

Isolated Children's Parents' Association – Queensland Ince

SUBMISSION

to

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION

on

THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION

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PREAMBLE

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association - Queensland Incorporated (ICPA - Qld Inc.) is comprised of 47 branches with approximately 1500 members scattered throughout the rural and remote areas of Queensland. For 28 years this organisation has lobbied to ensure that children's educational needs and future aspirations are not disadvantaged simply because of the location of their family home.

'A rural development policy worthy of the name will include a compelling vision of what an excellent rural education should encompass. It will also address the issue of how best to make education a central part of the overall rural agenda.'

(Sher and Sher. 'Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities Really Mattered', Journal of Research in Rural Education, Spring, 1994, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp 2-43)

Australian children will be best served if politics are left out of education and learning outcomes focused on.

The direction set, as a result of this inquiry, must receive bipartisan support. With such support, a well-educated rural and remote population will be equipped to participate in and facilitate both ecologically and economically sustainable growth.

THE AVAILABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF BOTH PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLING.

Many students living in rural and isolated areas are unable to **EASILY ACCESS** all levels of schooling - not only primary and secondary, but also preschool and post secondary education.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

For many families from rural and remote areas with children of preschool age and younger, there is only a limited range of early childhood programs and services available.

Mobile Early Childhood Units not only assist in meeting the needs of these families, but in many instances, act as an early intervention mediation for a child/children with learning difficulties. They can provide information on where assistance can be obtained and the personnel to contact.

In some instances, it is the mobile service personnel who have detected a particular problem with a child that the parent has not perceived. Without these mobiles early intervention of special needs for many isolated rural and remote families would never have eventuated.

These units however, are restricted in number, and limited in the areas that they can service, due to the uncertainty of ongoing and adequate funding.

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ICPA – Qld Inc. advocates:

- that a range of early childhood programs and services be available to support children and families who live in rural and remote areas.
- that there be an ongoing commitment to maintaining funding for rural and remote mobile units providing Early Childhood programs and services.

In Queensland, the Remote Area Family Service (RAFS) has mobile teams working from 4 centres providing a successful and valued support service for families in rural and isolated areas of the state.

PRIMARY, SECONDARY and POST SECONDARY EDUCATION

Boarding/hostel facilities play a large and important part in ensuring that children from rural and isolated areas are able to **ACCESS** an appropriate education, whether they attend a government or non-government school.

Queensland is one of three states which offer funding via the School Hostel Support Scheme to School Term Hostels.

ICPA - Qld Inc. believes that compensation for the costs incurred in gaining access to an appropriate primary, secondary and post secondary education can be achieved through:

- the provision of a non means tested Basic Boarding Allowance equivalent to 55% of the Average Boarding Fee, indexed annually to that fee.
- the provision of a means-tested Additional Boarding Fee, indexed annually to that fee.
- the provision of a Second Home Allowance equivalent to the Basic Boarding Allowance for those families who establish a second home to provide daily access to an appropriate school for their children.
- the provision of a GST free education. Isolated families, who have no choice but to educate their children at boarding schools/hostels, experience many emotional and financial hardships, including separation of the family, adverse weather conditions and fluctuating commodity prices, to ensure their children can complete their education. Unless food and travelling costs to sporting commitments and school-specific functions are GST free, the increased costs of these essentially core curricula activities may place boarding schools/hostels beyond the reach of these isolated students and their families.
- the provision of an allowance that is not tied to a parental asset or actual means test for geographically isolated students who have no choice but to set up a second home for Post Secondary Education. Rent Assistance and Travel Allowance would help towards equality of access to the Tertiary Institution gate.

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The challenge is to address the problem of low post-compulsory qualifications in Queensland and so improve the labour productivity.

Queensland is currently below the Australian average in the post-compulsory qualification profile. Information – ABS Schools Australia- shows that while 80% of Brisbane students continue on to higher education, the rate drops to below 50% in Central west and North West, and to 28% in South West Queensland.

STUDENTS LEARNING THROUGH SCHOOLS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Throughout Queensland, rural and isolated students who do not have daily access to a school, receive their education in their home from a School of Distance Education (SDE). Curriculum papers, which are written and distributed to the SDE from the Open Access Unit in Brisbane, are implemented at home under the supervision of a Home Tutor (usually Mum) and supported by:

1. a comprehensive field services program.
2. daily on-air lessons via outdated HF Radio from their SDE.

Trials are being conducted in Queensland at the Charleville School of Distance Education using telephone technology in place of the outdated and inefficient HF radio. Results to date have been most successful, with improved learning outcomes for the students suggested as the possible most outstanding benefit.

The SDE staff is often unaware of the role and duties of the **unpaid Home Tutor**, and seldom realises the pressures that these women are placed under daily. Duties can include meal preparation for family and staff, assisting with mustering and shearing, general station duties, caring for younger children, and teaching.

Inservice, support and recognition of the role of the Home Tutor is of utmost importance.

While the Field service activities of Outreach Days/ Clusters/ Mini Schools enhance the isolated student's social, sporting and educational skills, the SDE is often unaware of the extra financial strain, and loss of school days that travel to and participation in these activities places on families.

The SDE student's attendance at the compulsory Literacy and Numeracy tests can normally involve rural families driving their students vast distances to participate. This can often include the cost of an overnight stay as well as the travel costs incurred.

ICPA - Qld Inc. advocates:

- that educational materials for students studying via distance education

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1. continue to be coordinated centrally by experts
 2. are continually updated with changes to keep pace with the curriculum
 3. are written to be implemented by a home tutor who is not necessarily a trained teacher.
- the provision of a realistic Distance Education Allowance, to help defray the costs of educating geographically isolated students at home.
 - that financial assistance be provided for travel and accommodation expenses incurred by parents accessing their SDE's and school events in rural and remote areas, particularly with the introduction of compulsory numeracy and literacy testing.
 - the future introduction of voice and data technology into the Distance Education system must be comprehensively trialed and evaluated before being implemented. If found to be successful, the technology should be implemented without delay and without budgetary restraints. As well, consideration should be given to the home situation of isolated students, and these students must not be disadvantaged in the program they receive.

CURRICULUM

The Queensland School Curriculum Council (QSCC) has established a range of consultative structures and advisory processes. These include syllabus advisory committees, consultative networks and forums.

ICPA - Qld Inc. has been participating in a Rural and Remote Forum to raise and discuss issues related to the curriculum and the testing needs of students and teachers in rural and remote areas.

ICPA – Qld Inc. believes QSCC should prepare curriculum materials that:

- can be implemented in the full range of educational settings, including small schools, multi-age classes and the home tutoring of distance education students.
- can be easily adapted by teachers at Schools of Distance Education for specialised use by their students.
- assist students from rural and remote areas to prepare for the world of work.
- take into consideration the fact that many teachers in rural and remote school settings are young and inexperienced; and that they may require easy and ready access to curriculum and support materials, including planning and assessment examples.

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THE QUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES, INCLUDING TECHNOLOGICAL SUPPORT SERVICES

To ensure the continuity of delivery of quality educational services to students in rural and remote schools.

ICPA - Qld Inc. advocates:

- that a rural component be written into all educational policy and programs to ensure the practicality of their implementation in rural and remote areas.
- that a 'rural education' component be included in pre service teacher training courses, to prepare teachers for the diversity of teaching situations in rural and remote schools.
- that the 'rural education' component be supported by pre-service practical experiences conducted in a diversity of teaching situations in rural and remote communities.

The Queensland University Technology (QUT) and ICPA – Qld Inc. have developed a partnership program for QUT student teachers to undertake practicums at schools in rural and remote areas of Queensland. This program enables student teachers to gain first-hand experience teaching in small schools, along with the opportunity to develop an understanding of living and working in rural /isolated communities. One of the significant outcomes of this program has been that many of the students (the majority of whom are from the city) have applied for and accepted teaching appointments to schools in rural and remote communities.

- that the following inequities evident in small rural and isolated schools because of their geographic isolation be taken into consideration.
 1. the personal and professional isolation of teachers
 2. the reduced secondary curriculum options which can be offered
 3. the levels of staff experience
 4. the additional postage and telephone costs
 5. the difficulties and costs of technology
 6. the additional time staff and students have to be away from schools to participate in a range of activities, together with the associated costs.
- that extra resources be made available to provide access to a wide range of educational opportunities for students in small rural and remote schools.
- that the Priority Country Area Program (PCAP) in Queensland be maintained in its current intersystemic and community-based format.
- that the Country Areas Program (CAP), including PCAP in Queensland, be maintained as a separately identified and funded Commonwealth Targeted program within the area of "Special Learning Needs", as it is **the only program** (in the above scheme) which addresses the unique needs of students who are geographically isolated.

Appendix 1 for additional information on PCAP in Queensland.

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Technology must be used to enhance educational opportunities, but never to further isolate students from their peers. This could particularly have an adverse affect on students from rural and remote areas.

It is vital that schools in rural and remote areas have quality, reliable and equitable access to the very latest technology, which could alleviate the problems of limited library/written resources in rural and remote schools.

ICPA - Qld Inc. advocates that:

- a study be conducted on the educational outcomes, social interaction and maturity for students studying many subjects via technology.
- professional development and technical support for teachers expected to implement current technological change in rural and remote areas be adequately funded.
- all students acquire the skills necessary to allow them to adapt to the rapid and less predictable changes that will confront them in the future.
- the provision of grid power at an affordable price for all Australians irrespective of where they live. Those living in cities take technological advances for granted. Those without grid power are falling behind, as home generators do not support computer use, and allow only limited use of electrical appliances.

ICPA – Qld Inc. views access to quality telecommunications as paramount to the provision of education to rural and remote students.

Such telecommunications should be provided in their homes (their place of learning) at the same standard in every aspect, as it is, in the homes of their urban counterparts, who do have other venues, such as their school in which to access such information technology (IT) services.

The inherent data rate that co-exists with voice in urban standard telephone services should be formally identified, and a base data rate equivalent to the rate available to the majority of consumers via this delivery method MUST become part of the USO and be upgraded in line with future enhancements to this standard telephone service.

The hybrid service proposed to deliver a ISDN compatible download service for the remaining 4% of customers is virtually useless for E-Commerce and interactive education services because it is not 'two way'. Therefore a rural and remote customer's ability to participate is limited to what their existing voice services can provide in the way of inherent data capacity and speed.

Students studying at home in rural and remote areas via Distance Education must have an effective carrier to deliver quality IT services to enable them to participate in the "Virtual

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Classroom” that is now being proposed by Education Queensland; **this will have a significant impact within the Distance Education systems in the near future.**

WHETHER THE EDUCATION AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, INDIGENOUS CHILDREN AND CHILDREN FROM DIVERSE CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS COMPLIES WITH THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS.

Access to an adequate and appropriate education is a major priority for families of students with disabilities and learning difficulties, residing in rural and remote communities.

There is a pressing need for increased levels of funding for professional development of teachers and teacher aides, and for a wide range of program-related purposes to improve the educational provision for rural and isolated children with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Creative and realistic solutions must be found to develop assessment in relation to early intervention for students with special needs from rural and remote areas.

ICPA – Qld Inc. advocates:

- that a mobile multi-disciplinary group of specialist therapists be established to travel to rural and remote areas of Queensland to provide early and accurate identification, assessment of needs, ascertainment and appraisal for students with disabilities and learning difficulties, and to support their families.
- that adequate funding be provided to ensure availability and retention of experienced therapists in rural and remote areas, and to allow for greater access to these allied health professionals for isolated students with disabilities and learning difficulties.
- that the government provide some financial assistance in the residential care area to enable boarding schools to cater for students with disabilities from rural and remote areas who attend these schools because of the geographic location of their family home.
- that the education sector and government establish equity policies for children with disabilities from rural and remote areas.
- that a special needs component be built into the normal government funding methods for families with children with disabilities who live in rural and isolated areas.

ICPA – Qld Inc. thanks the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for the opportunity to respond to the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education.

This association acknowledges that 'economic, social and technological changes are transforming every aspect of the world, and the society in which our children will live'. We believe that the prospects for rural development, and thus, the prospects for a better future

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for Queensland's rural and remote people and places, are dependent upon a broad range of appropriate educational options and activities.

*Prepared on behalf of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association – Qld Inc.
by Susanne Stirton and Queensland Council.*

Appendix 1

In Queensland, the Priority Country Area Program (PCAP) was established to improve **the educational opportunities, the participation, the learning outcomes, and the personal development** of rural and isolated primary and secondary school **students in both government and non-government schools.**

Students from geographically isolated areas experience restricted access to a range of educational, social and cultural experiences due to distance.

The PCAP program in Queensland is project-orientated and emphasises the adoption of educational strategies and services appropriate specifically to the needs of country children.

PCAP sees the participation of parents, representatives of community groups and teachers in identifying needs, planning and implementing projects for their local areas as integral to the effective operation of the Program.

Community participation is highly valued by the Program.

Education Queensland, the Association of Independent Schools and the Queensland Catholic Education Commission jointly administer PCAP.

The Program operates in a three tiered management structure –

- State Management Council
- 4 Area Committees (**South West, North West, Central and Northern PCAP Committees**)
- Local PCAP Committees

Each of these committees follows the same administrative and accountability procedures as outlined in the Commonwealth Guidelines. Financial administration procedures are consistent with those of Education Queensland.

Funds are accessed through submission to local PCAP Committees for consideration.

PCAP encourages the community to become responsible for its own initiatives and places great emphasis on participation from parents and community members.

PCAP is an extremely valuable and highly regarded program for the benefit of students in rural and isolated communities in Queensland.

Among the most beneficial projects funded by the PCAP area committees in Queensland are:

- **The 'Artist in Residence' program.** In this project, an artist (be they a poet, painter, craftsman or writer) is funded to visit an area and tutor students from the small schools and distance education centre. These workshop-type projects foster an interest in learning and enrich the curriculum of the schools.
- **Sports Skilling Camps.** These teach specific sporting skills and develop the feeling of being included in teams—so important for these students from small isolated schools who are able to join together for

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specialist training and coaching using the shared facilities and personnel. Such projects bring students and communities together to form working partnerships.

- **The Instrumental Music Program.** This program, conducted in the SW PCAP area, enhances the social and cultural life of small isolated communities and gives students opportunities to access specialist instrumental music instruction, not otherwise available in their area.

ICPA – Qld Inc. believes the organisation, administration, management and overall accountability of PCAP in Queensland, provides a successful model for equity programs across Australia.