

Submission
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**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION TO
STUDENTS WITH A DISABILITY OR SPECIAL NEEDS**

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From the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association
of NSW Inc



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Introduction

The NSW State Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association, (ICPA-NSW), welcomes the opportunity to have input into the Inquiry into the provision of education to students with a disability or special needs, by the General Purpose Standing Committee No.2, Legislative Council, NSW Parliament.

ICPA -NSW is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. Member families of the Association reside in rural and remote NSW and all share a common goal of access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Members' children are educated in small rural schools, at boarding schools, school term hostels and by distance education. Students wishing to study at a tertiary level always need to live away from home to do so.

Access to specialist educational services to assist with the education of children with special needs has been a longstanding area of concern for ICPA-NSW members. ICPA-NSW has recognized - and lobbied many years for - the need for increased access to specialist trained teachers to meet the specific needs of students with special education requirements in rural and remote areas. Motions requesting additional funding, services and employment of specialist education professionals and allied health professionals in rural areas have been put forward by branches at ICPA-NSW annual conferences for many years.

It is the contention of ICPA-NSW that for students with special needs who reside in rural and isolated parts of NSW there needs to be an increase in funding to allow for increased availability of the required services, a complete restructure of how resources are managed and accessed in rural and remote areas, and provision made for travel and accommodation by those providing the service and those accessing the service.

ICPA-NSW will address the Terms of Reference 1, 3, 6 and 7 with respect to the provision of education to students with a disability or special need in rural and isolated NSW.

ICPA-NSW believes all students, irrespective of where they live, should have the opportunity to *'receive the education they require to participate to their full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community'*.

ICPA-NSW looks towards an equitable way forward that does not disadvantage rural and regional students in the pursuit of their educational goals. Constructive changes to the way additional services and support mechanisms are offered would enhance the opportunities available to them and improve the access to education in rural and isolated NSW for students with special needs and disabilities.

1. The nature, level and adequacy of funding for the education of children with a disability

- Current funding is not adequate to cover the costs of provision in rural and remote areas of NSW.
- An additional component is needed to cover the travel and accommodation costs of teachers and allied health professionals needed in rural and remote NSW to provide a service.
- Funding should be allocated per child, so that the funding follows the child from school to school and sector to sector (i.e. government to catholic to independent).
- Current funding is allocated to public schools on the basis of a portion of a full time equivalent teacher (FTE). Small rural schools will be allocated a 0.1FTE. This is not practicable for the school to access. Often travel time uses all this allocation.
- Changing school enrolments affect the distribution of school expertise - if funding is not also realigned, the small rural school finds it increasingly difficult to support students with special learning needs in their local school.
- The assessment process that the Department of Education and Training requires before additional funding can be supplied to a school for a special needs student is time consuming. The process follows official procedure which involves school staff, school counsellors and then regional input. Availability, or lack of, these specialist staff ensure that the assessment process can take many months. In the meantime, the child and the teacher are struggling to meet educational outcomes.
- Students with special needs who are enrolled in Schools of Distance Education (Distance Education Centres) have the same access and equity issues.

The bottom line is that rural and isolated schools need their individual circumstances and location taken into account when funds are allocated. The difficulty of access to assessment staff, allied health professionals and specialist trained teachers needs to be considered and factored into the funding formulae. This includes allowance for travel time and accommodation if necessary.

3. The level and adequacy of current special education places within the education system.

- Within rural and remote NSW there are no special education support schools or special education classes within schools as the school population is too low. These children are integrated into the school, often in multi-aged classrooms. PP5 and PP6 schools have no additional trained support available for the teacher, to either give assistance in the classroom or provide classroom relief for the development of individualised programs.
- The assessment process needs to be simplified immediately. It is well known that early intervention is beneficial to the student and the teacher and the eventual outcomes.
- The assessment process is hampered by a clear lack of specialist trained teaching staff and allied health professionals in rural and isolated NSW.
- Ideally, each classroom teacher would have a specialist teacher available within the school to assist in the classroom and facilitate with writing and creating individual learning programs.

6. Student and family access to professional support and services, such as speech pathology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and school counsellors

- The dearth of allied health professionals in rural areas is common knowledge.
- Travel to access these services often inhibits families from obtaining the professional opinion and diagnosis that is needed.
- The waiting list for visiting specialist is also prohibitive. It is quite common for service to have three to six months, and up to a year's waiting list.
- A travelling multi-disciplinary service could allay some of these issues.

- The use of broadband and internet as an alternative needs to be questioned. There are small rural communities and schools where broadband is not available. The internet connection is a satellite connection. Satellite connections are variable, experience time delays, especially with verbal communications, and have constant drop-outs. This technology is no replacement for face to face teaching or assessment.

7. The provision of adequate teaching training, both in terms of pre-service and on-going professional training.

- ICPA-NSW would like to see a compulsory module dealing with teaching children with special needs. incorporated into the Bachelor of Education qualification
- On-going professional training is difficult to access from rural and remote NSW. Issues which make this so, are the travel time and distance, and the availability of casual staff to free the classroom teacher to attend.
- The turn over of staff in rural areas means that those with additional training move to other schools in larger centres, to be replaced with staff who do not have further professional training.

Conclusion

ICPA-NSW has been involved in the debate surrounding the decision by the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Health to relocate the services provided by Dalwood Assessment Centre and Palm Avenue School. Palm Avenue School and Dalwood Assessment Centre provided intensive one-on-one assessment and assistance for students from rural and isolated areas of NSW, who have severe learning difficulties and have experienced failure in previous interventions.

The combined service provided these students one-on-one multi-disciplinary treatment which cannot be provided on a regional basis, or at school level. This model of cooperation between departments, and teaching and health professionals ensured that diagnostically appropriate intervention was made available to these students. The delivery of specifically designed programs for individual students was then either delivered at a short term residential facility or as an outreach program in their home school.

ICPA-NSW believes that the concept of multi-disciplinary diagnosis, treatment and program delivery would best suit rural and regional students. The specialists, sited in central locations, or as a mobile service, would be available without long waiting periods and within reasonable

travel distance. It is necessary to create a service which has no waiting lists, provides immediate access to the most appropriate specialists in health and education, and is easily accessible to rural and isolated students.