

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

**National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care
Draft for consultation**

Submission

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 on the National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Draft 2023.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have **access to an equitable, affordable high-quality education**, from early childhood through to tertiary and training.

Access to quality early childhood education is essential for optimal educational and developmental outcomes for all children in Australia, regardless of where they live. The lack of essential early childhood education services available to geographically isolated children continues to fail the country's most remote cohort, many of whom have no access to centre based early childhood education and rely on In Home Care (IHC) and/or mobile early learning services. The complexity of need of rural and remote families and children, specific to their location and circumstances, has not been met by current Government blanket approaches and has unfortunately not been adequately addressed in the Draft Vision for consultation.

The lack of a specific rural and remote vision to deliver ECEC services to geographically isolated families significantly hinders the educational development of children living in these areas, and also stifles the growth and sustainability of communities and industry 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, women especially are kept out of the workforce, inhibiting their capacity for growth, independence and the ability to make a meaningful contribution to their community. A vision for and delivery of quality ECEC, specifically in rural and remote areas should be the backbone of equitable educational outcomes for geographically isolated children which would strengthen the economic and social vitality of families and communities across rural and remote Australia.

Recent changes to the Child Care Subsidy do not address the provision of an equitable, accessible, and affordable service for the unique circumstances of geographically isolated families. The National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care needs to seriously consider the unique geographical barriers which hinder access to affordable high quality ECEC.

ECEC Workforce

Availability, attraction and retention of quality ECEC staff must be a vital piece of this vision. This will not eventuate until the issue of pay package parity between ECEC services and schools is addressed. An Early Childhood Teacher completes a four year degree. If they elect to work in the public school system in a rural and remote location, the additional benefits they would get compared to working as an Early Childhood Teacher at a long day care centre would 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 are significantly limited in their budgets. It is important to find long term solutions to address pay parity of Early Childhood Teachers in rural and remote locations.

In Home Care (IHC) Program

In remote locations, early childhood services are limited, and the In Home Care (IHC) program is often the only available option. However, many geographically isolated families cannot use the IHC program in its current form for various reasons, primarily due to the current guidelines and processes associated with the IHC program. These guidelines are inappropriate for geographically isolated

families and in fact accentuate the difficulties associated with accessing an equitable level of early childhood education in rural and remote areas.

In order to address these issues, ICPA (Aust) proposes solutions to improve access to IHC for these families such as:

- **A flexible approach with respect to the required qualifications and suitability of rural and remote IHC educators.**
 - Allowing an educator to care for children from more than one family at the same time
 - Allowing an educator to care for their own child whilst caring for children from other families under IHC
 - Extensions of time in which IHC educators must begin and complete a relevant qualification.
 - Allowing those qualified with a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education or equivalent but under age 18 to work within the IHC program.
- **Introduction of guidelines to regulate the fees that In Home Care providers can charge to families and educators.**

Several case studies are provided in **Appendix A on Page 4** for your information, which demonstrate typical family/work scenarios in rural and remote Australia.

Mobile Learning Services

Diminishing funding of the mobile learning service model has further reduced children's services to an unacceptable level, or removed them altogether, in some rural and remote communities. Unfortunately, in recent years, the availability of these services for disadvantaged, geographically isolated children have severely dwindled due to inadequate and uncertain funding under current funding models which abrogates security and longevity for early childhood services.

The Report into *Education in Remote and Complex Environments*² 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**. Unfortunately, this did not occur, and the rights of these children to adequate education has been diminished as a result.

For your consideration a Case Study is provided in **Appendix A** outlining the experience from the perspective of a rural and remote community with no ECEC service which demonstrates how desperate these families are for any early childhood service for their children.

In addition to the above, an array of initiatives is required in order to address this reality to ensure that geographically isolated children are provided with equitable opportunities to access quality ECEC as their urban counterparts, lest where they reside result in considerable educational disadvantage.

1. Extension to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance for 3 to 4 year-olds undertaking a pre- compulsory distance education program

Children undertaking pre-compulsory distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These children are deemed ineligible for the AIC Distance Education Allowance as they are not recognised by the Australian Government as participating in compulsory schooling and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) either as these children are still in their parents' care while participating in distance education. The need for this initiative to be implemented was also recommended in the Report into *Education in Remote and Complex Environments*².

2. Human Rights Implications

ICPA (Aust) seeks to highlight and rectify the inequity in the current child care system which does not provide for the rights of rural and remote children and families as set out in the explanatory memorandum of the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Cheaper Child Care) Bill 2022 *“that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child care services and facilities”* and *“the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain their living by work”* (p. 7-8). Mothers, especially, who live on geographically isolated properties in Australia are not given the opportunity to gain their living by work because they have no options for affordable childcare.

3. Compulsory Education Supervision

In 85% of instances, the mother of the children must undertake the role of the Home Tutor in the geographically isolated distance education classroom. She is therefore taken out of the workforce, foregoes an income and relevant financial benefits and performs a role out of necessity for many years of her life so her children can access compulsory education. This issue goes to the heart of equitable access to education, which is every child’s right, and speaks to the value and support for women’s equality in the remotest parts of Australia along with the creation of a robust workforce and the sustainability of rural and remote communities and the vital industries they facilitate and support.

The plight of rural and remote families who have limited to no access to early childhood education and care continues to be a grave concern for ICPA (Aust) members across the country. The ICPA (Aust) [Early Childhood Education and Care Portfolio Briefing Paper](#) provides a comprehensive explanation of early childhood education and care issues faced by geographically isolated families in Australia.

APPENDIX A

Typical situations of Australian rural and remote families needing a flexible and practical childcare option.

Example 1: A single mother applies for a station hand position. She is highly qualified and prior to becoming a mother had extensive experience working on remote cattle stations. The owner of the station she has applied to also has a small child and already employs an educator through IHC. There is suitable accommodation for the mother and child but not enough for another educator. By allowing that educator to also care for the station hand's child, the station hand gets a job for which she is qualified (it is also difficult to find good station hands so expanding the pool of people who could take these jobs is important) and both children have access to good quality childcare as well as a playmate.

Example 2: A father applies for a station hand position on a remote cattle station. He and his partner have a toddler. There are no childcare facilities within 200km. The managers of the station also have a toddler. By allowing the partner to become the In Home Carer (dependent on obtaining the relevant qualifications etc) the manager's child has access to high quality care, the manager(s) can concentrate on their jobs, the station hand is not separated from his partner and his partner has a fulfilling job.

Example 3:

A current Year 10 student commenced a Cert III in Early Childhood Education and Care and will be working within a school-based traineeship in a kindergarten setting for the duration of her studies. She was able to commence the Cert III in Year 10 at high school as she had clear career aspirations to work within a rural setting as an in-home educator or carer. This student will not be 18 years old for approximately six months after the completion of Year 12, thus meaning she will be ineligible to obtain an IHC position and be disadvantaged in pursuing her career for this period of time.

Case study of rural and remote community with no ECEC service:

The Cunnamulla State School (QLD) has the funding for an early childhood teacher 2 days per week through the Keeping Early Years in the Spotlight Program (KEYS) however they have been unable to fill the position.

The Cunnamulla library has recommenced in late May 2022 a one hour per week session of singing and story time as part of 'The First Five Forever Program' (Children must be vaccinated to attend.)

- 2021 data indicates 47% of children start school in the Cunnamulla district developmentally vulnerable.
- The Early Childhood Education and Care Department have been active in Cunnamulla since July last year and no significant action or change has occurred.
- Results from the Australian Early Developmental Census have deteriorated since 2009 and Cunnamulla is one of 5 locations which are going backwards.
- Paroo Shire has been nominated as a QLD State early childhood priority.
- The Paroo Contact Children's Mobile remains unfunded, Contact Inc (who own the equipment & did operate the service) have made no contact with Cunnamulla, the equipment, including fully equipped Toyota Landcruiser 4WD with canopy, all sit in Cunnamulla unused as there is no funding for the coordinator/teacher.
- The Paroo Contact Children's Mobile needs to get funding to immediately recruit staff to utilise the vehicle and extensive early childhood resources/equipment to offer regular scheduled supported playgroups to Eulo, Cunnamulla, Noorama, Quilpie and Thargomindah.

The Noorama Playgroup has been running for almost a year with on average 5 parents and 8 children in attendance, with a total membership of 10 core families and 20 children. The playgroup meets monthly and is run by volunteer parents, most with minimal experience with early childhood education.

The main issues this playgroup hopes to address include:

- Improving statistics on disadvantaged school starters by better preparing our children in the early years.
- Access to qualified educators that can help parents learn how to interact with their children at home and identify developmental abnormalities. If required, they could assist with pathways to support services.
- Ensure funding and services are reaching remote children.
- Provide a socialisation opportunity for both children and parents.
- Prepare families and facilities/services for Distance Education, which will be required in the near future.