Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"

Submission

to the

Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments

Home learning and teaching during COVID-19

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 provide further comment to the inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments on complexities arising from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students in remote educational environments.

ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that during the COVID-19 pandemic, several positive measures and initiatives were put into place which supported rural and remote students during these times. The improvements made in communications, especially around satellite internet access, have proven extremely beneficial for remote families. Furthermore, the continued and increased support for those tertiary students receiving Youth Allowance and the commitment to continue AIC uninterrupted for geographically isolated recipients was gratefully received.

However, COVID-19 certainly presented increased challenges for many rural and remote students and their families, who already face the range of problems and difficulties in accessing equitable educational opportunities that have been mentioned in ICPA Australia's previous submission. The unique disadvantages of geographically isolated families across all educational stages were found to be extenuated and magnified due to the impacts of COVID-19.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

The impacts of COVID-19 concerning early childhood education and care on rural and remote families served to highlight the fact that rural and remote early childhood education and care is unique and therefore requires a standalone approach to providing support for remote families. The Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package, with its provision of about 50% funding for services, caused significant impacts on In Home Care and Family Day Care services in rural and remote areas where there was not a reduction in children requiring child care, hence providers had to look elsewhere for extra funding to pay their current educators properly. While additional payments became available for eligible providers and educators, several issues arose:

- misunderstanding and lengthy application and approval processes,
- rejection of applications and
- In Home Care providers not employing replacement, new or extra educators for rural and remote families

All of which meant that many families were left without care despite their needs remaining as they were before COVID-19.

RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS

The provision of online learning from a rural and remote school perspective hinged upon the availability of staff and resources to be able to achieve this. Remote schools have been faced with unique challenges and circumstances. For example, in some states, issues with internet connection occurred because school staff had limited understanding of their connections and could not directly contact their providers to gain assistance as this had to be done by the state education department. This caused delays in some cases for schools to access assistance to set up online teaching. For many of the smaller rural schools where principals also need to teach, the additional obligations of preparing for remote learning became a significant challenge and burden to maintain.

DISTANCE EDUCATION (DE)

The disadvantages of geographically isolated distance education mentioned in our previous submission were still present for these students (and their families and tutors) who must participate in Distance Education/online learning at all times, not just throughout a crisis such as COVID-19. Having to participate in distance education and online learning without teacher and peer support available in a face-to-face capacity due to geographical

isolation is ongoing, without any alternatives available in remote locations. However, some other impacts have been felt during COVID-19:

- A move to all students using the platform and resources usually accessed only by distance education students saw the systems overrun with increased usage and meant access was affected for the students who always need to rely on these online resources for their learning in some states.
- Geographically isolated distance education students who may only see their teachers and peers very occasionally at any time had their visits limited further. Students at a Distance Education school in Qld have not had face-to-face contact since February, and no contact will resume until August at this stage. Many Distance Education schools were not able to run with the standard camps that they operate to allow Distance Education students to have access to their classroom teachers as a class cohort. This meant that the rare opportunity for face-to-face assessments was also missed.

The situation that occurred in COVID-19, served to highlight further how essential it is to have a tutor available for students while participating in online learning/learning from home, an ongoing issue for geographically isolated distance education students and their families.

BOARDING

Many remote students who rely upon boarding schools to receive an equitable education to that of their urban peers, experienced unique and prolonged challenges throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and many are still being impacted significantly. Students boarding interstate, due to their remote situations struggled to return to their schools when other students went back to face-to-face teaching as state borders continued to be closed and quarantine restrictions made it difficult for this to occur. Even within states, due to the implications of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (APHHC) Guidelines and how these were interpreted and applied to boarding schools, many remote boarders remained unable to return to their school until well after other students were immersed in face-to-face teaching. This meant these students:

- Received less access to their teachers and students as they remained at home completing their schooling while face-to-face teaching was occurring for all other students
- Have had no face-to-face contact with their peers or teachers, or access to other school resources for 14 + weeks and this is ongoing.
- Some families have needed to move from their rural/remote location to reside in the town/city where their children attend school for them to return or find other accommodation, such as billeting with other families.
- The students who were able to return to their boarding houses faced restrictions which made their daily lifestyle in their boarding house cumbersome and distressing.

The impacts of these extra challenges for these students have been significant, including in terms of the effects this has had on their education but also emotionally as they cope with potentially far more prolonged restrictions due to their need to board than their peers who have been able to return to face-to-face schooling. During the pandemic, there was a recognition that face-to-face schooling is superior to online or distance learning, hence the intention to get students back to face-to-face learning as quickly as possible, however, for remote students who rely on boarding to be able to access face-to-face schooling, this has proven especially difficult.

TERTIARY

Tertiary education, has been impacted extensively during COVID-19 and ICPA (Aust) understands these effects have been felt by all students, however, some unique impacts of the situation have been seen to affect rural and remote students especially. Some of these challenges include:

- Fewer resources available in remote locations, along with extended isolation from peers if students had to return home to a remote area. Even as restrictions ease and a sense of normality is restored, the ability to return to urban centres from remote areas remains a challenge.
- Many tertiary/training students have been unable to return home as they had to cross state borders and faced the uncertainty of quarantine/restrictions. This means being away from family support, along with being unable to work etc. during this time.
- For those who do not receive Youth Allowance or other financial support who must live away from home for tertiary/training, impacts and difficulties arose with being able to afford their housing/living expenses etc. when not able to work due to COVID-19 restrictions and also not being able to return home due to state border closures and other restrictions.

ICPA (Aust) is also concerned for future tertiary students. Uncertainty surrounds the cohort of students who would have been planning to apply for independent Youth Allowance in 2021, in that they may be unable to qualify due to not being able to meet the requirements which apply due to limited job opportunities and job losses during COVID-19.

TRAINING

Training students from remote areas are also in a unique disadvantage group, especially when they have had to relocate to take up their positions. This has been exemplified in challenges seen for LAFHA recipients, who are not eligible for Youth Allowance to supplement the loss of income due to their employment/training being deferred, decreased due to the pandemic or terminated (temporarily or long term). While Youth Allowance recipients received extra support to assist with their expenses, LAFHA recipients did not, and this has meant that they have seen a dramatic decrease in their income and therefore their ability to cover the expenses associated with living away from home to undertake their training positions.

Most VET training programs have a strong practical component, and many rural, remote and regional students opt to complete this component of their course in workplaces closer to home. COVID-19 restrictions to many workplaces have meant students have not been able to achieve this essential component of their courses to complete training within their enrolment period.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS

One of the challenges for children with learning difficulties and the problems they face in a remote environment is the ability to access professional support and assistance. COVID-19 saw access to telehealth increase over the pandemic period. The Increase was much needed and appreciated however it still did not cater to the needs of all students and preschoolers in remote and rural locations with specific health issues affecting their learning. This increase in services needs to be extended/expanded so it can be obtained for a range of allied health services for all remote students who rarely/never have access to specialist support due to their geographic isolation, not just in times of crisis.

CONCLUSION

ICPA (Aust) is pleased to have the opportunity to highlight the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of students in remote environments. Many of the impacts and challenges for remote students and their education during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and reiterated the unique disadvantages that students in remote educational environments face. Rural and remote students should be recognised as a uniquely disadvantaged group. Specific programs are required to serve these students' unique needs to ensure their educational opportunities and outcomes are equitable to their urban peers.