



Early Childhood Education and Care

Extension to the AIC Allowance

The Australian Government recognises the importance of ensuring that children are not disadvantaged in terms of their early physical, social and educational development. Researchers throughout the world report that the social and developmental gap in children's functioning and achievement can be significant by age six. These differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills are strong predictors of later academic, occupational and life achievement. The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting school has never been better. This can be attributed to the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, ICPA remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions.

ICPA believes the impact of not being able to access affordable early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. Much of this is due to learning difficulties going undiagnosed in the early years and having very limited opportunities to socialise and interact with other children. All States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education and this is the *only* avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, approximately 280 children access recognised 4 year old programs in their homes through distance education, which today includes a mixture of hands on play-based learning and teacher-led structured lessons which involve the use of technology for communication.

As with every other early childhood program for four year olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task, to use the technology required for distance education, to appropriately interact with their peers and teacher and to understand the formal concept of school. It is vital that young children have opportunities to socialise face to face with other children of their age. This often requires families to travel great distances to attend school functions which provide an opportunity for the children to participate in group activities, such as sport, practise conversation skills and socialise with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

Families undertaking distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children's Scheme, (AIC), Distance Education Allowance as 4 year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through Child Care Rebates (CCR) or Child Care Benefits (CCB) as these children are still in their parents' care.

Based on projected 4 year old distance education enrolments, approximately 280 families Australia - wide would benefit from the extension of the AIC Distance Education Allowance which is intended to assist with out of pocket costs. Why are these 280 four year olds ignored?

ICPA requests that the Federal Government address the financial inequity facing rural and remote families needing to access an early childhood program through distance education. Equity can be achieved by extending the AIC Scheme to include four year old students taking part in distance education early childhood learning programs.

Mobile Playgroups Services in rural and remote areas

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, play and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face to face interaction for children of similar ages. Flexibility and surety of

funding for these services is vital in providing the much needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. ICPA Australia has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the Jobs for Families Early Childhood Package, specifically in relation to Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas. As many of these mobile playgroups do not provide child care, nor can they be licensed, it appears they would not be funded under the new Community Child Care Fund.

Recommendation:

That the Federal Government facilitate specifically that Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas, be included in the Jobs for Families Early Childhood Package, so that funding for these services is secure beyond 2018.

Nanny Pilot Programme

Accommodating the needs of families who cannot access mainstream child care services (shift workers and rural and remote families) was continually raised throughout the Productivity Commissions enquiry into child care. ICPA was pleased when government announced that a new program would be trialled for such families. At the inception of the Nanny Pilot Programme it was touted as the solution to the problems that rural and remote families were having in accessing child care. To date ICPA Australia has no knowledge of any of its members that have actually continued with the program citing it as unaffordable in its current design. The high cost of accessing the program can be credited to service providers requiring that the Nannies are Cert III accredited (although it is not a requirement of the program) and high administration charges. Even with the increase of the subsidy from \$5.50 to \$8.00, families are still experiencing high out of pocket costs.

Recommendation:

ICPA Federal Council recommends that the Federal Government immediately reviews the guidelines for the Nanny Pilot Programme, in relation to rural and remote families, so they can be assessed, charged lower rates and placed in a category consistent with their location and level of disadvantage.

In Home Care

For families living in rural and remote Australia, who are able to provide accommodation for staff, the In-Home Care scheme is an affordable option when it comes to accessing child care. However, there are three main concerns continually raised by our members:

Firstly, that the criteria needs to be broadened to meets the needs of these families, particularly for those undertaking distance education schooling. The Federal Government must introduce greater flexibility in the IHC guidelines to include an educator role. Currently, the guidelines only allow for carers for under school age children or out of school hours care for older children. In remote areas parents cannot 'go to work' while their children are taking part in distance education school lessons as they are required to deliver the program. This carer is a live-in position and it would seem sensible that if they continue as the educator through the day into school time, there would be no need to have a second person to supervise the school work.

Secondly, members continually raise concerns about the difficulty of finding suitable people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children of families residing in rural and remote Australia who must be educated by distance education. Frequently the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are backpackers. While they are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas, they can only stay maximum of 6 months with one employer and are not eligible for a 2nd year visa, as working with children is not an acceptable employable occupation. Lastly, all too often we are hearing of incidents where families are not able to access In Home Care, even though they meet all of the guidelines. There are cases where In Home Care Service Providers are not travelling to remote areas to assess families for child care, yet the Department of Education maintains that this program is undersubscribed, further limiting rural and remote families in accessing affordable child care.

Recommendations:

- 1) ICPA Federal Council recommends that the Federal Government review the guidelines for In Home Care in relation to rural and remote families so that carers can deliver the distance education program as well as caring for the children.
- 2) A solution to this employment problem is to extend the current list of occupations qualifying as rural work for people entering Australia on the 1263 Working Holiday visa verification form. ICPA (Aust) would like to see this list revised and In Home Care and governess work included as accepted employable occupations for rural families.