



Voice for Regional Education

Working Together to ensure access to appropriate education for all regional Australians.

Established in 1971, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association (ICPA) is a national organisation representing rural students and their families at all stages of education and has a large network of branches throughout Australia.

ICPA WA works within the community to provide support and assistance to rural and regional families across Western Australia. We advocate and lobby to assist families to access appropriate education for their children.

Submission to the Inquiry into the Department of Education's Independent Public Schools Initiative

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Western Australia (ICPA WA), welcomes the opportunity to provide information and recommendations into the inquiry into Independent Public Schools, in particular the impact of Independent Public Schools on students in remote and regional areas.

Background:

ICPA WA is the state arm of a national, voluntary, parent body representing families who live in rural and remote Australia. Our goal is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all geographical isolated children and thus ensure they have access to a continuing and appropriate education. ICPA WA seeks to have all elements of education (ie cultural experiences, social contacts, participation in sport and enrichment activities) available to children regardless of the location of their home. The member families of the association reside in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of seeking to achieve access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. A significant percentage of our members in WA live very remotely, great distances from their nearest community with their only access to education being via distance education programs.

Introduction:

ICPA WA is generally supportive of the concept of Independent Public Schools for schools and communities who have the resources and inclination to undertake the program. Greater independence and flexibility for local decision making has the potential to directly benefit students' needs.

Often rural and remote communities are highly skilled at community involvement and self-management. It is widely recognised that some of the most successful P & C organisations are from rural schools.

However, some school communities currently do not have the resources to even consider becoming Independent, due to inexperienced staff, lack of information presented to staff and the community and/or the lack of appropriate skill set of board members.

With the introduction of the Student Centred Funding Model (SCFM), all schools have effectively moved to a system that is more autonomous, from a budgeting point of view and hence similar to Independent Public School operation. Inexperienced and high turnover of Principal in many rural and remote non-Independent Public Schools is resulting in lack of long-term school planning. Schools are being expected to operate in a similar way to Independent Public Schools, but without much of the training, system management or quality of staff.

Terms of Reference:

ICPA WA has made some very brief, informal comments according to the terms of reference, collected from a number of school communities that are currently IPS :

1a) The implementation of the initiative, including support provided to schools transitioning to become Independent Public Schools and the use of Delivery and Performance Agreements:

- Separate development workshops for school board and staff are beneficial as it allowed for candid discussion on issues or concerns relevant to each group.
- Many schools reported an increased amount of Professional Learning which was targeted to specific needs.
- Resistance from some school staff and parental communities to even investigating IPS implementation, based on previous negative experiences of ineffective school councils.

1b) The ongoing role of the Department of Education, and other agencies, supporting Independent Public Schools.

- The 'Admin Grant' provides excellent support in compensating for the extra work load in preparation for becoming an IPS and the consultation between staff, school board and community. It provides help for extra professional development, extra teacher support and school board development.
- There is a large amount of extra work involved. The Principal, staff and board members all need to be willing to undertake the extra work load.
- The registrars of IPS in some regions set up networks for communication to discuss common issues and discuss progress.
- The community representation on the school board can and should allow for direct and practical community support. Obvious choices in rural areas are local Shire representatives, progress associations and businesses operating in the region. An example of this could be direct support from the local shire to contribute to grounds/water etc.

1c) How Independent Public Schools are monitored through informal and formal review processes and the transparency of review for the school community.

- Formal: Everyone in the School community is aware of the 3 year review process. It is very thorough, with the panel coming into the schools and speaking with all staff/board/parents. Negative aspects identify areas for future school development. 'It's an awesome process, shouldn't be afraid of it'.
- Informal: The 'school business plan' is reviewed annually by the school board and staff to make sure the school is meeting its targets. This is transparent and available to all. On-going monitoring of finances gives a safeguard that things are on track.

1d) The impact on the engagement and performance of students, in particular those with additional needs.

- Staffing can be specifically targeted to student requirements with specific needs or weightings in various year levels.
- Boards are empowered to make decisions based on the school vision, for eg taking on particular programs or extra-curricular needs. An example quoted was how important school assemblies/concerts are for cultural and arts development.

1e) the outcomes of formal and informal reviews of Independent Public Schools.

- See comments above (1c)

1f) The process and extent to which the Department of Education incorporates review outcomes into its management of the Independent Public Schools initiative and ensures that Independent Public Schools act on review outcomes.

- ICPA WA is unsure of how this is undertaken, however recommendations are that the feedback from individual schools' 3 year reviews are used to look for patterns, successes, failures in order to review on a broad scale across regions and the state.

1g) The impact of Independent Public Schools on staffing arrangements.

- The autonomy around staffing and the benefits of merit select is seen as a major advantage. Prior to becoming IPS some schools reported being ham-strung by a number of part-time staff only available on certain days. Now schools have much more autonomy.
- Most schools reported a positive aspect being the flexibility to organise staffing according to needs. An example, in some schools 2 deputy positions (pre IPS) not warranted and could create relevant positions to address school requirements.
- Most staff we spoke to reported having to work harder in an IPS, but not always in negative terms, 'We became proactive, becoming IPS has contributed to greater school energy.'
- Some teachers unhappy about a lack of adequate Education Assistant time in the classroom.

Summary:

There are obvious merits to rural and remote schools becoming Independent Public Schools, if the school staff and community are supportive of the idea and if the community has the population and infrastructure to establish an effective board.

The success or otherwise of an Independent Public School depends on the quality of the leadership, both the Principal and the School Board. It has been quoted to us that "the board is the glue that holds the school together." "The board is responsible for representing the community, laying down and being custodians of the school's vision."

Our recommendations to increase the success of the Independent Public School in rural and remote areas are to:

- Provide more resources to inform and educate the community on the merits of Independent Public School program. This could be done in conjunction with Local Government, where appropriate.
- Establish targeted approaches to developing leaders from rural and remote communities, both Principals and potential board members. Often schools in these areas have a revolving door of Acting Principals and are unlikely to even consider becoming an Independent Public School. The success of the program relies on effective leadership, both Principal and board members and it makes sense that where possible these people should be drawn from the local area, who are happy to live in the regions and understand the lifestyle.
- Provide opportunities for board training and governance and advertise this more widely.
- Encourage local area networks or networks of like-minded schools who may move to IPS together.
- Great flexibility and more opportunity for very small schools to network with other schools to enable students to have enriched core subject learning experiences – to enable larger cohorts of same aged students. This could be done on a regular basis via face to face measures or via the internet.
- Use the reviews of similar rural and remote Independent Public Schools to consider broad ways to make the system work better across rural and remote WA. (This could extend to governance of non IPS schools).

In some very small rural and remote communities, it may never be appropriate to move to an Independent School status, but these schools require just as much, if not more support than schools in larger towns and the metropolitan area. Some school communities need extra assistance as they grapple with small numbers of students and adults, as well as group members who have multiple roles, for eg teachers who are parents.

Members have raised concerns that in rural and remote areas, many non-Independent Public Schools are struggling to remain vibrant and viable. Attracting and retaining competent Principals and teachers is a major issue. The transition of year 7 to high school has had a negative effect in some

areas, with families unable to afford the cost of six years of boarding fees, so moving their children to larger schools via longer bus routes or moving entirely from the region for the purpose of education. This contributes to fewer enrolments, as younger siblings often leave before they would normally. It can easily become a downward spiral.

With 70% of government school students now attending an Independent Public School, ICPA WA is concerned that the remaining 30% are not being given the same opportunities. More resources need to be provided in a targeted way to non-Independent Public rural and remote Schools to support the school council and to review the school plan, as is done in the Independent Public Schools.

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