



Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc.

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association Qld Inc. (ICPA Qld Inc.) is a voluntary parent body which advocates for equitable access to quality educational opportunities for children in rural and remote areas, from early childhood to tertiary. ICPA Qld Inc. represents forty-seven branches, comprising of over 1200 families living in areas of Queensland considered rural and remote.

As a key stakeholder in the education of rural and remote children, the Council of the Queensland Isolated Children's Parents' Association wish to present a submission on behalf of our members.

It is the intention of this submission to highlight the issues in relation to accessing childcare and Early Childhood Learning services in rural and remote communities in Queensland with the main focus being accessibility, flexibility and affordability of ECEC services to our members and their families.

The early years of a child's life provide the fundamental stepping stones to their future as a learner. Due to the geographic location of families in relation to ECEC services, many of our members are disadvantaged in terms of their access to regular and quality early childhood services.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR RURAL AND REMOTE CHILDREN

Treasurer Joe Hockey's request to the Productivity Commission in relation to this enquiry on 17th November 2013 stated that the child care and early learning system could be improved because *"there are shortfalls in reaching and properly supporting the needs of ...regional and rural families..."*

(pg iii – Productivity Commission Issues Paper). The Treasurer further indicated that one of the Australian Government's objectives in commissioning this Inquiry was to examine and identify future options for a child care and early childhood learning system that *"is more flexible to suit the needs of families, including ... regional families."*

Further, the scope of the inquiry instructs the Productivity Commission to use evidence from Australia to report on and make recommendations about the current and future need for child care in Australia, including consideration of *"the particular needs of rural, regional and remote parents..."* (2b. pg. iv Productivity Commission Issues Paper).

Despite these specific requests and instructions, ICPA Qld Inc. believe the Commission has inadequately represented rural and remote children and their families with very little focus upon the specific issues faced by those in geographical isolation in relation to ECEC services.

The Productivity Commission's Draft Report specifically mentions disadvantaged children, including indigenous, special needs, NESB and children who are 'at risk'. However rural and remote children, who are subject to many of the same disadvantages as the aforementioned groups with similar results, have little special recognition in the Report. The Review's Terms of Reference acknowledge that children in rural and remote areas of Australia are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable (2012 AEDI) than their urban counterparts, yet the draft report does very little to address this inadequacy.

ICPA Qld Inc. believe that rural and remote children require their own unique criteria of disadvantage, whereby the particular complexities and challenges faced by these children and their families in accessing affordable quality care and early childhood learning services are recognised, with recommendations specifically relative to their situations formulated.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

ICPA Qld Inc. express disappointment in the consultation process undertaken by the Productivity Commission throughout the term of this inquiry. Public Hearings were conducted in Port Macquarie, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Perth, yet it would seem that these regions would have considerably better access and choice of child care services than those in rural and remote regions of Australia. No hearings were held in Queensland, South Australia or the Northern Territory, regions of Australia predominantly characterised by inadequate access to educational facilities including child care and early childhood learning programs. ICPA Qld Inc. suggest that the location of these public hearings may have potentially impacted the evidence which was collected by the Commission to inform their report.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS AGREEMENT

ICPA Qld Inc. support the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and have welcomed this vital assistance to families in rural and remote regions. However, Queensland has many areas across the state where access to a quality education program in the year before formal schooling begins is a very challenging endeavour. Many families spend hours travelling to ensure their children reap the benefits of attending an early childhood centre. Due to the tyranny of distance, it is not possible for many children to fulfill the universal access target of 30 hours per fortnight.

When distance makes face to face attendance unviable, there is an option in Queensland for geographically isolated families to enrol in a form of distance education learning called eKindy. This program requires guidance by a parent or carer in the home environment. However, due to a myriad of factors (including lack of local facilities, financial situation, confidence and competence to undertake distance education) many children will receive no early childhood exposure and therefore begin compulsory schooling ill prepared.

The information provided in the Draft Report which indicates the Productivity Commission has come to the conclusion that rural and remote children have adequate access to early childhood education and childcare services is of great concern to ICPA Qld. Inc.

The Commission comments on page 359, *“children in rural and remote area access pre-school services at the same rate as their city counterparts, suggesting that for this age group access to Early Childhood Education and Care services is not an issue.”*

The Commission also states on page 539 *“Children in rural and remote areas are currently well served by state and territory preschool programs”*.

ICPA Qld Inc. consider it vital that the Commission note that whilst the increase in children attending these services has been substantial, as previously stated, the majority of rural and remote children are not receiving the recommended number of hours within an approved program per week. There is concern the Commission may have equated attendance of a child at a mobile playgroup service, which provides a 0-5 year old program for 3 hours per fortnight with attendance of an urban child at a kindergarten for 30 hours per fortnight.

Obviously there is no comparison between the opportunities the two children are able to access in such a situation and ICPA Qld Inc. suggest the Productivity Commission may find more valuable evidence by collecting data in relation to the number of hours each child is able to attend an approved kindergarten rather than the number of enrolments at each service.

NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK

One of two key rationales for the core national regulations affecting Early Childhood Education and Care is *‘to support family decisions through the provision of information – helping reduce the asymmetry between families and service providers by making it easier to determine service quality; thereby also acting as an incentive for services to provide higher quality care’*.

ICPA Qld Inc. is concerned that of only two key rationales underpinning the National Quality Framework, one offers very little value to rural and remote families across Queensland.

Rural and remote communities are often extremely lucky to have even one Early Childhood Learning facility at which their children can experience the social, emotional and educational benefits offered to their urban counterparts. There are even fewer communities where having the opportunity to make a

choice as to which centre would best meet the needs of your child/ren is a reality. Often there is only a single provider in a geographically isolated region, so no real incentives for service providers in rural and remote areas to provide higher quality care exist due to lack of competition for enrolments and no choice of services exists for families.

This key rationale underpinning the national regulations to our Early Childhood and Care services has very little relevance in rural and remote areas and therefore many of the Productivity Commission's draft report findings in relation to this are of little assistance to Queensland's geographically isolated families.

STAFF QUALIFICATIONS

The Commission's Draft Recommendation 7.2 that would see all educators working with children aged birth to 36 months only requiring a Certificate III or equivalent may have a positive impact on rural and remote ECEC services. A relaxation in these qualification requirements could potentially mean an increased opportunity for accessing and retaining staff in these areas.

Attraction and retention of staff to rural and remote regions of Queensland continues to be a pressing issue for the members of ICPA Qld Inc. Many ECEC services struggle to find qualified staff who are willing to come to these country areas and stay for an extended period of time. This places undue pressure on these services which are striving to maintain continuity for the children and their families.

ICPA Qld Inc. believe that by lowering the qualification requirements of staff dealing with children 0-36 months, where a 'carer' rather than an 'educator' is of greater need, rural and remote ECEC services may be able to find suitable staff within their own community or indeed find staff willing to work toward this qualification.

VIABILITY SUPPORT RECOMMENDATION

ICPA Qld Inc. believe the introduction of a Viability Support Program (p. 571 Productivity Commission Draft Report ECEC) for service providers in regional, rural and remote areas could prove invaluable to geographically isolated children and their families. We are aware of many ECEC centres in such areas of Queensland which would benefit greatly through assistance such as this. The provision of viability support would mean greater sustainability for rural and remote providers and a commitment to providing access to quality Early Childhood Learning opportunities for these children.

IN-HOME CARE SCHEME

The In-Home Care (IHC) Scheme funded by the Federal Government is an integral service available to many families in rural and remote areas. An in-home carer may provide the only form of child care some families have access to due to their geographical isolation from mainstream child care facilities and this access needs to remain protected. Carers are in great demand and often waiting lists are long.

ICPA Qld Inc. has reservations in relation to the Productivity Commission's draft recommendation that the Australian Government removes the In-Home Care category of approved care and extends the recommended Early Care and Learning Subsidy to include nannies.

Should nannies become subsidised by the government, ICPA Qld Inc. is concerned this will effectively spread a limited pool of qualified child carers across a much larger demographic, adversely affecting the availability of carers to rural and remote areas. Further to this, nannies will become much more affordable to families in metropolitan areas where accessing child care facilities is less of an issue. We believe that demand will definitely exceed supply and it would seem likely that geographically isolated families will suffer as a consequence.

ICPA Qld Inc. firmly believe the In-Home Care Scheme must remain a priority for the Federal Government as it offers a flexible form of child care for those living in rural and remote areas where access to mainstream child care is limited.

CONCLUSION

ICPA Qld Inc. values the feedback received from members who are located in regional, rural and remote areas across Queensland. It is this feedback which guides and directs responses to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning. The opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission in relation to this inquiry is appreciated and ICPA Qld Inc. asks the Commission to keep in mind the relative geographical isolation of many families with young children across the country, and, most pertinently, how this creates difficulties in accessing consistent, flexible, affordable and high quality care within a reasonable distance from their home.

Rural and remote Australian families do have particular, unique needs which require recognition in any inquiry into Early Childhood learning. ICPA Qld Inc. would urge the Productivity Commission to keep these needs in mind when finalising their report to the Federal Government.