



# Submission

**to the  
Review of the Disability Standards for Education**

**from the Federal Council**

**of**

**The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

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ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have access to the services required for an equitable, affordable high-quality education, from early childhood through to tertiary and training. The member families of the Association reside and work in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to an equitable education for their children, despite their geographic location. They often live great distances from services required to support the education of their children and therefore need specifically designed rural and remote programs that allow these children to learn, develop and thrive.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Review of the Disability Standards for Education. We have many member families who have lived experience engaging with all levels of education provision advocating for a student with disabilities and we will draw on this experience shared with us to frame our response to the review.

The majority of our members would be classed as living in rural, remote or very remote areas across Australia. This geographic footprint presents particular challenges for students, their families and carers in accessing appropriate levels of support to allow full engagement with learning opportunities. Additionally, staff at educational institutions, also due to the tyranny of distance, experience challenges in accessing professional development opportunities to learn how to effectively and efficiently embed the standards into daily learning experiences. It can also be challenging, given the issues with attracting suitably qualified staff to rural and remote areas, to ensure there are appropriate numbers of staff at these facilities to provide the full gamut of support and oversight required to facilitate robust and safe engagement.

Additionally, this comparative isolation also increases the difficulty for students and their support networks to find out about the standards, develop the skills needed to successfully advocate and also raise concerns regarding issues and challenges students are experiencing. The opportunities to attend training, awareness, skill development sessions/events to improve capacity and capability to advocate are minimal to none. Many of these communities also struggle to have a reliable platform to enable them to identify and attend courses/training to develop those skills. It is also well documented that digital literacy is an issue in rural and remote locations further challenging the ability of students and families to learn skills needed.

A significant proportion of our members do not live in townships at all, instead residing on remote stations, roadhouses or in contracting camps where frequent change of location is intrinsic to their work. These students rely on distance education for their daily learning. Embedding the standards into a distance education is problematic as face-to-face engagement by the distance education is limited to short time spurts each day for on air components of lessons or to activity days/school camps/sports days etc. which may only occur a couple of times per term. The bulk of their daily learning is provided by a home tutor, often the student's mother who has no formal education qualifications, in a classroom within their home setting. They, not the teacher in the distance education center, are the educator of these students. Many of these home tutors would have little to any exposure to the standards and the rights and responsibilities these standards offer them should they have a student with a disability in their classroom.

ICPA Australia would encourage the creation of resources in simple language directed at rural and remote students and families to enable them to understand the standards, the rights and responsibilities they afford and that educational institutions be required to share these with students and their families/carers in order to close this knowledge gap.

The vast majority of these geographically isolated students, and those from rural communities whose educational institutions do not offer K-12 schooling, must leave home to attend boarding school to access a high school education.

Anecdotal evidence from members supports the view that, by and large, these institutions are doing an excellent job of supporting diverse learners within their classrooms. However, we are aware that there are challenges outside the classroom, within the boarding environment in these schools, when meeting the needs and circumstances of students with disabilities to ensure they are then able to undertake daily learning.

The additional scope and actions needed to support full engagement and successful learning outcomes for students with disabilities is not available at all schools who offer boarding. These families often experience challenges in simply sourcing a school willing and able to accommodate the differentiation required. Given that, some members have reported they have been unwilling to advocate/complain on behalf of their students as educational institution options for completing compulsory schooling are not as abundant or accessible.

Students with disabilities require differentiation and modification across all facets of the schooling environment. ICPA Australia would like to see educational institutions that provide boarding to facilitate students continuing their learning journey, be required to embed the standards into the boarding facilities policies, practices and activities. Boarding staff, who are not necessarily educators, need to be provided training to understand the standards, the rights and responsibilities that flow from that and how to engage regularly and meaningfully with students and their caregivers to ensure appropriate and accessible supports are being provided.

Students from rural and remote locations are already vulnerable due to having to leave the security and support of their home environment in order to continue their education. Should this student have a disability this vulnerability is further heightened. Unless the standards are embedded in the boarding portion of the school's offerings, students with disability are at great risk of disengaging from learning and not fulfilling their potential.

Schools, regardless of type of institution, must not require complex and onerous processes including provision of evidence regarding the student's disability to enable enrollment and the creation, adaption and adoption of adjustments. These processes must not be allowed to create barriers to learning or an "escape clause" to accepting enrollments. Anecdotal evidence indicates this may well be the case in some circumstances.

In closing, ICPA Australia looks forward to learning the outcomes of this review and the review of the wider Disability Act. The needs and circumstances of rural, remote and geographically isolated students and families are unique, even more so if these students have a disability. We urge the Australian Government Department of Education to consider these factors and the need to build in mechanisms and procedures that capture the unique challenges faced by geographically isolated students with a disability, to ensure this disadvantaged cohort do not slip between the cracks when policies are only considered within mainstream, urbanized parameters.