
Early Childhood Report

Dear Madam President, Distinguished Guests, fellow state Councillors, Members, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for allowing me to present the Early Childhood Report for ICPA-NSW for the 2023 year.

The past 12 months has seen ICPA-NSW continue to bring focus to several key issues in the Early Childhood Portfolio.

Lack of Practical Access to Preschool for Families in Rural and Remote NSW

Since 2014 ICPA-NSW has been working towards more equitable access to education for four-year-old pre-schoolers in identified remote locations where the only preschool four-year-old's could access was via Distance Education, requiring a supervisor. The pop-up pop-down model initiated by the NSW Department of Education utilises existing town/villages schools and Distance Education Preschools. This has proved successful at several sites identified as having the need, and although not before time, Wanaaring Public School has in 2024 a preschool program operating for two students, allowing them the vitally beneficial opportunity to participate in a formal preschool educational program in preparedness for their primary school education. ICPA-NSW will continue to monitor remote and very remote areas and aims to consult with the Department of Education to determine where preschool access is required as cohorts vary over time.

Priority of Access to Early Childhood Education for remote three- and four-year-olds.

Under the current Start Strong Funding Guidelines, services are required to give equal priority of access to;

- Children who are at least four years old on or before the 31st July in that preschool year and not enrolled or registered at a school
- Children who are at least three years old on or before 31st July in that preschool year and from low income and/or Aboriginal families
- Children with English language needs
- Children with a disability and additional needs
- Children who are at risk of significant harm (from a child protection perspective)

There is no order of priority of the above groups. However the groups outlined would have priority over all other three-year-olds. Due to vast differences, it is very difficult for many rural and remote preschoolers to access the recommended and funded 600 hours of preschool in just one year. ICPA-NSW would like to see the criteria for priority to include Children whose address is in a remote or very remote location.

Ongoing Lack of salary pay parity between four year trained early childhood teachers and four year trained primary and high school teachers, impacting services ability to recruit and retain adequately trained quality staff.

As the broader Education sector faces national shortages of teachers, the challenges in recruiting and retaining in rural and remote areas continues. Whilst there have been welcome incentives for NSW Government School Teaching Positions, this has further compounded the staffing issues for Early Childhood Services, particularly in Rural and Remote settings. Current Incentives for teachers and executives in rural and remote schools under the Incentive schools Benefits can offer financial benefits of up to \$65000 over and above the teaching salary award. This includes a breakdown of

- 70% rental subsidy
- \$20 000 recruitment bonus
- \$5 000 rural and remote relocation bonus
- \$10 000 stamp duty relief
- \$5 000 per annum retention benefit for up to 10 years
- \$10 000 experienced teacher benefit for up to 5 years

Some of the schools attracting such incentives are Balranald, Barham, Hay, Hillston, and Moulamein to name a few. There are currently no scholarships open for application for Early Childhood Studies on the department website, and no incentive package for current professionals to take positions and relocate to rural and remote services. The burden of incentivising positions remains with the early childhood service, with no additional funding to attract staff. This issue will continue to have a significant impact of services ability to provide quality early childhood education to rural and remote children, where access is already a challenge. ICPA-NSW continues to seek action on better equipping services to secure teachers now and into the future.

As the roll out of the 4 Year Health and Development Checks in ECEC settings commences in 2024, in conjunction with NSW Health, ICPA-NSW continues to support the request for ongoing funding of the "Better Learning Better Lives" proposal, a proposal presented last year to assist five identified rural, remote communities in NSW. The program aims to include services such as early intervention and screening, allied health therapy, wellbeing mental health services, capacity building for parents and teachers and community navigation and service coordination for families so that they can more easily find services. Royal Far West have the expertise and capacity to deliver this service in these locations, meeting a need that is otherwise unfulfilled.

ICPA-NSW made a submission to the IPART Review of Early Childhood Education and Care in November 2023, addressing several key areas. The submission included the points discussed in this report, aiming to provide an insight into the challenges and barriers for communities and families to provide and access Early Childhood Education.

Most recently at the time of writing, there has been an announcement of 100 new public preschools to be built and co-located on existing public schools. 49 of these new preschools

are in regional towns. ICPA-NSW will be keen to learn more about how this announcement will enable greater access to early learning for rural and remote pre-schoolers.

I have been in awe of the incredible work performed by your state councillors as I begin to learn how to advocate for better access to Early Childhood Education for rural and remote communities.

Kirsty Wilson
Early Childhood Convenor