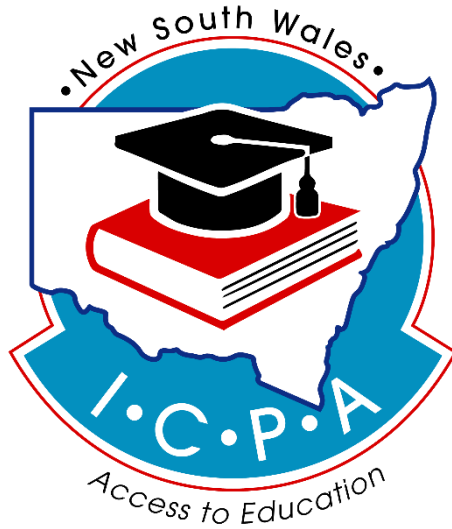


**Isolated Children's Parents' Association
of New South Wales Inc.**



Submission to the Better and Fairer Education System

Prepared by State Council

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ICPA-NSW is a voluntary non-profit advocacy group that has its roots firmly embedded in rural, remote, and regional areas across the state. ICPA-NSW believes that all students - irrespective of where they live - are entitled to equitable access to education that enables them to participate to their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of a community.

The NSW State Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association advocates for members who have children who:

- Attend a rural pre-school or access early childhood education through a mobile service,
- Attend a small rural or remote school,
- Study by Distance Education and School of the Air lessons
- Travel to school by bus or private vehicle (daily, weekly or at the end of term)
- Board away from home to access primary or secondary school at a boarding school, agricultural high school, hostel, private board or maintain a second home,
- Attend a Tertiary institution- University/TAFE/ College

Chapter 1: Meeting the needs of all students and shaping the nation's future.

Education transforms lives – it is the key to unlocking the ability of individuals to reach their full potential, contribute to society and engage in the workforce. It is the key to improving social equity and lifting social and economic outcomes for individuals and their families and communities.

Australia's current education system already provides this to many students – but not to all. In addition, Australia's future prosperity and international competitiveness depend on an education system that promotes excellence and equity. All Education Ministers committed to this in the 2019 Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (the Mparntwe Education Declaration).

The Expert Panel (the Panel) leading the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (the Review) firmly believes that the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) can help bring the Mparntwe Education Declaration to life by providing young Australians the best educational opportunities. We consider that this will need firm action by all governments, systems, and schools, but with national effort and commitment, we see a positive future for Australian education.

Education should support young Australians to become successful lifelong learners who have strong literacy and numeracy skills and deep knowledge of the world, are able to think creatively, logically, and inquisitively, can adapt to new ways of learning, and can continue to improve through formal and informal learning. Schools should also be inspiring and rewarding places to work for our best and brightest.

To fulfill this vision of education requires evidence-informed education policies, reforms, and classroom practices. In addition, it requires an innovative and aspirational spirit among all involved to drive continuous improvement. It requires valuing every student and every staff member and being able to identify and provide the support necessary for all members of the school community to thrive. It requires national agreement on the purpose of education and cooperation on reform.

ICPA-NSW has for years been advocating for changes to the education system especially for rural and remote students particularly in classroom practices in small rural and remote schools. We believe to achieve this vision that:-

- Directors of Education and Learning need to meet with communities when in these small rural and remote areas. In some cases, these schools may be one teacher schools. Parents feel they need to be informed of planned changes to staff and practices in the school as soon as the Department knows about them.

- ICPA-NSW has requested that the NSW Department of Education ensure that Connected Communities Directors of Educational Leadership are included in regular meetings held between ICPA-NSW and the Department of Education representatives.

Many of our rural and remote areas have Connected Communities Schools but as a body Connected Communities are not present to hear the issues and concerns discussed at conferences or in deputations. It would be beneficial to have a representative from Connected Communities leadership attend as part of the regular meetings between the Department of Education and ICPA-NSW.

- [REDACTED] School has been requesting a school car be provided with the principal's package, as this can then facilitate the opportunity for these students at this small school to participate in sporting activities in Bourke or Cobar. They have no sporting or cultural opportunities. The roads to and from the school from these service Centres are gravel and 4WD only.
- ICPA-NSW requests the Executive Director of Public Schools NSW to ensure that the Director, Educational Leadership physically attends the rural, remote, and very remote TP1 schools at least twice a year to check the school program.

The Director, Education Leadership needs to review the teaching principals' program, register of work which has been taught and the students completed work which aligns to that program. This level of support is necessary for the teaching principal who is working in professional peer isolation (despite having access to online mentoring) and the communities they are serving who deserve the best education possible for their children.

- ICPA-NSW requests that the Director, Educational Leadership responsible for isolated schools, monitor their principals' professional development directly benefits their current School.

Currently the principals in TP1 schools can access a series of training opportunities for themselves even though they are intending to transfer from their current school. If the training is not beneficial to the current school valuable resources are misspent.

- It is also the organisations view that at the beginning of each year there needs to be a handover in those schools where there has been a change of principal and teaching staff. Without a handover there is too much teaching time lost working out where students are up too, especially if the student has special needs.

We realise the improbability of teachers being able to physically meet before the end of the previous year, however, if the outgoing principal could provide the following for the new incoming principal, it would alleviate issues in small schools with only a teaching principal (TP1).

Often the incoming principal has not been in this role previously.

The proposed handover would be: -

A first term program would allow the teaching principal to:

- settle into the huge administrative workload knowing that the students are starting their schooling in the first week.
- become familiar with the multistage classroom environment, which is often the major hurdle.
- assess the students' academic progress and levels before having to set their own program.
- check what resources are available at the school before purchasing new ones.
- know the students and their families which, in a small community, is integral to roles in which leadership is required.
- It is vital that a discussion is had between the incoming and outgoing principals to ensure the new principal has an insight into the school and the community.
- Principal contracts should commence on the 1st of January, allowing the principal time to familiarize themselves with information applicable to the new school prior to the first day of term.
- If a face-to-face handover cannot be achieved, surely a zoom could be organised for the two principals to connect and for the outgoing principal to be able to answer any questions from the incoming principal.
- Distance Education students need access to sporting activities. ICPA-NSW has asked that the

Minister for Education and Early Learning to ensure Distance Education and Remote and very Remote Schools mandate intensive block swimming lessons as a compulsory part of their sporting program. As rural and remote children are exposed to many water ways, it is vital that all rural children are taught lifesaving swimming skills.

Block swimming programs need to be provided to ensure that the skills are taught and reinforced to every student. This type of program delivered would be effective and would reduce the travel requirements and costs for parents on a weekly basis to obtain these such services at great cost to themselves.

1.1 Getting ready for further transformation.

The NSRA is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments that sets out reforms in areas where national collaboration will have the greatest impact on lifting student outcomes across Australian schools. The Panel has been asked to advise Education Ministers on the targets and reforms that will drive improvements to support better student outcomes. The Panel is tasked with delivering recommendations on reforms in five key areas:

1. Lifting student outcomes

The ICPA-NSW urges the NSW Minister for Education and Early Learning to implement an initiative to ensure practical access to high schooling for geographically isolated Stage Four students, using the existing primary school facilities in remote and very remote areas.

Explanation: The NSW Department of Education does not provide practical high schooling options for some isolated high school students. These students are often kept back in primary school to do a nominal Year 7. The students this motion refers to are those who are unable to successfully assimilate into a boarding school environment because of a variety of reasons. The only practical pathway left to access high school is by distance education in which they enroll usually about Easter. It is unreasonable to expect a student to have any success in completing the distance education high school curriculum without a literate adult to support them and an appropriate environment to learn in.

Many students who this motion addresses are living within sight of a NSW Department of Education primary school which are resourced to meet their needs. This situation has led to parents arranging for their children to repeat Year Six because effectively, that ‘buys’ them one more year of school. We would like to see a situation where a successful time in high school is as accessible and the attendance obligation to do so is as rigorous as it is in the primary school.

ICPA recognises the complexities with enrolments in dual schools however we ask the Minister and their department to work with ICPA-NSW to find a solution which allows access to the existing primary school facilities, including a supervisor, immediately.

ICPA-NSW request the Minister for Education and Early Learning and the NSW Department of Education to provide administrative learning and support for volunteer led community preschools.

It is completely unrealistic to expect parent volunteers to be able to adequately administer community preschools. The responsibility and expectation placed on these volunteers without training and support are beyond what can be considered reasonable. Community preschools are often in small regional and rural communities where there is a significant challenge to attract paid and qualified staff.

Also, there is significant volunteer fatigue which has been raised with the NSW government via various channels for several years. Some of the requirements placed on the volunteers include reporting to ECCMS (Department of Education funding body), meeting ACECQA requirements and EYLF/QIP, staff management disputes etc. It is a massive workload and the time required to effectively get up to date with this required information is completely overwhelming.

ICPA-NSW requests that the NSW Minister for Education and Early Learning continues to establish Distance Education/School of The Air pre-schools in small, isolated schools where there is no other access to pre-school for four-year olds.

As many as ten remote schools were identified by ICPA-NSW in 2014, as servicing areas without practical access to preschool. The NSW Department of Education has since identified other sites. Several remote preschools have since been established.

The fact that, to date, all remote communities which have been identified as needing practical access to preschool have not had a simple distance education preschool model offered at their school. Without offering such a model can only be attributed to inefficiency and we ask that such be affected immediately.

ICPA-NSW would like to see the NSW Department of Education strongly promote and emphasize the benefits of early transition programs into rural and remote schools throughout NSW where there is no distance education model being used in the school.

In 2019 the [REDACTED] School introduced the early transition program for the four preschool aged children in the community. Children in this area would otherwise have had no other access to an early education due to the huge distances involved, for some a trip of 180kms one way.

The early transition program introduced at [REDACTED] School allowed these children to access the program in mid-2019 instead of late in the year. This early transition program allowed the children to have access to education resources and was received positively by the children, who showed great advancement in their school readiness. The universal 600 hours of preschool recommended by the Federal Government is difficult to achieve. Many children from rural and isolated areas barely, if at all, receive the recommended hours of preschool education because of the limitations in their community.

By encouraging more rural and remote schools to introduce the early transition program the NSW Department of Education would be allowing children to have some preschool education before attending primary school.

Tertiary students moving from one university to another would like a more streamlined way of ensuring credits and advance learnings can be transferred from one academic transcript with recognition of prior learning when students move from one university to another.

ICPA-NSW are asking for this because we believe the circumstance is unfair when a university degree course unit has been completed and passed, that a student is required to re-do and pay again for that same unit.

When degree courses are certified by NSW Department of Education, we feel the lack of unit acknowledgment is an inequitable deterrent for students' success in achieving qualifications; requiring more time to complete (increased accommodation costs) plus having to pay twice for the unit.

A more condensed university course where possible is an advantage to Tertiary students from rural and remote areas, as they can complete the degree quicker, save on the cost of living away from home and now help fill the gap of available employees.

2. Improving student mental health and wellbeing

The ICPA-NSW believes the NSW Minister for Education and Early Learning should ensure that rural and remote schools have access to in-person counselling sessions for students.

There are students requiring counselling in person in rural and remote schools, however, due to the lack of services being available locally, they don't have access to an appropriate in person counselling

service.

At one TP1 School, [REDACTED] School, there has not been access to a regular school counselling service for over three years. The school has a significant need for regular in-person counselling to support students academically and emotionally and are being disadvantaged by not having this support. This year, a school counsellor has been allocated half a day per fortnight to the school (the same day is shared with another school in the district), however, in this time the counsellor needs to travel to the school and does not allow sufficient time for cognitive assessments to be administered in the school counsellor time allocations, nor does it allow for discussion with the staff about the next steps needed to be addressed for each of the students requiring any other services that may or may not be provided for through the Department of Education.

The school is required to pay for OT visits from its own budget and with this limited funding, it is not sufficient to employ an SLSO (Student Learning Support Officer) to assist students. Schools are obligated to fund services for students' needs outside of Department of Education services due to wait times and lack of facilities in the area. The teaching staff are also feeling the absence of a regular school counsellor, who had previously provided support with classroom management strategies and learning adjustments to ensure every student was supported.

The ICPA-NSW believes the NSW Department of Education needs to ensure a more accessible school-based platform for assessment and diagnosis of any learning and well-being support requirements of children living in rural and remote NSW. This enables early identification and timely interventions without the need to access consultation outside the school.

The NSW Department of Education schools have psychologists allocated to their schools through the school counselling service however they are unable to formally diagnose conditions such as ADHD, autism, mental health conditions and specific learning disorders, for example, dyslexia. In rural and remote areas there is often very limited access to health professionals or specialist services. These are generally also highly transient positions making it extremely difficult for patients to develop any rapport with that professional - one of the most important factors of childhood diagnostics.

Accessibility of services should run absolutely parallel between young people in rural and remote areas and their metropolitan counterparts. Specialised support can be extremely difficult to access for families who are already vulnerable and disadvantaged due to isolation. Taking into consideration the additional needs or complexities is paramount especially because multidisciplinary assessments are often required to further delay a diagnosis. The follow-on effect delays support and early intervention and impedes a child's ability to grow and thrive.

We are not asking for additional learning support allocation and fully understand the shortage of specialised services within rural and remote areas. Utilising the current psychological health and wellbeing resources available within the NSW Department of Education would provide timelier and streamlined assessment and therefore earlier intervention processes within the schools.

Growing up in a rural or remote area should never be seen as a disadvantage. There should be no barrier to accessing services, especially those that can change the trajectory of a life.

The ICPA-NSW asks the Minister for Education and Early Learning and the Minister for Health to provide funding or subsidies for rural and remote Distance Education children that require allied health support.

Currently remote students requiring allied health professional support are required to pay for services out of pocket as the Distance Education Centres are not providing the necessary support or the online allied health service linked with the school has large waiting lists.

We ask that subsidies are provided so that parents of remote children can use private allied health professionals so that local providers can be accessed if available and to avoid wait lists to ensure that the appropriate support is provided in a timely manner.

Allied health support for children who are not classified as disabled cannot access funding through NDIS therefore paying for it out of their own pocket.

3. Attracting and retaining teachers

ICPA-NSW requests the NSW Department of Education to investigate a pathway for funding accommodation or offer rent subsidies, to teachers and educators in Early Childhood Centres that are in remote and very remote locations.

The first 5 years of a child's life are vitally important for development in all areas, including, cognitive, physical, and social. While the State and Federal Governments have worked hard to establish and sustain early childhood education services in remote and very remote locations, it is very hard to attract teachers and educators to these areas. Accommodation is scarce and what is available is expensive. If services could offer rent subsidies or free accommodation it would make it easier to attract staff to remote areas. This situation in a very remote community like Tibooburra is even more acutely felt. There is one public school and one not for profit early childhood education facility, directly across the road from each other. A person who wants to live and work with children in [REDACTED] is much more likely to choose the job that comes with subsidised housing, which is the public school. Which then, in turn, adds another layer to the recruitment and retention of staff for the early childhood education facility across the road, as they can't access the subsidised teacher housing. We believe there is scope for both the public and other providers of early education facilities in remote and very remote areas to work together on this issue.

In [REDACTED], not having access to adequate housing really affects our ability to be able to recruit and attract people and retain them in the longer term in these early childhood positions. We have several staff who live in an unstable housing situation, and they are already amongst the most poorly paid workforce in the care industry, and it just adds to those staffing shortages.

ICPA-NSW requests the relevant State Ministers for funding to be sought to address Early Childhood Teacher pay parity.

Pay parity of early childhood teachers is a significant issue. An early childhood teacher completes a four-year degree course as a primary school teacher. 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 would include:

- Additional seven weeks of annual leave (approx. \$10,000pa)
- Significantly shorter contact hours per week
- Approx \$20,000-\$30,000 additional salary
- Professional mentoring by other teachers
- Structured professional development programs (\$10,000 pa)
- Access to teacher housing (at a 70% discount on market rates in [REDACTED]) (\$10,000pa)

In [REDACTED], a Connected Communities school, a deputy principal eligible for a salary package valued at up to \$210,000 per annum. An equivalent early childhood teacher who is directing the preschool with similar responsibilities is eligible for about \$72,000 under the children services award. This is a significant gap of \$138,000 per year and contributes to staffing shortages faced by early childhood services in rural and remote areas. Early Childhood Services are significantly limited in their budgets, and it is important to find long term solutions to address pay parity of early childhood teachers in rural and remote locations.

ICPA-NSW and ICPA (Aust) have requested the relevant State and Federal Ministers to amend the lack of salary parity between four-year trained early childhood teachers and four-year trained primary and high school teachers.

Currently, the pay gap is so significant it is impossible to recruit and retain teachers in Early Childhood Centres and new recruits often use early childhood jobs as a stepping stone into the

primary school sector.

ICPA-NSW request the Minister for Education and Early Learning review pay rates and incentives for Early Childhood and Preschool employees in rural and remote locations.

For many years the NSW Department of Education have been aware of the need to provide pay and incentives to attract and keep teaching staff in rural and remote locations. We now need the same attention paid to attracting and retaining staff in the Early Childhood Sector. At our newly opened Long Day Care Centre at the Wentworth Preschool, the staff member in the long day care room is entitled to higher pay than the preschool teacher. That same preschool teacher, currently studying to gain university qualifications, has received several written offers from Victoria promising a \$15,000 scholarship to work in Victoria.

This is making it near impossible for border communities to attract qualified preschool teachers. In very remote areas, access to housing or subsidised housing can mean the difference between having an operational Centre or not. Rural and remote areas need assistance to attract educators because our children deserve a ‘good start’ too.

The ICPA-NSW would like the NSW Department of Education to provide single accommodation at all remote schools.

There is not any affordable accommodation in either Louth or Wanaaring, therefore, when a casual teacher or visiting consultant needs to overnight it is not feasible for them to do so. The [REDACTED] teacher last year paid \$1,000 dollars a fortnight for a small flat as the teacher’s house was still occupied by the relief head mistress. There is no additional funding which allows for this extra expense. This is yet another disincentive for principals as they cannot leave their position for any amount of time as the school would be without a teacher.

ICPA-NSW requests the NSW Minister for Education and Early Learning that when incentivising remote teacher packages, they ensure that those incentives are authentic as to the teachers’ contract.

Currently remote teacher housing is subsidised considerably. However, this rental subsidy needs to be in addition to the remote teacher salary and be part of the incentivising package.

4. Data collection

The ICPA-NSW believes the NSW Department of Education should ensure that the “Tell Them From Me” parent and student feedback surveys are offered in all NSW small schools, with responses collected and actioned by the office of the Director, Educational Leadership to ensure anonymity is maintained.

We thank the NSW Department of Education for the work already completed to ensure more rural schools and their families can participate in the “Tell Them from Me” surveys.

However, there remains a disconnect between many remote small schools and the Director, Educational Leadership and many parents feel they have no avenue to report what is happening in a school and community.

Directors’ Educational Leadership visit remote locations infrequently and check in with principals, though rarely seek the feedback from families or communities. In a small school, the interaction between the school and the community is vital and families should have an appropriate avenue to report their educational experiences and expectations.

We understand the need for anonymity and therefore in a small school setting responses should go direct to the Director Educational Leadership’s office. They could then share across all small schools what is working well and what could be improved.

The ICPA-NSW is always keen to provide the NSW Department of Education to make school staff aware of ICPA as an information source for understanding isolated education processes and difficulties that may be incurred due to remoteness.

ICPA welcomes sharing knowledge with professional staff and believes that all communities need to discuss issues with the aim of working collaboratively towards solutions. We would like NSW Department of Education to have a definite policy which informs remote staff of ICPA's role in remote areas.

5. Transparency of and accountability for school funding.

The Review will not examine the calculation of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

ICPA-NSW urges the NSW Department of Education to ensure that the Hub and Spoke Program position in rural communities is retained for TP1 and TP2 schools so that relief teaching staff can be accessed when needed.

Our local schools currently have access to a Hub and Spoke Program teacher when covering teaching staff on leave or who are attending professional development. School principals are continually fighting for the positions to continue as casual teacher availability is extremely low in rural areas. These positions are vital in ensuring schools remain operational in the event of an unexpected illness or leave.

TP1 and TP2 schools have a low number of staff and do not have the ability to split classes in the event of an unexpected absence. Another issue is that this Hub and Spoke Program position is shared with three small schools in the area whilst the teacher is based at a central school in the district.

Whilst principals and teachers are accessing professional learning at the same time, each school can't access the relief teacher through the Hub and Spoke Program on the same day so accessing a very small bank of relief teachers is still an ongoing issue in rural areas. We acknowledge that these positions are three- or five-year contracts, however, it is very rare that staff stay in this position for much longer than one or two years, therefore it is necessary to ensure that this position is retained for TP1 and TP2 schools.
