

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance

from the

Federal Council

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the **Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance**.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The member families of the association reside and work in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this.

Geographical location should not be a determinant of the quality of education a student has access to, however educational outcomes for rural and remote students continue to lag behind those of urban students. This factor should be seriously considered in this Inquiry as disparate education attainment in childhood due to geographic isolation most certainly impacts literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skill levels in adulthood.

ICPA (Aust) would like to provide input into the following Terms of Reference:

The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages.

Early Childhood Education

ICPA (Aust) believes that from a rural and remote education perspective, there are a number of factors around educational delivery which can be attributed to poor literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skill levels in adults, which no doubt has a significant impact on an individual's labour force participation in the future.

Access to early childhood education in rural and remote areas continues to be a challenge due to the tyranny of distance, despite the Australian Government's commitment to Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, which ensures that a quality preschool program is available for all children in the year before full-time school.

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data demonstrates that children who attend preschool are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable across all five developmental domains upon arrival at school. Children who have access to early childhood education begin developing skills that they will use in all areas of their lives, for the rest of their lives. They also have a better chance of keeping up with peers, staying in school and having a healthy association with learning through the teenage and adult years. (source www.raisingchildren.net.au)

For geographically isolated families who live in rural and remote parts of Australia, access to consistent, adequate and affordable early childhood education services is marred by a myriad of challenges which impede fulfillment of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education recommended 600 hours of early childhood education the year before full-time school. These challenges include staff shortages and high out of pocket costs exceeding the family budget, resulting in a lack of services as Early Childhood centres struggle to remain viable in rural and remote areas.

ICPA (Aust) believes the absence of access to early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in larger, urban centres.

For more information on ICPA (Aust) Early Childhood Education and Care advocacy, including recommendations to increase the number of rural and remote children able to access early childhood education, the ICPA (Aust) Early Childhood Education and Care Briefing Paper can be found [here](#).

Specific Education Needs

There is no doubt that for students who have learning difficulties, their educational experience and outcomes can significantly impact their future skills and pathways following schooling due to poor literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills. For students living in rural and remote areas, where access to early diagnosis and appropriate intervention is greatly reduced due to service access, the impact on these skills moving through childhood, adolescence and ultimately adulthood can be devastating.

The early identification, diagnosis, intervention and management of specific needs is paramount to children reaching their full potential and poses significant impacts upon these children's future educational outcomes. Education is the greatest predictor of an individual's health going forward. Living in geographically isolated regions there are significant challenges in the access, diagnosis, and treatment of children with specific education needs, with children in these areas often having little to no access to screening and early intervention services, due to:

- Lengthy waiting lists to see a specialist for initial assessment and diagnosis for face-to-face consultations.
- The distance and expense to travel to a centre for periodic checks or for ongoing therapy. In addition, time out of school for this travel is not conducive to the student's education – or their siblings who may also have to travel with them.
- A lack of available Allied Health professionals to deliver telehealth therapy sessions.
- The inordinate expense of the telehealth therapy services which are not covered by the Medicare Rebate. One Northern Territory family is paying \$8,000/year for speech therapy telehealth sessions, delivered with the assistance of a School of the Air.
- Accessing telehealth services is dependent on the availability of adequate technology and connectivity to these children and their families, which in rural and remote areas may be limited or scant. With this in mind telehealth should not necessarily be viewed as a substitute solution to improving services in rural and remote area, rather as an adjunct to other services.

For more information on ICPA (Aust) Specific Education Needs advocacy, including recommendations to increase the number of rural and remote children receiving adequate support, the ICPA (Aust) Specific Education Needs Briefing Paper can be found [here](#).

Tertiary and Vocational Education and Training (VET)

There are many avenues available for school leavers to undertake further education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways, including apprenticeships. However, inequitable educational opportunities from birth to post-secondary education in rural and remote areas which may contribute to poor literacy and numeracy skills in adult life can hinder the ability of rural and remote young people to gain these qualifications and skills. This results in poor completion rates for many young rural and remote people, along with impacting on labour force participation and wages in adult life.

The relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development from birth to post-secondary education; and

Whether changes to schooling in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 will have a disproportionate impact on the skill development of those children of parents with lower literacy and numeracy levels, and, if yes, consideration of appropriate remediation programs which might address this.

ICPA (Aust) is not in a position to comment on whether parent skills and literacy levels have impacted skill development of children as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown. While a relationship between parents' literacy skills and their children's education and literacy skill development is likely undeniable and this may have been extenuated in the COVID-19 changes to schooling in some circumstances, it must be remembered that for students living in geographically isolated locations schooling has occurred in a similar mode, via school of the air or distance education for many generations.

The focus therefore on possible repercussions for parents and students who were required to 'home school' during COVID-19 lockdown seems incongruous, given that for geographically isolated parents, tutoring their children via distance education, due to being unable to access a school, is a necessity and ongoing. The role parents play in the education of their children due to the fact they simply cannot access a physical school due to distance often goes unacknowledged and underplayed.

Families are required to provide and fund all costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) which limits their ability to assist with the family business or on the property where the family reside or participate in paid employment in order to fulfil this role, which on average takes up 6-8 hours per day.

ICPA (Aust) believe that any consideration of appropriate remediation programs to address this issue should also consider geographically isolated distance education students who continue to be educated at home especially those who have learning difficulties and struggle to receive the services they require due to living in a rural and remote location as outlined above.

For rural and remote children there are many other influencing factors that impact on their education attainment and potentially their literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in adulthood, such as the aforementioned, and other barriers outlined in the ICPA (Aust) Briefing Papers [here](#).

Conclusion

The impacts of geographical isolation on the educational outcomes of children need to be considered in the **Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance** in order to understand and address the potential implications in adulthood. Unless universal access to early childhood education and improved identification and services for students with learning difficulties and other contributing challenges associated with a lag in educational outcomes in rural and remote areas are addressed, we will continue to see deficient adult literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills, along with a lack of skilled workforce in regional, rural and remote communities of Australia.