

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Quality Initial Teaching Education Review

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 contribute to the *Quality Initial Teaching Education Review* identifying issues relating specifically to teachers and teaching in rural and remote Australia.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation, which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to a continuing and 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. They share the common goal of achieving equitable educational opportunities for all children living in rural and remote areas and the provision of services required to achieve this, ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their needs, aspirations and abilities rather than the geographical location of their home.

Closing the rural and urban divide must be a priority focus for all children to achieve educational excellence in rural and remote Australia. Rural and remote students must be afforded equitable opportunities to realise their potential and accessibility to pathways which provide educational parity with their urban peers.

Teacher quality matters a great deal. It could be considered the most important school-related factor influencing student achievement. The recruitment and retention of competent, committed, confident and highly effective teachers in rural and remote Australian schools who can deliver a consistently high standard of education continues to be one of the challenges on the education agenda. High quality teachers who have the knowledge, skills and disposition to teach in the rural and remote context will ensure the improvement of educational outcomes for rural and remote students.

RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION CONTEXT

While academic requirements are important, different and multiple teacher characteristics need to be valued, particularly for teaching in small rural schools or Schools of Distance Education or Schools of the Air. Teaching in rural and remote locations needs to be promoted as a rewarding, fulfilling and respected career, with the opportunity to guide and shape the next generation that has intellectual and emotional rewards.

Education providers must recognise the unique circumstances surrounding the learning context of rural and remote students and ensure that all teachers working in geographically isolated schools are specifically trained to teach this cohort. Preparation for the complexities, challenges and uniqueness of teaching in a rural and remote school, living remotely, engaging in the community and the isolation from family, friends and colleagues is vital to improve recruitment and retention of teachers ensuring optimum and successful educational outcomes for all students.

As many geographically isolated students undertake distance education, particularly for the primary years, due to their distance from a physical school, it is imperative that all teachers embarking on a rural and remote pathway have the appropriate training and preparedness to teach at a School of Distance Education or School of the Air Centre. The skills required are unique and include mastering remote communication platforms utilised for remote teaching, engaging students when directly teaching in an online learning environment (particularly in the early primary years), the ability to gauge student comprehension and understanding of learning concepts via remote learning platforms and supporting the Home Tutor in the distance education home schoolroom.

To ensure teachers are well prepared for teaching in isolated locations, ICPA (Aust) believes education providers who offer teacher education courses should implement a more extensive course structure to include:

- a major in Rural and Remote Education and
- modules on teaching students with specific learning needs.

ICPA (Aust) believes the course should incorporate the range of unique challenges requiring specific knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to teaching in rural and remote areas including:

- multi-age classrooms,
- multi-age curriculum tools,
- the distance education environment (i.e. remote learning),
- web conferencing,
- online learning tools,
- use of communications facilities,
- an understanding of the nature of geographically isolated students school environment and the role of the home tutor within the home schoolroom and
- strategies for coping with the unique dynamics that exist in small rural and remote communities and schools.

As an adjunct, it is envisaged that the teaching students would complete rural and remote and distance education school practicums ensuring graduate teachers would start their career, job-ready and with invaluable insight into the structure, practice and delivery methods of rural and remote education so that they can succeed in this field.

The preparation of teachers for the rural and remote context is vitally important. Assistance throughout the teaching course for students who express a desire and commitment to teach in rural areas upon completion of their course, and incentives for teachers to take up positions in rural and remote locations would assist in the recruitment and retention as the students would have the knowledge and skills and insight. These could include:

- rural and remote school practicums with support to live in a rural and remote community and experience living and working in a rural and remote area,
- travel, accommodation and living expenses for practicums, services such as internet,
- relocation incentives – quality accommodation, travel, rental assistance,
- preparation for rural living and working and isolation from family, friends and colleagues,
- quality induction programs,
- competency attainment,
- mentor programs,
- peer support,
- additional support for professional development ensuring availability, accessibility and resourcing and
- salary loading and other financial incentives.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS

The teaching of students living in geographically isolated locations with specific education needs and learning disabilities requires an increased awareness of student needs, an appropriate level of skills and knowledge, and access to appropriate programs and support staff, including allied health professionals. Schools of Distance Education and rural and remote schools must be afforded skilled teaching staff, teacher support, and ongoing professional development in the early identification, implementation, intervention strategies and teaching skills to meet the individual needs of all students.

Furthermore, the inclusion of modules relating to specific learning needs in undergraduate and postgraduate education courses would build capacity and equip teachers in small rural schools and distance education schools. Content pertaining to Specific Learning challenges and disorders affecting learning, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia and

Dyslexia should be included as a foundation for educating teachers in supporting specific needs students, providing new teachers with the understanding, knowledge and skills to effectively:

- recognise learning difficulties in students,
- facilitate early recognition, identification and assessment,
- assist, manage and meet the needs and abilities of children with specific needs and learning difficulties,
- implement recognised learning programs designed by professionals experienced in the preparation and application of specific needs education,
- enable continuity of specific learning needs programs,
- develop management programs for students with specific needs,
- deliver strategies to support the child's education and ensure positive learning outcomes for all students in their classes and
- assist and support Distance Education tutors.

Regular, timely, affordable and appropriate access to and collaboration with specific needs teachers, allied health professionals and specialists such as behavioural therapists, speech pathologists, ophthalmologists and psychologists will further support rural and remote teachers in recognising, referring, managing and supporting rural and remote specific needs students. This would enable the continuity of specific learning programs and take the pressure off teachers to develop management programs for students with specific needs.

Teachers will encounter situations where a proportion of their class/es have specific learning needs or disabilities. Neglecting to equip teachers, in already challenging circumstances, with knowledge of specific needs education will inevitably contribute to poor teacher retention rates and impact learning outcomes for our rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review from a rural and remote educational perspective. Geographically isolated students need to be considered as a unique disadvantage group in any discussions and consideration of education programs, including teacher education and the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote Australia.

ICPA (Aust) is more than happy to provide additional information on any of the topics that have been raised and look forward to the recommendations that will be presented to government following this review.