of schools on a 'needs' basis. If your need is not triaged as a high priority, you may be left with a very long wait.

Distance does of course impact access to resources that assist in implementing successful evidence-based practices in schools. The School of Special Educational Needs: Disability (SEND) is a great support for teachers and special needs education assistants that would with children with autism spectrum disorder, though the times between visits to schools can vary in regional and remote areas greatly due to distance.

The distance and remoteness of much of Western Australia can vastly impact the access to experienced, appropriately trained, and supported staff in schools. Though teachers can be supported to move from one school to another with housing and transport, this is not the case for special needs education assistants. Special needs education assistants that are suited to the position and well supported with ongoing training is vital to a child with autism's success. In regional and remote areas there may only be a very small pool of education assistants to draw on in your area, this does not always lead to the best outcomes for a child.

Rural and remote school facilities are not always suited to a child's needs, and though modifications can take place at times, this is not always the case and can cause great safety concerns. I will state three examples.

Example one. At a small regional school a kindy child who already had an autism diagnosis started school. This school already had three other children with autism, and it was well equipped to deal with this child's needs. Except for their tendency to be a 'runner'. That is, at break times or whenever doing an outdoor activity, they often ran, usually towards their house just across the road from school. There was no secure area within the vast bounds of the school for the child to be deemed safe, and the administration of the school said they could not afford to make a safe area. The school did have a fence around the perimeter, but it could be hurdled by the child. Staff at the school then had to ensure they were always in a position to catch the child when she ran. There were several occasions when the child managed to escape and run down the road.

Example two. At a larger regional senior high school a child with autism started year 7. Even though there had been a transition program and plan in place which addressed areas of concern the year before starting high school, half way through year 7 there was still safety concerns that had not been addressed. This child had been identified as at risk of jumping from the second floor buildings. As a result, no year 7 classes were being held on the second floor thus restricting where the rest of the year 7 group could take their classes. The time delays in actions to make the second floor safe for the child has had a great impact on his outcomes and that of his peers.

Example three. Most schools in regional and remote Western Australia are quite old. They do not have facilities built to modern standards. Access to a disabled toilet and change facilities are not standard and may need to be part of support offered through (SSEND). These transportable facilities then need to be placed in a part of a school where they fit best with sewerage and water etc. This is often far from classrooms and 'help' if needed. An older child requiring to be changed and washed when soiled may then require a second teacher or education assistant to be present due to the distance and isolation within the school.

The lack of support for children with autism spectrum disorder attending boarding schools was highlighted this year at the annual ICPA WA State Conference. Attending a boarding school for high school is often not a choice in regional and remote WA. In much of the state it is simply not an option, either the family moves out of the area for their children's education, or children attend boarding school. Funding is not available to children with autism in residential boarding facilities to assist with adjustments and accommodations that should be made to allow them to access appropriate schooling. A boarding house has a duty of care, responsibility and accountability for the increased needs of a student with autism. Currently, the lack of assistance in this area is forcing families to leave their homes and businesses in rural and remote areas to move to where they can access education for their children.

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 education is vital. It is imperative when considering the support for autistic children and young people in schools that the implementation meets the needs of and provides equitable access to rural and remote families.