

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia Inc**



**Submission**

**to the**

**Select Committee for Child Development Services**

**for the**

**Inquiry into Child Development Services**

**from the**

**State Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia Inc.**

**ICPA (WA)**

**October 2022**

**Contact:**

**(Mrs) Kym Ross**

**State Secretary**

**ICPA (WA)**

**PO Box 146**

**JERRAMUNGUP WA 6337**

**[WASecretary@icpa.com.au](mailto:WASecretary@icpa.com.au)**

**Phone: 0427 371 027**

**Contact:**

**(Mrs) Sally Brindal**

**State President**

**ICPA (WA)**

**PO Box 199,**

**MINGENEW WA 6522**

**[WAPresident@icpa.com.au](mailto:WAPresident@icpa.com.au)**

**Phone: 0427 275 014**

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia, ICPA (WA) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Inquiry into Child Development Services and highlight the challenges that are unique to rural and remote students, to ensure effective support for these children.

ICPA (WA) is a voluntary, apolitical, not-for-profit parent organisation which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families (around 300) of ICPA (WA) reside in small communities in rural and often isolated areas of Western Australia, and all share a common goal of achieving equitable access to an appropriate education for their children and the provision of services required in achieving this.

Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health. The experiences children have in early childhood shape the brain and the child's capacity to learn, their social development and ability to respond to daily stresses and challenges.

Research has consistently shown that good early childhood development will have a direct positive impact on a child's long-term health outcomes and will improve future opportunities, school attainment and even earning potential.

Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, often live great distances from their nearest education institution and from services required to support child development, health and wellbeing. All students have a right to participate in education on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful, accessible and affordable child development, health and wellbeing programs and services, regardless of geographical location. In the rural and remote context, there are a variety of challenges which can impede students access and participation in education. This can be accentuated for students where the availability of appropriate child development, health and wellbeing programs and staff to assist these students is often limited.

The review of the services needs to consider the difficulties and disadvantages that students encounter due to geographical isolation. Families in rural and remote areas deal with constant travel for health and schooling, and this comes with a substantial cost burden. Affordability, accessibility, and provision of equitable essential services should be high on the government agenda to future proof geographically isolated students' development, health and wellbeing, and ultimately access to education. Equity in access, diagnostic, travel and ongoing costs associated with child development and intervention programs requires urgent consideration.

Guarantee of frequency of health services such as, but not limited to, occupational therapists, speech therapists and psychologists within the education sector is critical in supporting the needs of rural and remote areas. The collaboration between schools and support services is vital in achieving the best outcome for the student. Access to and the availability of child development services can be very sporadic. Many families report not being able to access a specialist in a timely manner with a lengthy wait for the initial appointment. Subsequent appointments are also met with lengthy delays which put these children at greater risk of future social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive problems.

In Katanning, Community Health offers a KOLP (Katanning Oral Language Program) for Kindergarten and some Pre-primary children. It was developed by speech pathologist Jan Batchelor and is run in schools. Local schools in the Katanning region (Tambellup, Broomehill, Nyabing, Gnowangerup to name a few) pay a fee and a speech therapist or therapy assistant comes each week to help

administer the program. It is a highly valued program. This is one example of how communities are bridging the gap in services offered by the public sector. Community Health at Katanning also has occupational therapists, speech therapists and physiotherapists that can visit students at school after being referred by parents and teachers. The ability to be able to access a paediatrician and related services should not be determined by your geographical location.

Our members find it extremely difficult to access a paediatrician. Members have even taken to using the Zoom platform to access a paediatrician in Adelaide as there is no access to a paediatrician here in the near future.

The impact which the tyranny of distance coupled with a lack of face-to-face and online services has on family wellbeing, finances along with health and educational outcomes cannot be underestimated. The additional issues for rural and remote families of students when accessing child development services away from home include but are not limited to; vast distances to travel, the necessity for and impact of multiple face-to-face visits, disruption to the child's schooling, extensive costs of access to multidisciplinary services including fees, travel, and accommodation and family disruption including care of other children. This type of inequity of access to child development services is having a detrimental effect on the education of many children in rural areas and could be considered as discriminatory against those with specific child development needs which affect their learning abilities.

Given the lack of available services in rural and remote locations, more consideration needs to be given as to how to make therapy and other child development support services readily available to students in these settings. One solution would be to expand the availability of telehealth for rural and remote students. While telehealth cannot be a replacement for face-to-face, on-the-ground support, it does provide increased access to otherwise unattainable or limited services for rural and remote students. Telehealth in conjunction with videoconferencing with specialist child development teaching staff and education providers, including distance education tutors, would assist in a holistic support system to children and families, ensure the provision of high-quality child development programs and maximise the learning opportunities for these children.

ICPA (WA) recommendations:

- The Review needs to ensure equity of access with in a rural and remote context
- Initiatives need to be put into place to improve early identification and intervention for student's child development issues in rural and remote contexts
- Expansion of and ongoing availability of telehealth to rural and remote students for child development who might otherwise have to forego treatment and support
- Initiatives are needed to support the needs of rural and remote students. It is imperative that rural and remote child development and support does not continue to be disadvantaged by the tyranny of distance.

ICPA (WA) believes an inter-departmental, collaborative approach is required to better coordinate the resources and services which are available, and to highlight the services which are still lacking. This should be coupled with a vigorous utilisation of online services such as telehealth, covered by Medicare, to complement face-to-face delivery in rural and remote communities.

Deficits in early childhood support services in rural and remote areas are leading to increased developmental delays which further impacts a child's academic outcomes and accomplishments.

## **EQUITABLE ACCESS**

The key message which ICPA (WA) continues to promote across all components of our advocacy is equitable access to educational opportunities and support programs for geographically isolated students. The importance of early childhood development is undeniable. It is imperative when considering the provision of child development, health and well-being services that the implementation meets the needs of provides equitable to access to rural and remote families by providing affordable and equitable access