



# Submission

to the

## **Early Childhood Education and Care Capacity Study**

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.

Central to ICPA (Aust)'s vision for rural and remote Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is authentic, lifelong outcomes for geographically isolated children and families and the belief that addressing current barriers could result in resources being targeted to where they will achieve child centred outcomes.

### **Suggested solutions for current barriers to adequate ECEC staffing in rural and remote communities.**

#### **1. Pay Package Parity**

Optimal outcomes will only be realised when ECEC staff are valued by our country and given the professional status commensurate with the role they are playing in the lives of our future generations. Availability, attraction and retention of quality ECEC staff must be a vital piece of this Strategy. This will not eventuate until the issue of pay package parity between ECEC services and schools is addressed. When an Early Childhood Teacher completes a four-year degree and elects to work in the public school system in a rural and remote location, the additional benefits they are eligible for compared to working as an Early Childhood Teacher at a long day care centre include:

- Additional 7 weeks of annual leave
- Significantly shorter contact hours per week
- Professional mentoring by other teachers
- Structured Professional Development programs
- Access to teacher housing

Early Childhood services operating outside of the State School Systems across Australia are significantly limited in their budgets. It is important to find long term solutions to address pay package parity for Early Childhood Teachers in rural and remote locations.

**2. Alignment of the ECEC Certificate III qualifications and In Home Care (IHC) Guidelines** is required to support access to qualified educators within the IHC program. Currently, the IHC National Guidelines require carers to have, or be working toward, a minimum Certificate III level qualification in a relevant course. The guidelines detail further requirements including the carer being at least 18 years of age. Students can study a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education at school and be fully qualified and seeking employment in the early childhood sector upon their graduation from school at age 17. These young workers could be gainfully employed caring for rural and remote children under the IHC program, if Government regulation, namely the IHC Guidelines, allowed them to work in the industry for which they are qualified. The requirement of the IHC Guidelines for the carer to be 18 years of age is prohibitive to having qualified childcare workers in the program and disadvantages young, qualified people. While the qualification transitional provisions in place for remote and very remote locations are welcome and theoretically should assist with the employment of educators, in reality they have done little to alleviate the myriad of challenges associated with the In Home Care program as a whole.

3. A specifically rural and remote In Home Education and Care program will allow geographically isolated children to learn, develop and thrive, parents to work and thus rural and remote communities to thrive, socially and economically. A rural and remote IHC program requires a flexible approach with respect to the required qualifications and suitability of rural and remote IHC educators including:

- Allowing an educator to care for children from more than one family at the same time. If two families live at one remote property, it is not feasible to provide accommodation for an educator for each family, however if the IHC guidelines allowed, one educator could provide the early childhood education for the children of both families.
- Allowing an educator to care for their own child whilst caring for children from other families under IHC. A single mother could be qualified in Early Childhood Education and Care and be willing to live remotely to provide the IHC service but as she would also need to care for her own children, she excluded from the position under current Guidelines.
- Extensions of time in which IHC educators must begin and complete a relevant qualification and expansion of the allowable qualifications. Being enrolled in any education degree should qualify for the rural and remote IHC program as many of the educators are providing after school care to primary aged children. The need exists for rural and remote IHC to provide all ages of care not just an early childhood education.
- Allowing those qualified with a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education or equivalent but under age 18 to work within the IHC program as detailed above.

#### **4. Long term continuity of funding for rural and remote mobile learning services.**

Services funded on rotating short term funding models find it very difficult to retain staff due to the lack of security in the roles. Staff energy and time are expended in re-applying for funding, subsequently taking precious resources away from the children they are trying to help to learn, grow and thrive. Short term funding models do not work in rural and remote Australia. The Report on *Education in Remote and Complex Environments*<sup>1</sup> recommended that the **Commonwealth modify funding arrangements for mobile early childhood education to provide flexibility and surety of funding for these services in the 2021 Budget**. This would ensure their viability resulting in them being a more attractive employment option. Unfortunately, this did not occur.

#### **5. Specifically rural and remote staff incentive programs**

Rural and remote employment incentive programs could significantly reduce childcare service waitlists which are largely caused by a lack of ECEC staff. In turn, this lack of childcare availability limits the possibility of attracting professionals (e.g. Doctors) to the area which further disadvantages the community's children.

If a childcare centre is not meeting the qualified educator ratio, the service is unable to operate. Services are in breach of legislation and the approved provider is liable for a \$50000 fine, in which case, service closures can occur, thereby often taking away the only opportunity for rural and remote children to participate in vital preschool programs.

Incentive programs are necessary to engage qualified staff in rural and remote ECEC services and ICPA (Aust) implores the Australian Government to bring together all relevant departments to forge a pathway in creating innovative and relevant training and employment incentive packages to place and retain staff in the rural and remote early childhood centres and programs.

Increased financial assistance coupled with incentive programs for skilled employees for rural and remote services would allow approved providers to attract and retain qualified early childhood educators and teachers. Services will then have the capacity to support children to meet necessary early childhood outcomes. The risk if this is not achieved is that children will continue to be at a disadvantage to other children through compromised delivery of early childhood education and care.

## **6. National Working with Children Check (WWCC)**

Early childhood education and care employees travel and work across rural and remote parts of the States and Territories of Australia and must apply for, fund and then wait for the processing of a different working with children check in each State/Territory. This results in lengthy delays causing disruptions and risks to the care of rural and remote children. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that National Cabinet have a national workplan to eliminate red tape and duplication across different levels of government, including agreement to explore avenues to further improve and promote national consistency for WWCC. Further efficiencies are needed to enhance child safety and reduce regulatory barriers around WWCC.

## **7. Family Day Care in small rural and remote towns**

A major issue that continues to be endured by rural and remote families is the unique needs of small rural and remote towns not being adequately serviced by current Family Day Care legislation. ICPA (Aust) believes this matter requires examination and resolution as a matter of urgency. ICPA (Aust) seek an inclusion to the Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011 SI 653) - Regulation 124 (NSW Legislation) to enable two approved family day care educators to care for children in an approved family day care venue in disadvantaged rural and remote areas of Australia where there is an absence, or limited supply, of Centre Based Day Care or Family Day Care services.

Communities in rural Australia struggle with the lack of access to childcare. These towns are too small to attract a private provider to offer centre based long day care as the demand profile makes it unviable. We are seeking a small inclusion into the current legislation to enable more than one approved family day care educator to care for children in an approved family day care 'in-venue' location. This provides a cost-effective solution to the government to cover childcare demand in small disadvantaged rural communities where no appropriate childcare exists.

This change could potentially provide essential and effective support to address the additional early childhood education challenges faced by rural and remote communities.

## **8. Working Holiday Visa**

There is a chronic shortage of experienced workers in rural and remote Australia, especially in agriculture. As it currently stands, the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program declares the position of a nanny on a farm to be an ineligible employment option when seeking to increase the time on Working Holiday Visas. Removing this limitation in the Working Holiday Visa regulations would allow skilled and experienced members of a farm workforce, that are currently undertaking duties at home, such as childcare and the home tutoring of distance education children, to return to every day agricultural work while the position of childcare and supervision of education on rural properties could be filled by visa holders. The direct impact would be that already competent agricultural workers could return to the agricultural workforce, which would achieve the desired aim of an increase in skilled workers actively engaged in agriculture as well as having the children adequately cared for. ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Working Holiday Visa (subclass 417), of the WHM program include as eligible employment, the positions of governess/nanny/au pair for Working Holiday Visa holders intending to complete the required 88 days of work within the specified industry of 'Plant and Animal Cultivation in Regional Australia'.

The long-running lack of vision to deliver specific rural and remote Early Childhood Education and Care staffing strategy has significantly hindered the opportunities for educational development available to children living in these areas, and also stifles the growth and sustainability of communities and industries to which these families belong. With limited to no access to suitable ECEC services in many rural and remote communities and surrounding areas of Australia, parents and women especially are unable to participate in the workforce, inhibiting their capacity for growth, independence and the ability to gain their living by work. Professional families cannot relocate to a rural and remote community if there is no early

childhood education service to care for their children. A strategy for and delivery of employment incentives for ECEC staff, specifically for rural and remote areas should be the backbone of equitable educational outcomes for rural and remote children and would strengthen the economic and social vitality of families and communities across rural and remote Australia.

<sup>1</sup>The Report into *Education in Remote and Complex Environments*.

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Education\\_and\\_Training/RemoteEducation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Education_and_Training/RemoteEducation/Report)