



Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc

Australian Education Bill 2012

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc (ICPA Qld Inc) is concerned with the educational opportunities of children in regional and remote areas. ICPA Qld Inc represents forty-seven branches, comprising over 1200 families scattered throughout regional and remote areas of Queensland.

ICPA is the only community based parent group with interests in all sectors and levels of education – state schools, independent, church or boarding schools, early childhood and care through to tertiary education and all methods used to facilitate access to that education.

The Queensland State Council of the ICPA wishes to respond on behalf of its members to the Australian Government's *Australian Education Bill 2012*, and would like to particularly address the areas of distance education and small schools which help to form the diverse landscape of the educational structure in Queensland.

ICPA Qld Inc has concerns regarding the following issues:-

Schools of Distance Education

Queensland has seven Schools of Distance Education which fall under the definition of 'government schools' under the said *Bill*.

These schools collectively service over 1000 geographically isolated students who, by definition, have no reasonable daily access to face-to-face publicly funded schooling. These students are at a considerable disadvantage in their pursuit of an equitable education. Council believes that this, coupled with the costs of the specialised services Schools of Distance Education provide, should be considered when developing any uniform national plan.

With reference to Part 2-Section 9 School funding (b) that base recurrent funding will be allocated according to a formula that calculates an appropriate amount for every school in recognition of the costs of providing a high quality education;

Our Association recognises that the cost of educating a child studying via a School of Distance Education is greater than that required to educate a student in a mainstream school due to the method of delivery of the curriculum and the unique needs of geographically isolated children. It is therefore imperative that distance education is seen as a specialised service and financed accordingly. The following

extra financial outlays should be considered when financing Schools of Distance Education and the students they serve:-

Location

A certain amount of face to face contact is crucial for all children, obviously to build social skills, learn to interact with peers and to support positive educational outcomes. Due to the geographic isolation of many of their students, it is a requirement that Schools of Distance Education in Queensland offer face to face contact through mini-schools, activity days, field services and an annual camp. The cost of schools delivering these services in isolated locations is significant and requires extensive staffing and resourcing.

Professional Development

As Schools of Distance Education curriculum is accessed from the home, invariably in an isolated location, a 'home tutor' is required to administer the curriculum. This may be a mother or member of the family or a 'governess' employed by the family. In the majority of cases the home tutor is non-teacher trained. Due to the complexity of the new Australian Curriculum and the increasing digital materials, it is imperative that home tutors receive adequate professional development from their school. The national plan should recognise these unique circumstances and the expense incurred by regional Schools of Distance Education to provide this service.

Technology

Every child is entitled to a free education. The cost of providing telecommunication in a distance education school is therefore borne by the school and/or the department. Daily audio lessons and the provision of audio telephones and headsets are substantial and specific to schools of distance education.

Resources and mailing

A School of Distance Education's core business is administered via correspondence. Therefore the expense of mailing resources to families is a major financial undertaking. Another consideration Council would like noted is that due to the 'one on one' nature of distance education, curriculum and accompanying resources are supplied in multiple quantities. A mainstream school teacher might use one set of curriculum resources per classroom, whereas the distance education multi-age classroom would have one set of resources per student.

In reference to Section 9 (c) educational disadvantages associated with any of the following circumstances will be recognised and addressed through providing additional recurrent funding in the form of loadings:-

(vi) the location of a student's school;

Council believes it is necessary to point out that although Queensland's six regional Schools of Distance Education are in predominately provincial areas, students enrolled in these schools who study from their principal place of residence may be remote or very remote. The amount of time a geographically isolated student spends annually at their school campus is minimal compared to the amount of time he/she spends studying in their home classroom. It is imperative that any extra student loadings be based on the latter and not the former.

Small Schools

As outlined in the Bill, our Association also believes *the quality of education should not be limited by a school's location, particularly those schools in regional Australia (Preamble).*

Queensland has a large number of small schools in its rural and remote areas, many of which have less than ten students enrolled. Our Association believes that funding must reflect costs related to location and distance, the need to attract quality teachers and special needs services, and technology limitations.

Quality Teachers

Teacher attraction and retention schemes are necessary to staff many rural and remote schools. It is critical that funding in the national plan targets the provision of ongoing programs to enable these schools to attract, support and retain quality teachers, whilst also arming teachers with the skills required to teach in a multi-age setting.

The teacher-student ratios in small schools of 1:25 places unfair pressure on small school teachers, in particular one teacher schools whose job is to not only teach, but to also act as the school administrator. Without a concentrated effort in this regard, it will be very difficult for small school students to receive the equality to which the said *Bill* aims to achieve.

Technology

Many of Queensland's small schools do not have the technological infrastructure to fully utilise a digital education and therefore struggle to fully adopt the opportunities offered to them by the National Curriculum. Some schools still have ISDN (128kb/s) or satellite internet connection modes, resulting in very limited or unreliable data transfer capability. The cost of reasonable internet plans (which at best do not meet the needs of the school's digital requirements) are exorbitant compared to metropolitan areas. Council believes we are yet to receive a commitment that NBN will cater for Queensland's educational needs. Our Association implores that a national plan must take technological limitations into account.

Students with Disability

Whilst Council applauds the *Bill's* provision of a 'loading' for students with a disability, it must be noted that servicing children with learning disabilities in Schools of Distance Education and rural and remote schools is a major problem in Queensland due to the tyranny of distance. Like small school teachers, attracting and retaining allied health professionals and special needs teachers is an ongoing challenge in rural and remote areas. Council believes it is critical that any loading allocated is representative of the additional difficulties faced by these schools with a view to better supporting students in these areas with learning disabilities.

ICPA Qld Inc has welcomed the opportunity to highlight the special circumstances faced by Schools of Distance Education and small schools. Both modes of education equate to more costly delivery per student. The viability of the state of Queensland's rural and remote areas is dependent on the ability to attract families to

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non-metropolitan areas. Furthermore, Council echoes the *Bill's* objective that all children have access to a quality education regardless of their location. We implore government to consider the above points when developing a uniform national plan in order to support and sustain education in rural and remote areas and to ensure that we do not isolate the most isolated.