

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

**Independent evaluation of the
National School Chaplaincy Program**

from the

**Federal Council
of the**

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

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Contact:

**Kim Hughes
Federal Secretary
ICPA (Aust)
Harrogate Station
RICHMOND QLD 4822
FedSecretary@icpa.com.au
Tel: 0427 377 985**

Contact:

**Alana Moller
Federal President
ICPA (Aust)
Star of Hope
CLERMONT QLD 4721
FedPresident@icpa.com.au
Tel: 07 4983 5353**

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Independent evaluation of the National School Chaplaincy Program*.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to an appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, often live vast distances from services required to support the education of these students. This includes quality and consistent health and wellbeing support services.

Rural and remote students are often at a distinct disadvantage due to where they reside and the resultant lack of services and support available in these locations. Students can be disadvantaged in a variety of ways by the unique circumstances of residing in isolated areas and these can impact the whole school community including students, staff, parents and families. These disadvantages need to be considered and addressed in order to ensure equitable educational opportunities are provided and achieved for the geographically isolated students across these schools. ICPA (Aust) members have consistently shown their commendation of the role of the National School Chaplaincy Program in rural and remote schools to address disadvantage in their school communities since its inception and continue to emphasise the need for this program to remain in place.

Mental health is an ever-increasing concern in rural and remote communities. Students face a multitude of challenges in their day-to-day life that can impact heavily on their education, mental health and wellbeing, with many having unique needs, vulnerabilities and barriers which can be exacerbated by the limited support services available in geographically isolated environments. The most recent *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)* report, suicide was the leading cause of death among people aged 15–24 (35%). Alarmingly male youth suicide in regional, rural and remote areas as a whole is estimated to occur at almost twice the rate of that in metropolitan areas.

Due to the tyranny of distance and lack of healthcare professionals in rural and remote areas, Guidance Officers and other support services are not easily accessible for rural and remote schools and their students. The National School Chaplaincy Program has proven invaluable as an adjunct to meeting the needs of geographically isolated students where other services are not readily available.

In isolated schools across Australia the visit from the School Chaplain, or the 'Chappy', provides a welcome addition to all in the school community. The skills of the Chaplain to identify and communicate with children that are at risk means they play an important role in school communities, assisting students who are struggling with issues of self-doubt, bullying, peer pressure, anxiety, family breakdown, impacts of family drug and alcohol use and more. Rural and remote students also often need to be supported during times of hardship unique to their communities, such as drought conditions, bushfires, cyclones and floods, along with family personal hardship.

The National School Chaplaincy Program has been a major success and the continuation of this program is important for some students to succeed in school. The Chaplain provides support and comfort for students in a safe zone as well as running programs such as "Rock and Water" for at risk students, "Safe Sisters" to provide practical advice on positive relationships and choices for girls; and "Which Way, This Way" for adolescent boys, as well as participating in school and community events.

Furthermore, many small rural schools are located in very isolated and sparsely populated areas of Australia with often limited access to telecommunications. The very nature of these small

communities means that everyone knows everyone which has its advantages, however can also be detrimental for students seeking support because of personal issues. Moreover, the teacher shortage facing many schools means teachers are stretched and their ability to be a listening ear to students in need of support is limited. The School Chaplaincy Program provides an additional, outside and independent avenue for students who may require impartial comfort and assistance to support their wellbeing and mental health. Appendix A, attached to this submission provides a Case Study which describes the positive role the School Chaplain plays in a rural school in Western Australia.

ICPA (Aust) emphasises that the National School Chaplaincy Program has been a positive and valuable program for rural and remote students and schools who, due to their location, may have limited access to other support services. ICPA (Aust) recommends that the program be maintained to ensure the vulnerable cohort of rural and remote students who may have no or limited access to other support services are not further disadvantaged.

Appendix A - Case Study – School Chaplaincy Program in Schools – Western Australia

I teach at a small rural school in Western Australia which has benefitted from the School Chaplaincy Program.

The School Chaplain has been a very welcome addition to our small rural school as a visitor every Thursday. Over the years we have had a variety of Chaplains with different skills and talents, ages and gender all who have contributed enormously to the culture and general wellbeing of students, staff and caregivers at our school.

Of most importance is the anticipation from the teaching staff that every Thursday we know that there will be some special time for the student/s that might be struggling in class be it with a subject matter, friendship groups, a family struggle, the impending journey to boarding school or a natural disaster. The school Chaplain has an impartial ear for these students. Often the “Chappy” will sit beside these students as the lesson progresses and be a support and reassurance to the student without them even knowing what is occurring.

I have witnessed many times the school Chaplain kicking a footy on the oval or playing in the sandpit, making some fairy bread to share at recess time on a cutting board on a tree stump in the playground. These seemingly insignificant events are often the opportunity for troubled students to “open up” to this impartial person about what may be bothering them.

Sometimes the details of the conversation are relayed back to school staff and strategies are put in place to enable a positive change for this student. The Chaplain’s impact is recognised and real by all staff at our school.

Support services for students with wellbeing or mental health concerns are not available in our small town and travel to access this service is at least 100km one way to a larger Regional Centre where wait times for an appointment can exceed six months or more. Our school psychologist list was full at the end of first term in 2022 and no more students could be added to the list.

I sincerely hope that the value of The School Chaplaincy Program is recognised and is fully funded to continue into the future for the benefit of student wellbeing in small rural schools across Australia.