



2025 Specific Needs Federal Conference Report

Ali Allison - NSW

For students with specific education needs (SEN), access to quality education is essential for their development, inclusion, and lifelong success. However, for children living in rural and remote areas of Australia, meeting these needs poses significant challenges.

Following the 2024 Federal Conference, the Specific Education Needs portfolio addressed the following issues-

- Improving rural and remote school's access to specialists who can diagnose students with learning disabilities and offer ongoing education and support to students and their teachers.
- A commitment to a set intervention period of no more than six months from diagnosis of students with learning disabilities to commencing treatment.
- Addressing inequities within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), particularly regarding the ability of NDIS providers to charge cancellation fees to remote and geographically isolated participants for telehealth services. This issue arises when participants are unable to cancel appointments at least seven days in advance due to circumstances beyond their control related to their geographic location.
- Improved rural and remote access and utilisation of Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) funding, currently managed through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

Unfortunately, as reported in the portfolio's April Motion update, after writing to the relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers in regard to all motion issues, Federal Council only received replies from the Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in regard to issues relating to the NDIS.

As we look at the motions received over the past few years in this portfolio, and the information provided in the case studies alongside these motions, it is clear that access to professionals who can diagnose and support students with specific education needs, including speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and special education teachers, is at a crisis point in many rural and remote areas of Australia.

In his response to one of our letters, the Minister for the NDIS at the time, the Hon Bill Shorten, referred to the recent changes to the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013.

He stated that the changes were made to *'Get the scheme back on track to support the people with disability that it was originally intended to support, this includes making sure that early intervention paths are in place that can better support children and their families to receive supports within the NDIS that are aligned with their individual support needs.'*

'These changes are in response to the independent NDIS review and are informed by key recommendations of the Disability Royal Commission. The NDIS review observed that there are continuing issues in accessing allied health supports in regional and rural parts of Australia and that Governments, as market stewards should be more active and flexible to help ensure NDIS markets work for everyone everywhere.'

It is hoped that NDIS legislation changes, which took effect in 2024, will not only address concerns about the scheme's sustainability and implement recommendations from the NDIS Review, but that continued



work from both public and private sectors will help address issues of access to essential allied health services and disability support for rural and remote students.

Office of the Rural Health Commissioner Consumer Advisory Group

ICPA Australia's involvement in the Office of the Rural Health Commissioner Consumer Advisory Group (CAG), provides a great opportunity to hear the issues at the forefront of health reform in rural and remote Australia and to share our member's stories. Unfortunately, at the time of writing this report, we have only been able to attend one meeting, due to the postponement of the June meeting to late July.

At the first meeting for the year, the National Rural Health Commissioner, Professor Jenny May AM, expressed her passion for advocating for equitable health services and her dedication to collaborating with stakeholders to develop effective solutions. Jenny also outlined her priorities for the role, including enhancing place-based education and supporting rural and remote health professionals.

This goal of place-based education is well aligned to addressing the challenges that many ICPA members are facing. Place-based Health education is a vital component of addressing the challenges of recruiting and retaining health (and education) professionals in rural and remote Australia.

Place-based education is not only important to students who want to remain in their rural or remote community to live, train and work in the health and education professions, but also to the rural and remote communities who will benefit not only from their professional skills but their commitment to rural and remote Australia.

We are all aware of the difficulties that the sector is facing, a combination of professional, personal, and systemic challenges:

- Workforce Shortages and High Turnover
- Geographic and Social Isolation
- Professional Development and Career Progression
- Infrastructure and Resources
- Personal and Family Considerations
- Cost and Administrative Barriers

Addressing these challenges requires targeted incentives, improved infrastructure, support for professional development, and community integration strategies. There are examples of successful models which were discussed in the meeting, yet there is still so much to be done by both the public and private sectors in addressing both healthcare and education workforce shortage in rural and remote areas.

You can find more about the Office of the Rural Health Commissioner at - www.health.gov.au/our-work/onrhc

You can find more information on one of the successful model highlighted in the meeting here: <https://www.flinders.edu.au/study/health/regional-allied-health-courses>

The Disability Standards for Education draft Amendment Standards 2025



2025 Federal Conference – Adelaide SA

Australia's Disability Standards for Education (DSE) are reviewed every 5 years to find out how they could be improved.

The 2025 review by the Department of Education, proposed significant amendments to enhance inclusion and accessibility in education. The draft Amendment Standards, released in early 2025, primarily aim to extend the DSE to encompass early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and outside school hours care (OSHC) providers. This expansion aligns with Recommendation 12b from the 2020 review and reflects the Government's commitment to inclusive education across all age groups.

The Key Aspects of the Draft Amendment Standards:

Inclusion of ECEC services: The primary change is to explicitly include most ECEC and outside school hours care service providers in the Disability Standards for Education.

Clarification of obligations: The amendments aim to make it clearer for ECEC services to understand their obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) and the Disability Standards for Education, particularly regarding making reasonable adjustments and providing educational program adjustments.

Definition of ECEC services: The draft includes a definition of ECEC services that aligns with those approved under the national Family Assistance Law (Child Care Subsidy) and those approved under state or territory laws that require delivery of an education program based on an approved learning framework.

Examples of ECEC services: The consultation paper provides examples of ECEC services that would be included, such as centre-based day care, family day care, outside school hours care, and in-home care.

For more detailed information or to access the draft Amendment Standards, visit the Department of Education's official website. <https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/consultations/disability-consultation-ecec>

Autism CRC Guidance Reference Group

ICPA (Aust) has been invited to be a part of the Autism CRC (Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism) Guidance Reference Group, (GRG), the Reference Group for Autism CRC's new Commonwealth funded project: *Developing National Guidance for Best Practice in Inclusive Education for Autistic Students* ("National Guidance").

The National Guidance aims to develop evidence-based guidance for teachers, educators, school leaders and allied health professionals in formal (mainstream) preschool and school settings to inform best practise for supporting positive social, emotional and academic outcomes of autistic children and youth.

The responsibility of the CRG is to provide feedback and input on documents, components and processes and to advise and support during the development of the National Guidance.

This is a fantastic opportunity for ICPA (Aust) to share the point of view and perspectives of our member families educating autistic children and youth in rural and remote Australia.



Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)-Inclusive Capability Project

ACECQA has been engaged by the Australian Government Department of Education to lead the development of an Inclusive Practice Framework, a professional development resource to strengthen the capability of early childhood education and care services to embed inclusive practices. It will also better support children and families experiencing barriers to access and participation. It is an 18-month project which will involve collaboration with early childhood education and care educators, services and providers, national peak associations, sector organisations and expert practitioners. This framework will help services reflect on current inclusive practices and plan for ongoing improvement. A suite of free and practical resources is also being developed to support implementation. ICPA (Aust) was represented by myself and ECEC Portfolio Lead, Julia Broad, at the initial consultation session, where we had the opportunity to share an overview of the experiences of our members and the issues they face when it comes to inclusivity in early childhood education and care in rural and remote Australia. For more information on the project please visit- <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/projects/inclusivecapability>

Children with specific education needs in rural and remote Australia face systemic challenges in accessing equitable education and support. While initiatives exist, more comprehensive and coordinated efforts are needed. Enhancing services, empowering educators, and addressing geographical barriers are essential to ensuring that every child, regardless of location or need, can access quality education and reach their full potential.

ICPA (Aust) will continue to work with members and advocate on your behalf to highlight and address these challenges. We thank you for your continued support and strongly encourage you to continue to provide us with your stories and case studies to inform our advocacy.