

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

**Teacher Education Expert Panel
Discussion Paper**

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 Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper and to highlight key issues specifically related to initial teacher education, teachers and teaching in rural and remote Australia.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, grassroots, not-for-profit, apolitical, national parent organisation, which advocates on behalf of members for equity of access to an appropriate, consistent and high-quality education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary and the provision of services required to achieve this. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia. They often live great distances from their nearest education institution and from services required to support the education of their children.

The current teacher shortage and recruitment and retention of teachers with the knowledge, skills and disposition to teach in rural and remote schools continues to be a major concern and one of the challenges on the education agenda. Positive educational outcomes for students in rural and remote Australia are reliant on high-quality and confident classroom-ready teachers.

Delivery of education in rural and remote Australia involves teaching in small rural schools and Schools of Distance Education or Schools of the Air. Teachers must be well-prepared for the unique circumstances surrounding these learning contexts. Education providers must ensure the initial teacher education content delivered, both theoretical and practical, is contextually appropriate and that all teachers working in geographically isolated schools are specifically trained and prepared to teach this cohort from day one of their teaching career.

ICPA (Aust) believes education providers who offer initial 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.

RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION CONTEXT

Preparation for the complexities, challenges and uniqueness of teaching in rural and remote schools, including potentially multi-age classrooms, living remotely, engaging in the community and isolation from family, friends and colleagues is vital to improve recruitment and retention of teachers and to ensuring optimum and successful educational outcomes for all students.

Graduate teachers need to be classroom-ready with the skills and knowledge to support a diverse range of learners including students with specific education needs. ICPA (Aust) believes initial teacher education courses should incorporate the range of unique challenges experienced when teaching in rural and remote areas requiring specific knowledge, understanding and skills around:

- 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
- strategies for coping with the unique dynamics that exist in small rural and remote schools and the wider community

- teaching out of specialist areas such as music lessons for a school concert or organising a school sports carnival and
- First Aid training as often there is no medical services close.

This would allow student teachers undertaking practical experience placements to develop and apply knowledge and skills in the rural and remote context and ensure graduate teachers would start their career job-ready with valuable insight into the structure, characteristics, practice and delivery methods of rural and remote education.

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 where the majority of interactions with students is done remotely.

The skills required for teaching in the distance education context are unique and may include:

- mastering remote communication platforms utilised for remote teaching
- engaging students in meaningful learning when directly teaching in an online learning environment (particularly in the early primary years)
- the ability to gauge student engagement, comprehension and understanding of learning concepts via remote learning platforms
- supporting the Home Tutor in the distance education home schoolroom and
- visits to student's homes or other locations, often in very isolated areas requiring travel on unsealed roads.

Financial and personal assistance throughout the teaching course should be provided for students who express a desire and commitment to teach in rural areas upon completion of their course. Further, incentives for teachers to take up positions in rural and remote locations would assist in recruitment and retention.

These could include:

- rural and remote school practical experience placements for teaching students to equip themselves with high-quality knowledge, skills and insight of these contexts
- support to live and work in a rural and remote area including assistance for travel, accommodation and living expenses for practical experience placements
- relocation incentives – accommodation, travel, rental assistance
- preparation for rural living and working in isolation from family, friends and colleagues
- quality induction programs that include “in classroom” programs and P&C and school board operations that are reviewed regularly.
- access to essential services including communications
- competency attainment
- quality mentor programs with experienced, knowledgeable and skilled mentors who are supported to undertake this important role
- peer support networks both within and outside of the school
- additional support for professional development ensuring availability, accessibility and resourcing and
- salary loading and other financial incentives.

Students who attend rural and remote practical experience placements often endure significant financial hardship, especially when undertaken in different locations to where they reside for university. These practicums often occur over an extended period of time and students may have to

give up part-time jobs to participate whilst still needing to pay their regular rent on accommodation, combined with paying practicum location accommodation, travel and living costs. Additional assistance should be provided to these students to supplement travel and accommodation expenses incurred while accessing practical experience placements in these locations.

A high-quality practical experience placement for a student within a rural and remote community that is welcoming, supportive, enjoyable and rewarding may incentivise not only rural and remote students, but others, to undertake practicums in these areas. This will potentially see these skilled students returning to a rural and remote community as graduates, improving the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote Australia. Adequate academic, emotional, financial and other supports are all essential to ensuring that students undertaking these practical experience placements have quality experiences, especially when these may be completed in locations where their families and other acquaintances are not present. This has benefits for the student and the community as the graduate is classroom-ready and community-ready.

There should be timely, regular and adequate support from the initial teacher education course supervisors during rural and remote practical experience placements as is readily provided to urban placements. If this cannot be face-to-face due to remoteness, alternative delivery must be offered either over the phone or virtually.

Practical experience placements requires preparation and careful planning; pre-placement introductions (face to face or at very least online), inductions, ongoing checks and then final reviews. These must be managed and overseen by suitable mentors within the rural or remote host schools. Available professional development prior to the placement for these mentors is essential and beneficial to the school. This training and development will ensure mentors can support a student teacher's successful transition from observer to supervised teacher within the extended practicum time. Reporting of practical experience placements experience needs to include feedback that contributes to the growth and development of the student teacher and be timely in its delivery so as to support the student teacher's positive progression towards displaying the Graduate Teacher Standards.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS

It is vitally important that teaching graduates in rural and remote schools are also adequately prepared with an appropriate level of skills and knowledge to teach students with specific education needs, learning difficulties and behavioural issues as access to appropriate support staff, including allied health professionals can be limited in these locations.

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 and strategies to implement when students are in an escalating behavioural situation, as often all teachers/principals are teaching so classroom teachers need to have strategies in place to deal with these behaviours unaided
- external assistance on management of specific issues, for example, a hotline that teachers could use for strategies to assist children with specific educational needs such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder to ensure best practice advice
- 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 Home 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 students with specific education needs. This would enable the continuity of specific learning programs and take the pressure off teachers to develop management programs for these students.

Teachers will encounter situations where a proportion of their class/es have specific education needs or learning 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 rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper 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 should it be required.