

**Submission  
No 60**

**ACCESS TO TRANSPORT FOR SENIORS AND  
DISADVANTAGED PEOPLE IN RURAL AND  
REGIONAL NSW**

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**Date Received:** 21 July 2016

# Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc.



Submission to the  
NSW Legislative Assembly Committee  
on Community Services

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Incorporated (ICPA-NSW) is a volunteer parent group that lobbies for equality of access to education for all geographically isolated students. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. Member families of the Association reside in regional, rural, remote and very remote NSW and all share a common goal of access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this.

ICPA-NSW is pleased to contribute to the Inquiry into access to transport for seniors and **disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW.**

ICPA-NSW believes that all students, irrespective of where they live, should have access to the education they require to participate to their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community. Furthermore, remote rural families experience disadvantage in their efforts to ensure their children attend school. Many families have to transport their children over long distances to either access the school bus which travels to their local school or to drive their children to the school gate or early childhood service. This places a financial burden on many of these families as the Private Vehicle Conveyance (PVC) Scheme in its current form is outdated and inequitable, and is not doing much to subsidise the expenses these families face. Many families also face challenges in time management, as the time taken to transport their children over these long distances is time away from their businesses.



**ICPA-NSW responds to the following items on the Committee on Community Services'****Terms of Reference:**

- (a) Specific issues relating to the transport needs of seniors and disadvantaged people in rural and regional NSW;**

In a rural and remote context, the most important factor when considering alternative schools (if the closest school has closed) is distance. In the interests of children, in particular very young children, the travelling of excessive distance by bus or car should be heavily weighted in considerations, as should circumstances where distance education is the only feasible alternative.

Most critically, when schools have insufficient numbers of students to remain open, student numbers are usually insufficient to establish a new bus run to the next alternative school. Generally, Transport for NSW requires 15 students to commence a new bus run. School closures commonly occur with much fewer than 15 students, such that there may not be sufficient numbers to establish or reconfigure bus routes to provide student transport to the nearest alternative school.

If distances in a rural or remote setting make private vehicle travel impractical, then the remaining alternative may be to transfer children into distance education placing even greater burden on families who then need to supervise the school room each and every school day.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that the Department of Education works with Transport for NSW to resolve potential problems arising from unsuitable student transport to alternative schools prior to school closure consultations, so that families can clearly consider the alternative schooling scenarios before providing input into the consultation process.**

**ICPA-NSW recommends that the student numbers required to start a "Bus Run" be lowered from 15 (MD2 category bus) to 12 so that it is in line with capacity seating of an MD1 Bus.**

ICPA-NSW acknowledges that the Department of Education currently considers issues of distance to an alternative school when making decisions regarding school closures. However, our members' experience is that alternative school transport issues are not always fully considered in advance of a decision to close a school.

- (d) Support that can be provided to seniors and disadvantaged people to assist with the costs of private transport where public transport is either unavailable or unable to meet the needs of these groups; and**

Early childhood education investment consistently demonstrates the greatest return of all educational spending. PISA analysis, along with other studies, finds that pupils who had attended at least one year of pre-primary education tend to perform better than those who had not, even after accounting for the pupil's socioeconomic background.

PISA research also shows that the relationship between pre-primary attendance and performance tends to be stronger in school systems with a longer duration of pre-primary education, smaller pupil to teacher ratios in pre-primary education, and higher public expenditure per child at the pre-primary level (*PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful?*).

New South Wales compares poorly with other states in pre-school participation. Of the children attending pre-school in regional and remote areas, only 47% do so for at least 15 hours per week (the level of the Universal Access Guarantee). In contrast, in every other state in Australia, regional and rural participation at or above 15 hours per week is at least 60% (*ABS, Pre-school Education 2013*). One of the huge benefits of children attending pre-school is the ability for early intervention for children with special needs, the ability to help these children and reduce the long term cost for society is enormous.

ICPA-NSW suggests that enhancing early childhood education in rural and remote areas will narrow the unacceptable gap between rural and metropolitan educational outcomes in later years. ICPA-NSW also suggests that rural and remote education in NSW needs rebuilding from the ground up, and perhaps the greatest potential for change is to ensure that all rural and remote children participate in 600 hours of pre-primary education.

However, in rural and remote areas in New South Wales, access to existing services can be difficult. Despite the fact that school buses travel rural routes transporting older children to school, parents are left to provide their own arrangements for pre-schoolers. Commonly, parents drop children onto the school bus and then follow that bus into town driving their pre-schoolers to the service.

Alternatively, often young children don't access the services due to the cost of travel, as well as the time for the parent away from paid or unpaid work. In remote areas where distances are large, frequently the parent has to wait while the child attends the service because the distances are too great to allow two return trips in the same day. The outcome is that, even where regional and remote children do access early childhood services, they do so for fewer hours per week than metropolitan students.

#### **Weekly hours of NSW Children Attending Pre-school in the Year before School**

| Weekly Hours Attending | Major Cities  | Regional and Remote Areas |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Less than 10 hours     | 5604 (13.4%)  | 4731 (24.1%)              |
| 10-14 hours            | 11195 (26.8%) | 5755 (29.3%)              |
| 15 hours or more       | 24919 (59.8%) | 9174 (46.6%)              |
| Total                  | 41718         | 19660                     |

*Australian Bureau of Statistics, Pre-School Education, 2012*

Fewer regional and remote children access pre-school for more than 10 hours per week than city children. However, arguably, regional and remote children have far greater early childhood needs than urban children due to the greater need to improve the following outcomes:

- Schooling outcomes, including literacy, numeracy and school retention rates;
- Social outcomes including lowering delinquency;
- Health and developmental outcomes arising from opportunities for early screening and intervention; and
- Personal outcomes including increasing sociability and independence.

The private costs to families accessing early childhood services in rural and remote areas are significant, while the public returns to government investment when rural and remote children achieve access to early childhood services are equally apparent. All this signifies disadvantage for rural families as well as the obvious disconnect in communication when buses are currently transporting school age children to and from school each day along the same routes as pre-school children travel thus providing a possible solution to these issues.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that Transport for NSW formally recognises that bus companies should be contracted (included in the *School Students Transport Scheme (SSTS)*) to carry pre-schoolers in the year prior to commencing school on rural and remote bus runs, and should also be included in the *Private Vehicle Conveyance Scheme (PVC)*.**

(e) Any other related matters.

Shire Councils in western NSW are giving priority to maintaining unsealed roads required for school runs. However; without giving priority to the roads that families travel on to access the school run, accessing education becomes difficult, expensive and thus inequitable. It is unacceptable for children to be missing more than one day of school in a single rain event because of unsealed roads. Roads in the northwest of the State become impassable and dangerous quickly because they have little or no gravel on them. Children’s safety is at risk. In some cases, after 10mms of rain, the school bus does not leave the bitumen. To ensure children are as safe as possible, sealing of all unsealed roads needs to be progressing. ICPA has lobbied successfully for seat belts on buses. However, there are still many unsealed roads which are dangerous in wet or dry conditions. Our children’s safety has to be considered of paramount importance.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that the Minister for Transport supplies adequate funding to local shire councils to adopt a policy of sealing 10 kilometres per year of unsealed council roads on school routes, and prioritises maintaining unsealed roads that are travelled on by families to access school bus routes.**