



**Submission to the
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations And
Education References Committee**

for the

**INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES**

From the
**ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS'
ASSOCIATION of AUSTRALIA INC. (ICPA-AUST)**

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INTRODUCTION

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, Incorporated (ICPA_Aust) welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the **Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities.**

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary national parent body dedicated to ensuring that all geographically isolated students have equality of access to a continuing and appropriate education. The member families of the Association reside in rural and remote Australia, and all share a common goal of gaining access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Their children are educated in small rural schools, at boarding schools or by distance education. ICPA supports both the government and non-government sectors of education in all states and territories as our members use and are dependent upon both systems.

The comments in this submission reflect the concerns of families in rural and remote Australian communities. The provision of appropriate learning opportunities for children with disabilities is not only a challenge for parents, schools, teachers, and communities, but indeed a challenge for governments, both state and Federal. *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century*, clearly states, in its preamble that, "Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this." This document acknowledges that all young people have the capacity to learn, the role of parents in this learning process and that schooling should not only be socially just but develop fully the talents and capacities of all students.

Rural and remote students, with a disability, are perhaps some of the most disadvantaged children within our education system.

Although the number of school age children with identified disabilities are a minority, these children are significant members of the school community whose needs vary greatly. Many of them are often unable to access assessment immediately because of their geographic location. This in turn means a delay in the child being provided with a specialised program.

Geographically isolated students, who are enrolled with schools of distance education, can be severely disadvantaged. Their supervisor is often an untrained person, who does not have the expertise, or experience, to fully recognise a disability or implement and carry out the teaching of a proposed program for an identified child with a disability. Regardless of geographic location, children with disabilities must be recognised, and have every opportunity to an education that is appropriate for their needs. Governments need to provide additional financial resources, so that the full potential of these students is realised.

No government or non-government school in any state or territory would claim to be adequately funded. There is an enormous shortfall in funding for children with disabilities.

Education is a human right, and is fundamental to the development of human potential and full participation in society. According to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, article 23, children with disabilities have the right to all the support necessary to become as self reliant as possible, and they should be ensured of access to education, training, health care services and preparation for employment in a way that is conducive to them achieving the fullest possible social integration and development.

The *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* posed this question - "What is necessary to ensure that, by the age of 18, each child in Australia has received the education he or she requires to participate to his or her full potential in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community? The challenge for our governments, and indeed for the community as a whole, is whether we as a nation are prepared to do what is necessary to achieve that." Surely this includes children with disabilities.

(a) whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs, including, but not limited to:

i. The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap.

There is a great diversity of children identified as having disability. *The Disability Discrimination Act* defines "disability" as

- total or partial loss of a bodily function, including mental function, or a malfunction
- total or partial loss of a part of the body
- having a disease or organism which cause a disease
- having an illness or disorder which affects thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or that results in disturbed behaviour.

Of course, not all children, defined as having a disability, have learning difficulties. There are children who have a physical disability, and their needs are quite different to those who have a mental or illness related disability. However, children with physical disabilities are no less significant than those with mental disabilities. Children with learning difficulties, are a varied group, and for some this may be because of behavioural problems, cognitive ability, language and cultural implications or illness related.

Too many children are excluded from disability services and special educational services, because of current testing and assessment criteria. Who determines if a child is going to be assessed? The parent? The teacher? The healthcare worker? Some testing or assessment procedures, which allocate a score can seriously discriminate children from accessing specialist courses. This testing and rating can often discriminate against specific disability groups, like autistic children.

The current criteria also exclude those children who suffer from ADHD, unless they have been identified as having another identified disability, eg physical, emotional or intellectual. There are a growing number of children who are socially dysfunctional, and may also come from a dysfunctional family.

Many of these students are not considered eligible for funding for services and resources such as "aide time", even though they find it difficult to learn. They also make learning difficult for their peers, as often these children are disruptive to the daily classroom events.

ii) *The accuracy with which a student's disability related needs is being assessed.*

In rural and isolated areas, Australia wide, there is a great shortage of assessment centres to diagnose learning disabilities including behavioural problems, psychological problems, speech and hearing defects, gross motor skills, and so some children will go undiagnosed until it is far too late for them to obtain effective treatment. Hence their full potential may never be reached. There is a critical need for access to therapists, psychologists and teachers who are trained to recognise a disability, act on that recognition to obtain an assessment, and finally have the skills and training to implement an early intervention program.

Families from rural and remote communities are seriously disadvantaged in having their child diagnosed. Often this service is only available in the capital city or a larger regional town in the state. This is costly, in time, and financially to these families.

iii) *The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and Indigenous background and from rural and remote areas.*

Children with a disability from a low socio-economic background are severely disadvantaged, as the high cost of care, medical treatment and educational support is not able to be met by families. The access to diagnostic testing through government agencies is slow and unreliable, and families feel increasingly frustrated by the constant request for this service. Families from low socio-economic backgrounds certainly are not able to afford diagnostic assessment from private sources. If government agencies are unable to provide diagnostic testing within a short period of time, then families from low socio-economic backgrounds should be able to access private services, with financial assistance from governments or their agencies.

Remote and isolated students with a disability are severely disadvantaged for reasons similar to above but with the added problem of access due to geographic location. There is often a lack of information available within the local school, or school of distance education, about assessment procedures. Often it has been left to parents to make enquiries.

Many teachers and schools seem to be ill equipped in offering advice or assistance to parents in regard to their child's disability for a number of reasons.

Sometimes the teacher is not trained to recognise all areas of disability. It is often the parent's persistence, knowing that something is not right, that finally has the school seeking further advice.

In some areas of Australia children who are allocated disability aide time are not receiving the total teaching allocation, because of the distance travelled by the aide to reach the child's school. For example, a child may be given a 3 hour/week aide time, but if the aide has to travel for 1 hour, then the time spent working with the child may be reduced, in accordance with the aide's travelling time. This is a very unfair and unsatisfactory situation.

A child from a remote and isolated area may have to attend a special school or a boarding school, so that they can receive much needed help with their disability. This not only upsets their routines, but being away from family can also impact in many different ways on a child. Travelling to and from the boarding or special school may involve special arrangements which prevents them using the normal forms of transport.

In rural and remote areas of Australia, **small schools** may only get visits from support services once per term, if they are lucky. The support service may only then be in the school for one full day. This is totally inadequate when there are a number of children needing assistance, and teaching staff requiring much needed information, program planning and particularly personal support.

In **schools of distance education** (eg schools of the air), aide time is very difficult to access, often taking several years with repeated application for this. Aide time is allocated to the school, not to the student personally and the school may have other students with special needs who are not funded.

A **home supervisor** teaching distance education to a disabled child may also have other children to teach without the assistance of anyone else to assist. A teacher in a school with an integrated disabled student usually has some aide time allocated to them but a home supervisor, without any formal training has far greater problems to deal with and overcome in educating a disabled child in isolation, far removed from therapists or aides.

In working with disabled students continuity of programs is important. All too often in rural and remote areas there are staff changes. This makes it very difficult for the students with disabilities, undertaking special programs, whom then have to adapt to someone new.

iv) The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

There is a **severe lack of early intervention programs in rural and isolated areas**. NSW ICPA in consultation with Contact Inc and the Charles Sturt University is currently investigating ways to overcome this by planning an innovative approach to introducing speech and occupational therapist students to assist in these isolated areas.

There needs to be a nationwide approach to the education of children with disabilities, as it is far too disjointed, with diagnostic testing/assessment, access to therapists, support teachers, etc for pre-school children and school aged children being handled by different departments.

There is a real **lack of communication between the different departments** of health, community services and education and of course this leads to wasted resources. There is little continuity between local, state and federal governments to provide the very best for children with disabilities.

As stated above there is a huge shortage of speech therapists, occupational and physiotherapists, audiologists, orthoptists etc. Without them satisfactory early intervention programs cannot be carried out successfully removed from regular and ongoing assessments.

The early intervention of children with disabilities is of utmost importance. Children with disorders like autism, need to be provided with structures in their personal life and educational learning, so that they develop good routines to make their lives more acceptable and comfortable.

Children with any disability need to be identified early in their lives, so that programs can be developed, so making that transition to school a much less stressful period, not only for the student, but also for the parent and teacher. Currently, many parents of children with disabilities, particularly in rural and remote areas, undertake and seek programs for their pre-schoolers at their own expense.

Early intervention programs need to be delivered by teachers who are trained and skilled in these areas. All too often programs are 'ad hoc' or 'trial and error', created by teachers or supervisors who do not understand the essential needs of specific disabilities. This problem could be rectified with better teacher training at university level, more assistance and support from professional services and better financial resourcing to schools.

As with any program such as early intervention, continued and regular diagnostic assessment of students with disabilities should occur, so that instruction can focus on specific areas of need. At all times parents should be encouraged to be involved with assessment and support programs.

v) Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors

With the emphasis on integration of all students where possible there must be recognition of the huge costs involved in this continuing integration. Special schools have been set up with all facilities suitable for students with disabilities. This is not the case in a mainstream school and many modifications must take place before students can be properly integrated.

There is nowhere near enough funding available to either the government or non government sectors to provide both the facilities and also the programs and human resources needed to fully address the problems faced by students with disabilities accessing education on an equivalent basis with their peers.

All education providers should review the adequacy of provision of special education support for all students with disabilities and revise the funding guidelines to ensure that students are not disadvantaged because of inflexible formulas and criteria.

The funding for children with disabilities should be attached to the child, rather than allocated to the school. This allows for parents to exercise their right of choice of appropriate school for their child, as the funding allocated will then follow that child to the school. This needs to occur with all providers of education: government and non-government.

The funding disparity between the public and private education providers is great.

vi) The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students

All classroom teachers and aides who are working with students with disabilities should receive training and assistance in dealing with these students and the preparation of programs for them.

A resource centre needs to be set up to provide programs, that are designed by specialist teachers of students with disabilities, so that classroom teachers are able to access such programs as need be. Departments of education need to be aware of successful programs within the private sector, as providers of these services could also be engaged to provide programs for public education system. (As one mother of a distance education child said, "Let's not keep reinventing the wheel!")

In small rural and remote schools, children with special needs are included in mainstream classrooms. It is not often appropriate for providers of education to establish specialist schools in such tiny communities. Many communities have established networks and support systems for families with special needs children, so that all community members learn and share the meaning of tolerance, acceptance, patience and the joy of achievement. These children in small communities need, however, to access assistance to improve their educational outcome, and there is a desperate need for aide time.

In addition the classroom teacher should be given basic training in dealing with the particular disability of the child. Allocated aide time, for special needs students, will allow the classroom teacher to attend to the other mainstream students, without disruption. In many cases, special needs children are not toilet trained, and so need help with this, so that hygiene can be maintained. The personal safety of all children within a school is paramount, and some special needs students require more attention than others in this regard.

It is therefore imperative that rural and remote schools have adequate funding, so that the impact of the student's disability, rather than age, is considered.

Overall there is an inadequacy of funding in government and non-government school sectors for the provision of trained teachers, aides and the development of specialised programs.

Once a child is integrated into mainstream schooling the aide time allocated is gradually reduced. This should not be the normal practice as the needs of the child do not necessarily reduce once they are integrated. In some cases as the child gets older and stronger aide time may need to be increased for successful integration within the classroom. There is not however the funds available in most cases to maintain this assistance.

vii) Teacher training and professional development

Teacher training for children with disabilities is not adequate. For example a student teacher will receive only a half-day in a four year course on the subject of autism - and does not spend any time with children in the field with this disability. The same can be said for most disabilities.

Teachers need specialised training in dealing with children with disabilities. As many of these students are now in mainstream classrooms, then teachers require skills and training to adequately and appropriately cope with this type of situation. This must occur at the university level as part of Bachelor of Education courses, followed by support, and professional development once the graduate teacher is in the field. There is no doubt that specialised training in such an area will benefit **all** children.

Teacher training must also include knowledge of different types of disability and the application of this knowledge to assist parents in seeking further information and assessment for their student if necessary.

Professional development is also inadequate, and often courses for specific areas, eg dyslexia, autism etc, are held in capital cities, with the course of say 2 to 3 hours per week over 5 or 6 weeks. This certainly does not cater for the teacher in a rural and remote location, as the distance, travelling time, and cost makes it impossible. Perhaps providers of professional development programs, need to look at the delivery aspect of those programs. There should be no reason why professional development programs, in the future, cannot be delivered by internet technology.

The inclusion of the parents and carers of the child in the teacher's ongoing professional development can only be beneficial. In dealing with many disabilities continuity of procedures is of paramount importance – some students find change extremely difficult with which to deal. There needs to be complete co-operation between all parties working with the student at home and at school.

viii) *The legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation*

There are an increasing number of schools where the danger of litigation is affecting their ability to enrol students with disabilities at their school.

There have been schools within the non-government sector being taken to court for not enrolling students because they feel that they do not have the facilities to accommodate those specific needs of a disabled student. Some government schools have also been unable to enrol children with disabilities because of the nature of that disability. There are a variety of reasons why a school feels unable to meet the needs of a disabled student - modifications needed to integrate the student are beyond the school budget especially where it involves limited access to classrooms and lack of allocated aide time.

The integration of children with disabilities into schools, places an enormous burden on the already stretched school budgets. The majority of schools are happy to accommodate a student with disabilities but with the continuing debate on public risk insurance and our litigious society, some schools may hesitate to commit themselves and school population to a possible legal action.

This can then leave them open to discrimination charges. It is a very difficult situation for a school.

In small rural schools, there is real concern when a teacher has to leave the class to attend to the needs of an integrated student, who does not have a full time aide. Who accepts responsibility for the unsupervised class? Who takes the responsibility for attending to the needs of the disabled integrated student if something happens while assisting the student? How does the teacher cope with the current procedures for the child protection act when they are the only adult at an isolated school? These are questions that need addressing by state education authorities.

If schools are not properly resourced, so that they can accommodate the special needs student, why should they be made accountable for problems arising beyond the financial constraints of the school?

(b) *What the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.*

All students have a right to access an appropriate education. Students with disabilities have special needs that require additional funding.

The Commonwealth allocates funds to the states to be distributed according to the particular states method of assessing needs of the disabled. The Commonwealth needs to ensure that the funding is allocated to the sectors based on an agreed national standard.

The Commonwealth should ensure that special education funds are distributed equitably and according to the needs of the student. A school's ability to provide facilities should not mean that the student is deprived of funding, to support the child, teacher, aides or whatever is needed to assist in the child's integration. The cost of building modifications and equipment needed for students with disabilities can be huge capital costs for individual schools. Often it is the school community that has to meet these capital cost. Schools need to provide access for students with disabilities, and forward planning in school building development must be recognised.

There is a real need for **an increase in funding for special education needs**. Funding should be **attached to the student**, irrespective of the system chosen to educate the student.

The majority of boarding places are in non government schools and the **requirements of a boarding student with special needs is far greater** than that of a comparable "day" student. This is certainly not considered in the allocation of funds. In many cases the school community has to pick up the additional costs.

SUMMARY

Within Australia, there are several exciting programs and schools that specifically cater for various areas of disability. One such school is Giant Steps, Deloraine, in northern Tasmania. It provides specialised learning programs and specialist support and therapy to children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It is a school that has provided early intervention practice, and programs that are specific to helping children with this disorder. It has made a difference to the lives of its students.

Children with disabilities are entitled to an education without discrimination. Inclusion into mainstream schooling is often desirable, to maximise social integration and learning. Resources are needed to support the child, the parents, the teacher and school community. The funding and provision for students with disabilities should enable them to participate in school programs without it providing a burden for the school community. Integrated students can add a great deal to a school community but this is only possible if there is proper training for the teachers and parents in working with the student and there are not huge financial commitments by the school community to enable the integration to occur.

The *Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission's Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education* made 12 recommendations, some of which have been outlined in this submission. These recommendations should be considered when addressing the particular needs of rural and remote students with disabilities.

ICPA-AUST looks forward to receiving ongoing information as to the results and recommendations of this Inquiry.