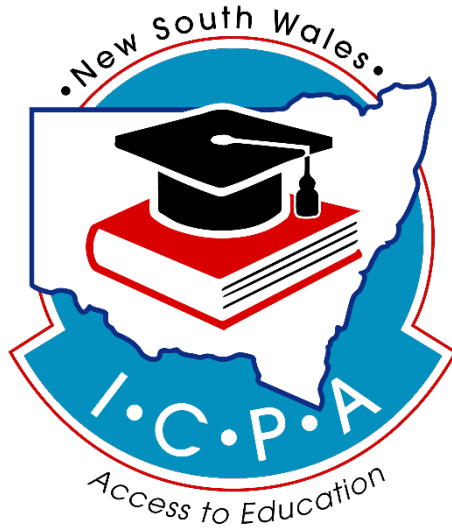


**Isolated Children's Parents' Association
of New South Wales Inc.**



**Submission to the IPART Early childhood education
and care affordability, accessibility and consumer
choice**

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

ICPA-NSW is a voluntary non-profit advocacy group that has its roots firmly embedded in rural, remote, and regional areas across the state. ICPA-NSW believes that all students - irrespective of where they live - are entitled to equitable access to education that enables them to participate to their full potential in the social, economic, political, and cultural life of a community.

The NSW State Council of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association advocates for members who have children who:

- Attend a rural pre-school or access early childhood education through a mobile service,
- Attend a small rural or remote school,
- Study by Distance Education and School of the Air lessons
- Travel to school by bus or private vehicle (daily, weekly or at the end of term)
- Board away from home to access primary or secondary school at a boarding school, agricultural high school, hostel, private board or maintain a second home,
- Attend a Tertiary institution- University/TAFE/ College

ICPA-NSW would like to provide the following feedback to the NSW review into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Access to Early Childhood Education and Care is limited for families in Regional and Remote NSW due to minimal services and significant distances to the services available. Choice is rarely an option while costs in accessing services expand due to travel, provision of resources and varied funding of services. ICPA-NSW has the following feedback regarding the draft review.

As outlined in the Mitchell Report, large areas of NSW are considered an Early Childhood Education and Care desert. Some families in NSW have no practical access to Preschool, let alone services for children under 3 years of age. Will an improved digital presence and data collection reflect those families that have minimal options available at all?

Response to Draft Findings

1. Complex funding: Funding regional and remote services to align with increasing costs of staff recruitment.
2. Workforce availability: Regional and remote areas of NSW have greater challenges in meeting workforce requirements in the Early Childhood Sector. Several branches have responded to a survey suggesting they have had services reduced due to staff shortages in both the long term and short term, causing disruption to an already limited service. This results in added pressure for existing staff and makes retention more difficult. ICPA-NSW encourages the recommendation of an incentive package to recruit staff to regional and remote services, including the provision of housing subsidies like the scheme offered to NSW primary and secondary teachers. Other financial incentives should also be funded to entice professionals to these locations. There is a need to incentivize students who are studying Early Childhood qualifications by assisting with study costs, travel and, if needed, accommodation.
2. Lack of comprehensive digital services and data. Would an improvement more readily identify the genuine need where services are currently not available?
4. Scope to improve access to services and support in services for families with children with diverse needs; Royal Far West early childhood proposal for "Better Learning Better Lives" is a flexible program with an aim to include services such as early intervention and screening, allied health therapy, well-being mental health services, capacity building for parents and teachers, and community navigation and service coordination for families. This model of service supports

children, families, services, and educators to successfully meet the diverse needs of children in the community and promotes better educational and health outcomes for the children.

Accessibility-availability and choice

7. Greater Barriers for outer regional and remote families; an expansion of the preschool drive subsidy could allow more affordable access for some families who are unable to cover travel costs associated with the long commute to services. Establishing funding for families to equip home classrooms where the only viable access to early childhood education is distance education. This could include but not limited to technology/communication equipment, resources, and staffing of in-home care educator.

Accessibility-Inclusion

8. There is scope to improve allied health service provision within early childhood services; See 4. Better Learning Better Lives. Accessing allied health services in regional and remote areas of NSW is incredibly challenging due to lack of service availability, distances to services and wait lists.

Accessibility-Information

Affordability of Services

15. Available subsidies for families may not be adequate to make early childhood services affordable for some low-income families; geographic disadvantage adds to this burden, and often increases costs involved in accessing services (see 7).

Supply of Services

22. For school aged children, remoteness of a location is associated with a lower number of places per child. This potentially indicates significant unmet demand in more remote parts of NSW. As many as 10 remote schools were identified by ICPA NSW in 2014 as servicing areas without practical access to pre schooling. The NSW department of Education has since identified other sites. Several remote preschools have since been established. Establishing Distance Education/School of the Air preschools in small, isolated schools where there is no other access to preschool would improve access for more families.

23. Population numbers and remoteness drive the mix of service types: preschool plays a larger role in the early childhood service mix compared to long day care as remoteness increases and population Centres are more isolated; Historically there have been families in NSW without practical access to preschool. While there are preschools in regional towns, the families who live in the vast outlying areas between these towns have only the choice of distance education preschool. Distance Education is only practicable when the child has access to a committed tutor to deliver the program. ICPA NSW have been working with the NSW Department of Education to establish pop up pop down preschools utilising existing town/villages schools and Distance Education Preschool. For the remote towns that have established these preschools it has been very successful. The continuation and expansion of this model would help meet the fluctuating needs in these communities.

25. See 2.

26. See 2.

Draft Recommendation Notes

1. Acknowledging the unique and varied needs of regional and remote communities, funding should support flexible models to accommodate accessibility for families.

2. See findings 2.

9. The NSW Government should advocate to the Commonwealth Government that it provides additional financial support to families in outer regional and remote areas of NSW, whose children participate in early childhood services before they commence primary school to help

with additional costs these families encounter to access services. *ICPA NSW would urge a recommendation “that an extension of the AIC Distance Education Allowance includes 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in a pre-compulsory distance education program.”

* ICPA NSW would further recommend that the NSW government extend the school drive subsidy to include preschool students relieving some of the added financial burden placed on families who must travel significant distances to access early childhood education.

15. The NSW Government should work with the early childhood sector and early intervention professionals to develop and implement a model and system for wrap-around support for children and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. *See findings 4 (Royal Far West).

Accessibility-Information

17. The NSW Government should advocate for the Commonwealth Government to provide support for services to comply with their obligations to report operating information, for example by conducting validation checks. * ICPA NSW would further encourage the state and federal governments work to create a national working with children’s check as the delay in application has been noted to contribute to the lack of workforce in border communities, where a potential staff member may hold a check for Victoria or SA, but not NSW.

Supply of Services

30. See Findings 2.

32. The NSW Regulatory Authority (withing the Department of Education) should develop a short-term educator relief policy regarding educator qualifications, to assist services that are finding it difficult to maintain current services due to staffing issues. # There have been temporary regulatory allowances whereby services can access Early Childhood Educators who are actively working towards an Early Childhood Teacher Degree. However, this regulation will change in December 2024, adding to the difficulty in staffing, and possibly becoming a deterrent for more students to enroll in the degree. An extension beyond 2024 is required.

