

Response to:

Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education

From the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of New South Wales Inc. (ICPA-NSW)



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Prepared by: Sian Barbanti
Second Year Student: Bachelor of Communications
University of Newcastle

On behalf of
New South Wales State Council ICPA

Mrs Helen Rogers,
Secretary, NSW-ICPA
"Yarto"
Booligal NSW 2711
Tel/Fax: 02 6993-8151
Email: helenrog@bigpond.com



***The Isolated Children's Parents' Association
Of New South Wales Incorporated***

To Whom it may Concern

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc (ICPA-NSW) would like to present the following submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education.

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association Inc. is a national parent organisation that strives to achieve equality of access to an appropriate education for all students from Preschool through to Tertiary level. It is the only parent organisation that uses and supports both government and non-government systems of education.

ICPA-NSW is a completely voluntary, non-party political organisation that represents the families from the rural and isolated areas of NSW.

In the pursuit of its objectives, ICPA-NSW has developed policies based on motions carried at Annual Conferences.

ICPA-NSW is of the opinion that through its broad membership location, it can offer sound comment on matters relating to the access of education for geographically isolated children.

As the majority of our members are based in rural or isolated areas of the state, the comments made in this submission will relate directly to the problems and circumstances, which affect students in these areas.

ICPA-NSW is available to speak to this submission or be involved in any discussion that may result from this review.

1. Introduction

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc. (ICPA- NSW) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ACADEMIC STANDARDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION.

1.1 Background

ICPA- AUST was founded in 1971, following the closure of a school term hostel and during a particularly difficult drought and economic period that led too many families leaving rural towns. ICPA- NSW was formed the following year.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary national parent body dedicated to ensuring that all geographically isolated students have equality with their non-isolated peers, of access to an appropriate education. The Association has over 3,300 member families, residing in the more remote parts of Australia, who all share a common concern of gaining access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Membership includes a cross section of Australia's rural and remote population and includes fishermen, miners, itinerant employees, farmers, pastoralists and small business owners.

"A geographically isolated child is one who does not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate school".

"An appropriate school is one which provides schooling at the required year level and with sufficient curriculum offerings to enable all children to achieve their individual potential".

A CSIRO survey in 1973 found that lack of schooling and opportunities for education was the number one contributing factor for families leaving rural areas. This is still the case today. Drought should not affect geographically isolated students education but unfortunately it does. It is important that rural and isolated students receive an education equal to that of their urban counterparts, their educational outcomes should not be limited because of where they live.

ICPA-NSW lobbies for rural and isolated children to have access to a continuing and appropriate education in order to reach their individual optimal potential through the following policy areas: Tertiary, Curriculum, Agricultural Boarding High Schools, Boarding Schools, Allowances, Distance Education, Rural Schools, Country Areas

Programs (CAP), Early Childhood, School Term Hostels, Travel, Communications and Special Education.

1.2 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to illustrate the inequality in the academic standards of school education, between geographically isolated students and non-geographically isolated students, and to suggest solutions to these inequalities.

This report focuses mainly on the Senates' first term of reference:

Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:

- a. the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage; and*
- b. The extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.*

This submission deals predominantly with the academic standards of schooling for geographically isolated children. It focuses on Early Education, Rural Schools, Secondary Agricultural Residential High Schools, Distance Education and Tertiary studies in formal learning institutions.

1.3 Acknowledgements

ICPA- NSW would like to acknowledge the Hard Work of ICPA- AUST especially on Tertiary Access Allowances, and the research of Richard James, Gabrielle Baldwin, Hamish Coates, Kerri-Lee Krause, Craig McInnis and Professor Margaret Alston and Jenny Kent. Special mention also goes to the main contributor Sian Barbanti.

2.1 Early education

ICPA-NSW policy on Early Education is that appropriate Early Childhood Education should be available for all geographically isolated children at least one year prior to the commencement of primary school, with an optional enrolment provision.

Early Education is important for children's intellectual cognitive development, for the early detection of learning disabilities and as an introduction to learning with integrated play. ICPA would like to see all rural early childhood centres resourced and funded appropriately and where access to these facilities is not practical a distance education program available. It is crucial that isolated children receive early education equal to their non-isolated peers to start learning patterns, implement special programs if required and so that they are not at a disadvantage when they begin primary education.

Recommendation:

That an affordable early childhood education be available to all isolated, rural and remote children at least the year prior to starting compulsory years of schooling. The delivery could be via distance education, pre-schools or mobile resource units.

2.2 Rural Schools

ICPA- NSW policy on rural schools is for them to offer a broad range of educational opportunities at the highest standard and where appropriate education is not provided, access to alternative educational options be made available.

As with all education facilities there are limitations upon what can be taught, this is increased in rural schools due to the lack of funding, resources and inability to retain teachers. Rural Schools must cater to the majority with 80% of students receiving the level of education that they require. It is the students that are in the minority, either above, below or outside the average that are not being appropriately educated, and where choice of schooling should be implemented. In a non-geographically isolated area there would be a choice of schools for parents to pick from according to their child's individual needs. Schools in urban areas have programs for gifted and talented students and programs for students with learning difficulties who require more attention. Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) guidelines need to be changed so that decisions could be made on a case by case basis so that children who require an education that cannot be received at their local school can receive an education, either via a boarding school or an appropriate school while utilizing hostel accommodation. The Academic standards of rural schools are challenged with high staff turn over and few student resources, as a result the literacy levels of rural children are well below the state average.

There is no point for students from small rural schools being able to access a university education on a Principal's recommendation as the curriculum based outcomes are often not attained and the students are not able to achieve at a tertiary level.

Recommendation:

That student's whose educational outcomes will be disadvantaged by what the local school can provide be able to access Assistance for Isolated Children, so that the cost of boarding can be offset, to choose a school that best meets the needs of that student. It needs to be recognised that an allowance assists only in making educational access more equitable. It is an equity payment.

2.3 Agricultural Boarding Schools

ICPA- NSW policy on Agricultural Boarding High Schools is that they should be a recognised form of access to education for geographically isolated students offering a standard of pastoral care and curriculum appropriate to their needs with an emphasis on agriculture to enable students to enter post-secondary studies at all levels and/or equip them for a career in agriculture in their chosen pathway. These high schools are important in teaching students practical hands on skills for rural areas; they will decrease the skills shortage that rural Australia is currently facing. The standards of these institutions is high, they are more traditional than academic in approach and succeed in training their students to a professional level. Currently in New South Wales there are only 3 Agricultural Boarding High Schools with only 2 that accept girls, all are selective in their intake, and many applicants miss out every year. With the current skills shortage we suggest that this is an area that could be expanded.

Recommendation:

That the Government recognises the value of the state funded boarding schools and increase their capacity or make more available.

2.4 Distance Education

ICPA-NSW policy on distance education (DE) is that it should be a quality education that is centred on personal interaction, from Kindergarten to Year 12 and of an equivalent standard to mainstream NSW schools, for students living at home in a geographically isolated area to be provided through a system of co-ordinated educational services delivered to students' homes and remote schools.

Distance education programs are designed by Department of Education and Training and implemented in isolated classrooms and households. The academic Standards of Distance education are limited, parents are not qualified teachers and some do not grasp the complicated concepts they are trying to aid their children with, another important aspect that is lacking, is social interaction with children their own age and level.

Recommendation:

That assistance and support to home tutors is of the utmost importance. The support can be in the form of financial assistance to travel to “mini schools” sport, and cultural activities or it can be teaching and educational support by offering inservice and training.

The value of Volunteers for Isolated Student’s Education (VISE) cannot be underestimated and would greatly assist parents if funding were available to assist in accessing this great service.

2.5 Tertiary Education - University

ICPA-NSW policy on tertiary education is that there should be an awareness of and provision for affordable access to all forms of recognised Tertiary Education to guarantee equity of participation for all geographically isolated students. ICPA-NSW does not feel that students need to attend university to succeed but rather that isolated children should have the same opportunities as non-isolated to fulfil their individual potential.

“There is not true equity of access to university education for students in rural NSW.”

Recommendation:

That a “Tertiary Access Allowance” be established (outside Youth Allowance which is a welfare payment) to assist rural and remote students with the additional “start up” costs of living away from home.

2.5.1 Low Rural Enrolments

Nearly a third of high school students are rural or isolated yet only 17% of tertiary places are taken by rural students. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the access share of rural and isolated children while figure 3 compares the participation retention rates (Analysis of Equity Groups in Higher Education 1991–2002). There has been a small upward trend in the mean success rate for rural and urban students, while students from isolated areas have a consistently lower mean success rate. The retention rates of rural and urban students has slightly fluctuated there has been a downward trend with isolated tertiary students.

This reflects the academic standards of the schooling that they are receiving in pre-tertiary studies and in many cases their lack of choice.

The education that they are receiving is not preparing them adequately for further study and we believe that this situation could be assisted with students being granted choice of schooling earlier on.

Recommendation:

That students from disadvantaged areas be allowed a choice of schooling. Where there is no choice available at a local level then the students are able to access the Assistance of Isolated Children (AIC) to do so.

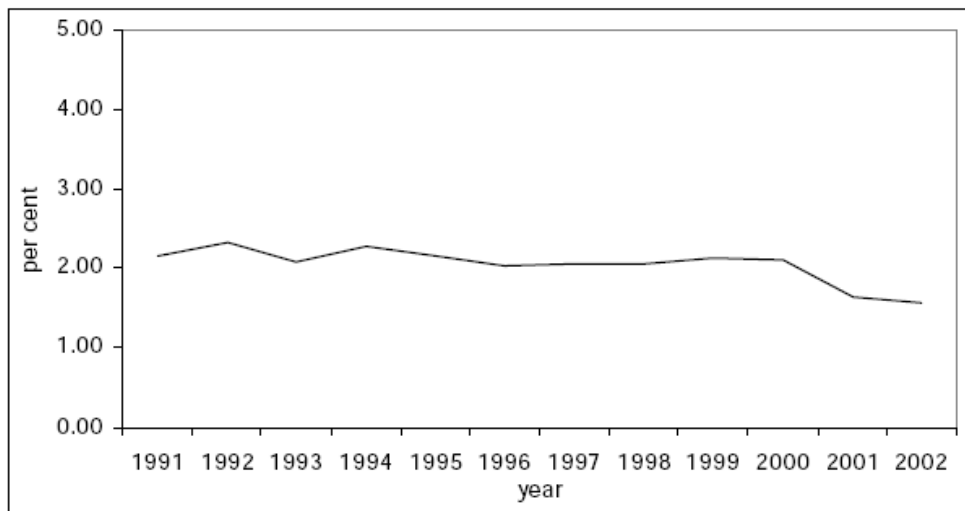


Figure 1: Access share for isolated students, 1991-2002 (per cent)

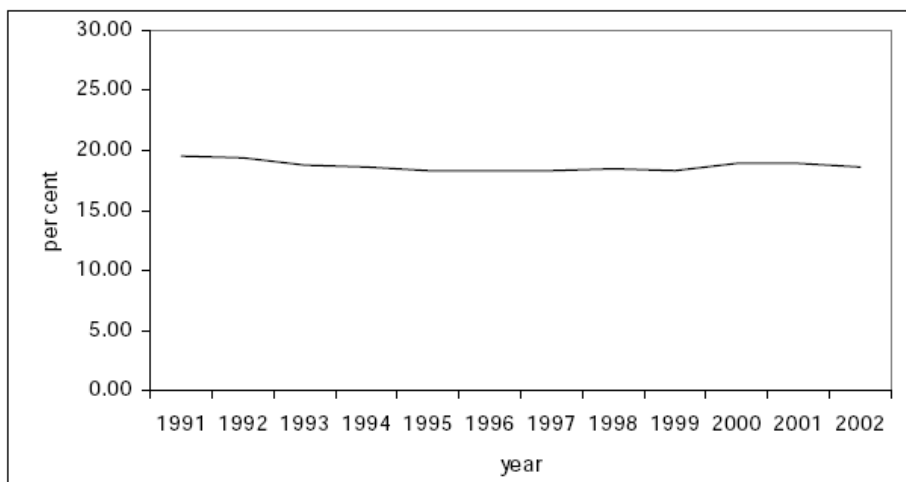


Figure 2: Access share for rural students, 1991-2002 (per cent)

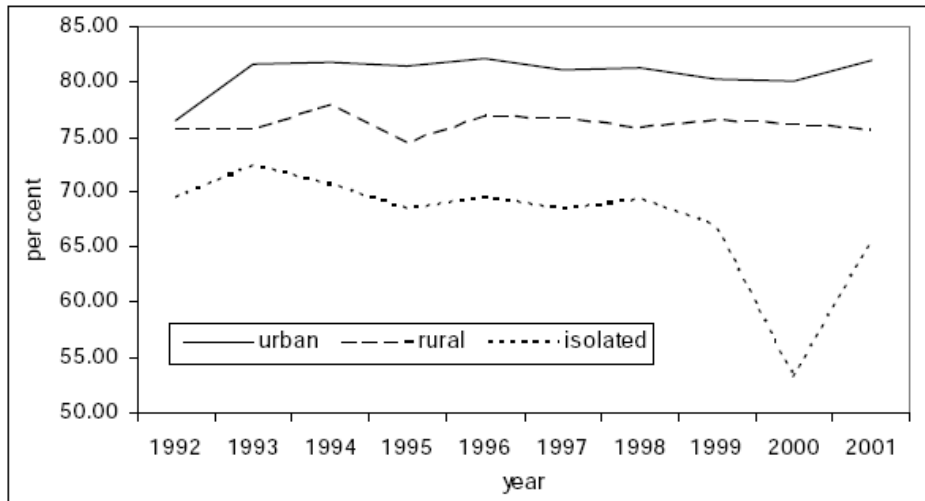


Figure 3: Retention by geographical location, 1992-2001 (per cent)

2.5.2 Restrictions on access

75% of students who attend university live at home this is not possible for rural children. At the moment there are Commonwealth Learning Scholarships and most universities offer Equity scholarships to allow disadvantaged students to apply to university. ICPA-NSW is concerned that the selection of scholarship recipients is not consistent with some universities awarding their scholarships in terms of academic credit, not those most in need.

Of concern to ICPA-NSW is that students from rural and isolated areas do not have the necessary funds to cover university studies. Youth Allowance is provided in an independent and dependant rate. If a student is determined to be dependant then the rate of pay depends upon parental income test, a family assets test and a family actual means test (none of these apply to EC declared families).

ICPA-AUST has been lobbying for a Tertiary Access Allowance which would be granted automatically to rural and isolated students to help with the cost of beginning university students and would mean that students could transition immediately from secondary school to tertiary study without having to spend a year working to be granted independent youth allowance as is currently the case.

Some NSW universities do not have appropriate deferment policies allowing for the fact that many rural and isolated children have to take a year off working, to be able to access education by way of independent youth allowance.

Restriction upon the access of University education affects the academic standards of education available to geographically isolated students, as only a limited amount are able to access further education, impacting upon their quality of life, their employment opportunities, and the livelihood of rural towns.

Recommendation:

1. That a Tertiary Access Allowance be made available.
2. That student's who have to live away from home to access tertiary studies be granted independent status immediately they leave home, for the purpose of accessing Youth Allowance.
3. That the Federal Government set clear and concise guidelines for the issuing of Commonwealth Learning Scholarships to all universities, so that the original intent (to assist rural students with accommodation and low income earners with tuition) be maintained.

2.6 Tertiary Education - Agricultural Colleges

ICPA-NSW believes that Australia needs a productive, innovative rural industry, run by dedicated young people; the infrastructure to allow this to happen is currently minimal with only one College offering full-time courses in NSW, that being the CB Alexander College at Tocal. Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre at Yanco could easily be made residential again making it possible for students who want to work on the land to get practical hands-on experience in a traditional rather than academic environment in secondary and tertiary education. A third college located in the north west of NSW would also be ideal.

Recommendation:

1. That the Murrumbidgee Rural Studies Centre is re-opened, offering residential, full-time agricultural courses, at least to Certificate 3, level.
2. Establish a third agricultural college of similar intent in the north west of NSW.

3. Conclusion

Approximately 30% of Australia's youth live in rural areas; the most common reason for families moving out of rural communities is educational opportunities for their children. This situation is getting increasingly worse as the drought continues; the flow on effect of this is a lot of rural towns are becoming welfare dependant as educational opportunities for new generations are not increased. In amidst of Australia's Skills shortages as an alternative to only encouraging skilled immigrants, we could be investing in our rural children's education and future to ensure a productive, innovative rural industry, run by dedicated young Australians, instead of the current situation of low literacy levels and lack of access to further education that is unequal and effecting our rural children's quality of life.

ICPA-NSW looks forward to hearing the results of this Inquiry and representatives of NSW Council are happy to meet with members of the Committee if further information is required.

4. Recommendations

The ICPA- NSW makes the following recommendations in relation to Rural Academic Standards.

4.1 Choice in Schooling

ICPA-NSW recommends that the guidelines for AIC be changed so that students from disadvantaged isolated communities can attend a school that meets the needs of the individual student. Similar schemes are active in QLD, SA and WA; the results in QLD have shown that the towns which offer choice of schooling prospering while those that do not continue to decline. AIC should be available to areas with only one secondary school, and in areas where the community does not see the school as desirable, and in cases in year 6 or secondary school where there is a lone student in a subject.

Small student numbers equals small choice. ICPA would like to see affordable access to appropriate education.

4.2 School Term Hostels and Boarding Schools

ICPA-NSW recommends that accommodation be recognised as a legitimate form of access to education for geographically isolated students. To this end the recommendation is that the current capacity of State funded boarding schools be increased or that more be established.

The value of school term hostels should not be underestimated for their value in keeping the student relatively close to home and a more affordable option for families. To this end hostels need recurrent funding and there needs to be more of them. Currently there are only five in NSW.

4.3 Re-opening Residential Agricultural College

ICPA recommends that the Department of Education and Training, the Department of Primary Industry and private enterprise to re-establish a senior secondary residential agricultural college at Yanco. This would increase the amount of skilled rural workers, in a more traditional rather than academic learning environment and offer a pathway for more rural students to further education.

4.4 Residential Agricultural College

ICPA recommends that a residential college be built in Western NSW for the practical training of young people in agriculture. This would ease the difficulty of finding skilled station hands. Currently students must look interstate for residential agricultural colleges, or remain in their community untrained and consequently unemployed. This could solve many social problems in rural towns and problems of people entering further education and not returning.

4.5 Tertiary Access Allowance

ICPA recommends a Tertiary Access Allowance for students from isolated rural areas, which have to live away from home to undertake tertiary studies, this would provide a direct path to tertiary studies, encouraging education and an increase in skills that rural areas desperately need.

As well as this, geographically isolated students, who have to live away from home to access tertiary studies, be granted independent status for the purposes of accessing Youth Allowance, if they wish to go straight from school to further studies.

4.6 Early Childhood

ICPA-NSW recommends that affordable early childhood education be available to all rural and remote children at least in the year prior to commencing their compulsory years of schooling, either via distance education, pre-schools or mobile resource units. The current system of early childhood education across Australia is very ad-hoc and needs a big “re-think” including child care, which offers early childhood education.