



Submission

to the

Federal Government on the Thriving Kids Program

from the Federal Council

of

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the design and implementation of the *Thriving Kids* program.

ICPA represents families living in rural, remote and geographically isolated areas across Australia, advocating for equitable access to education, health and wellbeing services. We strongly support the *Thriving Kids* program's vision that every child should have the best possible start in life. To achieve this, however, the program must address the significant and unique challenges experienced by children with specific needs in rural and remote communities.

Children with additional needs—including those with developmental delays, disabilities, learning difficulties, or complex health conditions—are among the most disadvantaged in remote Australia. Without deliberate policy attention, these children risk being left behind in both early childhood and school settings.

Key Challenges

1. Access to Services

- Allied health and specialist services are scarce or non-existent in many rural and remote regions.
- Families often must travel hundreds of kilometres, at significant cost, to access diagnostic and therapeutic supports.
- Telehealth, while valuable, cannot fully replace hands-on therapy, early assessments, or culturally tailored approaches.

2. Workforce Shortages

- Persistent shortages of educators, allied health professionals and specialist staff in rural and remote areas.
- High turnover and reliance on short-term contracts disrupt service continuity and undermine family trust.

3. Financial Barriers

- Families face additional costs for travel, accommodation, and private services, over and above the expenses of managing specific needs.
- For many, these costs are prohibitive, further entrenching inequity.

4. Inclusion and Equity

- Children with specific needs often miss out on inclusive early learning opportunities and supports in local schools due to workforce and resource gaps.
- Parents are left carrying the responsibility of navigating fragmented systems, often without specialist guidance or coordination.

Recommendations

To ensure the *Thriving Kids* program meets the needs of children with specific needs in rural and remote communities, ICPA recommends:

1. Targeted Resourcing for Rural and Remote Areas

- A dedicated rural and remote funding stream that reflects the higher costs of service delivery and travel.
- Flexible, place-based funding that empowers communities to shape services suited to their local context.

2. Hybrid Service Delivery Models

- Strengthen telehealth with regular in-person outreach visits from allied health professionals and/or
- Supporting and training community members to provide a broad scope of practice ie rural generalists to ensure inreach services as opposed to outreach services
- Invest in digital infrastructure to ensure equitable access to virtual services.

3. Workforce Attraction and Retention

- Incentive packages to attract and retain allied health and education specialists in rural and remote areas.
- Ongoing professional development for educators and health staff to support early identification and intervention for children with specific needs.

4. Support for Families

- Financial assistance schemes to offset travel and accommodation costs when services are only available outside the local community.
- Strengthened peer support networks and information-sharing for parents and carers in isolated regions.
- Ensure rural general practitioners are involved in this process and to continue GP management Plans, Team Care Arrangements and ongoing Medicare support of the Health Check 4 years to ensure children are on the correct path for equitable access to services

5. Cultural Safety and Community Engagement

- Engage closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to ensure services are culturally safe and responsive.

- Support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to deliver early childhood and family support services where appropriate.

ICPA urges the Australian Government to ensure that the *Thriving Kids* program explicitly addresses the needs of children with specific needs in rural, remote and geographically isolated Australia. Without targeted investment and policy attention, inequity will persist and deepen for these children and their families.

With the right supports in place—delivered locally, consistently, and in culturally appropriate ways—the *Thriving Kids* program has the potential to transform outcomes for children in rural and remote Australia. We look forward to working with Government to ensure that no child is left behind, no matter where they live.



