

# Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



## Briefing Papers

of the  
Federal Council

of the  
Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

November 2016

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## **BACKGROUND of ICPA**

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia had its beginning in the NSW outback town of Bourke, in April 1971. Families were struggling with drought and the consequences of such an event, and most importantly, the effects of the drought on the education of their children. The late Mrs. Pat Edgley, MBE, called a meeting to save the Bourke Hostel, which serviced families in the outlying district, from closure. Out of this has grown an amazing organisation, with branches of ICPA springing up all over Australia, and eventually the national overarching body - ICPA (Aust). In its 45 years as a volunteer organisation, ICPA has achieved much for families and children who are isolated from access to educational services. ICPA will continue to strive for equity of access to an appropriate education for these children.

## **OBJECTIVE of ICPA:**

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body, dedicated to ensuring all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of access to an appropriate education for their children and the provision of services required in achieving this. Children may be educated in small rural schools, by distance education, attend boarding schools or school term hostels and sometimes have access to early childhood services. Tertiary students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia frequently must live away from home to access further education.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS of ICPA:**

- Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC). This is a Federal Government allowance, established under the Australian Labor Party by the Hon Kim Beazley Snr MP, then Minister for Education, and is paid to parents to help support their isolated students as a distance education student, a living away from home student, or in establishing a second home so students can access education.
- Establishing allowances in each state, funded by State Governments.
- Establishing itinerant teaching services to assist in overcoming the tyranny of distance for distance education tutors and students.
- Supporting retired educators volunteering to assist families to educate their students in remote and isolated homesteads.
- Impetus behind the Country Areas Program (CAP), which has been replaced by similar State based programs.
- A leading role in improving telecommunication services for isolated families, including current technologies used for delivering distance education.
- Youth Allowance changes, which saw the introduction of a Relocation Scholarship and the removal of Family Assets and Family Actual Means testing for rural students.
- Provision of an education port with the introduction of the new **nbn** SkyMuster satellite internet service.
- Respect and credibility across all political parties and government departments.

## **CURRENT ADVOCACY of ICPA:**

- Early childhood programs and child care to be available for all rural and remote families, including an extension of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education allowance to four-year-old students and ensuring that early years' mobile services are continued to be supported.
- Financial support for distance education tutors who are working with students in distance education classrooms.
- Adequate and affordable communications in rural and remote areas to ensure geographically isolated students have the resources they require for their educational needs.
- An increase in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme payments to enable access of education for rural and remote students.
- A Rural Hardship Education Fund to assist families with the high education costs of their children in times of long-term drought, drought recovery and instances of rural hardship.
- Financial assistance and adequate support for students with specific learning needs.
- A Tertiary Access Allowance for students who want to participate in tertiary education and must live away from home to do so, but do not receive any assistance to relocate.

## **MAJOR EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACING GEOGRAPHICALLY ISOLATED FAMILIES**

Since 1971 the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), has represented families living in rural and remote regions of Australia. Our goal is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all geographically isolated children and thus ensure they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home. Due consideration must be given to factors which affect the delivery of and access to education by these children, factors which do not necessarily need to be considered within the context of metropolitan education.

Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote students requires a national approach that ensures national consistency, no matter where education is provided. The financial cost to families educating children in these locations continues to rise and can be attributed to many leaving these areas. There is a strong need for rural and remote education to be considered on a separate register when delivering and funding education for these students.

### **Early Childhood Education and Care**

#### **CHILD CARE:**

- **The Nanny Pilot Programme:**

The guidelines for the Nanny Pilot Programme, need to be reviewed immediately in relation to rural and remote families, so those families can be assessed, charged at more affordable rates and placed in a category consistent with their location and level of disadvantage.

- **The In Home Care Scheme:**

a) The criteria in the guidelines needs to be broadened to meet the needs of these families, particularly for those undertaking distance education schooling.

b) In rural and remote Australia, it is very difficult for our members to find suitable people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children who must be educated by distance education. Backpackers are a solution to this problem but they are currently constrained by their visa stipulations. A broadening of the criteria for working visas would solve this problem.

c) Some ICPA members have not been able to access In Home Care due to their remote location, even though they meet all of the guidelines. The Department of Education and Training maintains that this program is undersubscribed, further limiting rural and remote families in accessing affordable child care.

#### **ACCESSIBILITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING:**

- **Mobile Early Childhood Services**

Facilitation is specifically required to ensure that Mobile Early Childhood Services in rural and remote areas, are included in the Jobs for Families Childcare Package, so that funding for these services is secure beyond 2018.

- **Assistance for Isolated 4yo Children**

Four-year-old students enrolled in Distance Education need to be supported while participating in this essential transition to formal schooling programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme needs to be extended to include these children as no other service is available for this cohort.

**Funding required ≈ \$1 million dollars per annum.**

### **Distance Education Teaching Allowance**

#### **Recognition of the financial impact on families who must provide a distance education tutor:**

For around 1500 families living in isolated regions of Australia, the only means of accessing an education for their children is via distance education programs. While the AIC allowance assists with the setup of the classroom and ongoing costs associated with this method of education, it is not possible without a tutor present in the home schoolroom. Families are required to provide and fund the entire costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) who must often forgo an income, for many years in order to fill the role. ICPA is seeking the introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6 000 per family, per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a tutor performs.

**Funding required ≈ \$9 million per annum.**

## **Compulsory Schooling**

Accessing compulsory education is a significant financial burden for rural families.

- The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance needs to adequately address the out of pocket costs incurred by rural families whether their children need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling.

**Rural and remote families require a significant increase in the AIC allowances: Basic Boarding Allowance, Additional Boarding Allowance, Distance Education Allowance and Second Home Allowance. After the adjustment increase, the AIC allowances to be annually indexed at the CPI education sub-index.**

## **Tertiary Education**

Affordable pathways are required in accessing tertiary studies for rural and remote students. ICPA continues to lobby for a Tertiary Access Allowance (TAA), equal to the Relocation Scholarship (1<sup>st</sup> year-\$4 333, 2<sup>nd</sup> year- \$2 167, 3<sup>rd</sup> and subsequent years - \$1 083). All students from rural and remote areas, a group currently under-represented at university, who need to relocate to undertake tertiary study must have equity to tertiary education by way of financial assistance to assist them in accessing their chosen institution.

## **Early Childhood Education and Care**

The issue of accessing affordable early childhood learning and care for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to either:

- No services being available.
- No staff available to fill positions.
- No flexibility within programs to allow for individual family's needs.
- High out of pocket costs exceeding the family budget.
- The impact on Budget Based Funded Mobile Services, if the Jobs for Families Childcare Package is not amended to ensure they continue.

### **Mobile Early Childhood 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, playgroups 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 Child Care Package, specifically in relation to Mobile Early Childhood Services in rural and remote areas. As many of these mobile services 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:**

**ICPA recommends that the Federal Government ensures that Mobile Early Childhood Services in rural and remote areas, be included in the Jobs for Families Childcare 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 Commission's Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning. 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 recommends that the Federal Government immediately review 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 carers the In-Home Care scheme is an affordable option when it comes to accessing child care. However, there are four main concerns continually raised by our members:

- 1) Firstly, that the In Home Care scheme needs to remain available for rural and remote families who have no other child care options as the Nanny Pilot Programme is currently unable to facilitate these families due to the high costs to participate in the program.

- 2) Secondly, that the criteria need to be broadened to meet 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 supervisor role. Currently, the guidelines only allow for carers of 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 supervisor through the day into school time, there would be no need to have a second person to supervise school work.
- 3) Thirdly, 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 rural and remote families 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 they are not eligible for a second year visa, as working with children is not an acceptable employable occupation.
- 4) 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 and Training maintains that this program is undersubscribed, further limiting rural and remote families in accessing affordable child care.

**Recommendations:**

- 1) ICPA recommends that the In Home Care Program remains until the Nanny Pilot Programme is able to facilitate specifically for rural and remote children in relation to cost and accessibility.**
- 2) ICPA 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.**
- 3) ICPA recommends that the Federal Government 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.**
- 4) ICPA recommends that the Federal Government make the In Home Care Program available to any family regardless of their location throughout Australia.**

## Early Childhood Education Extension to the AIC Allowance for 4 year olds

**The Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education (AIC) DE allowance must be extended to the 4-year-old cohort when undertaking a transition to school program.**

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 formal schooling 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 which are 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, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (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?*

### **Recommendation:**

**ICPA recommends 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.**

## Distance Education

### Distance Education Teaching Allowance

For many young people living in remote regions, their only access to education is to study by distance education. While distance education services are well structured and distance education centres ably staffed, it is clear that distance education provision is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated classroom. This person is the distance education tutor who must be available and able to provide the practical, day-to-day supervision and support required for the effective delivery of a distance education program.

The distance education tutor is a person who frequently is the mother of the students, and must be present to commit between six and eight hours each day to the geographically isolated classroom to teach the distance education program, in addition to necessary preparation time. The role of distance education tutor requires dedication and is a commitment that frequently lasts many years. A distance education tutor must be capable and confident in delivering the distance education program, thus allowing rural and remote students to achieve educational parity with their urban peers who have face-to-face access to professionally trained teachers and support staff on a daily basis.

Tasks required of the distance education tutor include setting up a classroom, keeping students engaged in the curriculum, dealing with disciplinary issues, ensuring students link in via the internet or telephone for their formal instructions and a variety of extra-curricular activities, receiving and returning completed lessons to distance education centres, marking school work before it is returned, as well as dealing with family commitments and the everyday running of a business in a remote area. Distance education tutors spend similar time to a teacher in a mainstream school preparing daily lessons and teaching their students, with no remuneration or recognition for the work they do. The delivery of distance education is not possible without the commitment of distance education tutors who are accountable for the face-to-face delivery of educational support, supervision and educational evaluation of their students.

The roles women undertake in the operation of family agricultural businesses have changed and multiplied over the years. With the responsibility of the distance education tutor position often falling on the mother, fulfilling this position further compounds her workload. This can place increased pressure on other family members and may necessitate the employment of additional staff.

Due consideration must be given to the encumbrance on approximately 1 500 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate children. The vital role of the distance education tutor should be recognised through the payment of an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform.

**ICPA requests that the Federal Government introduce a Distance Education Teaching Allowance in financial recognition of the essential work distance education tutors perform.**

This Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) should be:

- for families who qualify for the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme – Distance Education Allowance
- paid per family (approx. 1 500 nationally)
- an annual payment of \$6 000.00, indexed to the CPI.
- As there is yet to be the creation of a DETA, ICPA members have asked that an increase in the AIC Distance education (DE) component be urgently sought to address the true expenses for those families whose only option of schooling is Distance Education.



## Compulsory Education Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily face to face access to an appropriate government school. Much has changed since the AIC Scheme was first introduced; the duration of compulsory education has increased and accessing regional term hostels has decreased due to continual closures. Changes are needed to ensure this allowance meets the needs of families in the twenty-first century.

Accessing compulsory education is a significant financial burden for rural families. The Assistance for Isolated Children allowance needs to adequately address the out of pocket costs incurred by rural and remote families whether their children need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling.

The AIC allowance consists of three main categories for geographically isolated students:

- **Distance Education Allowance** for students living at home and undertaking distance education
- **Boarding and Additional Boarding Allowance** for students boarding away from home at a school hostel or private arrangement
- **Second Home Allowance** for students living in the family's second home so they can attend school daily

### **DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Families who educate their children via distance education are required to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting, provide extra learning materials and resources, print necessary learning materials all of which are supplied to students at mainstream schools. In addition, distance education families often travel significant distances to participate in school activities that offer interaction and socialisation for their children. The AIC DE Allowance assists distance education families with some of these necessary expenses in order to educate their children when living in geographic isolation.

### **BOARDING**

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must move away from home to attend school. This comes at a considerable cost to families. Annual out-of-pocket boarding expenses range from \$10 000 to \$35 000 per child, which is unsustainable for most. Some families are splitting the family and moving to town to access affordable schooling, or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all of their children in boarding school. This is negatively impacting the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

The disparity between the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) Boarding Allowance and the actual cost of boarding schools across Australia continues to grow. This growth in disparity is impacting the intent and effectiveness of the allowance. Rural and remote families are required to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education.

### **SECOND HOME**

The AIC Second Home Allowance assists families with the cost of setting up a second home away from their main place of residence where a family member lives with the children so that they can attend a school on a day to day basis. The option of establishing a second home while children are of school age, is paramount in efforts to retain families in rural and remote areas of Australia. In many cases, the mother and children live in the second home during school times and return to their rural area during school breaks and holidays. This allows the family to access schooling, but also maintain their connection and support with their rural community as well as work and live in a rural area. If the Second Home Allowance were not available, more families would move their entire family permanently to an area where appropriate schooling was available. ICPA advocates for the Second Home Allowance component of the AIC to be paid at the same rate as the Boarding AIC.

It is in the National interest to ensure isolated children are not disadvantaged in terms of educational and social development and to ensure their educational outcomes are not compromised. These students need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs which allows them to achieve educational parity with their urban peers. It is imperative for rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions.

**The Federal Government has recently committed funding for geographically isolated children which includes an increase to the Additional Boarding Allowance. ICPA recommends that utilisation of the balance of this funding includes assisting geographically isolated children through the AIC Distance Education, Basic Boarding and Second Home Allowances.**

## Tertiary Education Tertiary Access Allowance

Engaging in tertiary education should be an option for all Australian students. Ability to access education is one of the key considerations in determining whether a student can take up this option. Equity of educational access for rural and remote students is restricted and they continue to be under-represented in tertiary education.

ICPA's Tertiary Access Research (May 2013) found that travel distance and the huge financial cost of relocation were the major hurdles in a student's ability to access tertiary education. Fifty-three per cent of young people from rural and remote areas live between 501 to 2 000 kms from the nearest university offering their required course. These students residing in rural and remote Australia require financial assistance to access their place of study. This assistance should not be dependent upon being a recipient of student income support payments such as Youth Allowance (YA). While the costs associated with relocating have been recognised through the provision of Relocation Scholarships, only students receiving dependent Youth Allowance have benefited from this change.

The logistics for rural and remote students to journey to an institution offering tertiary studies involve expenditure often beyond their financial means. The high up-front costs of accessing and paying for accommodation, travel to access their place of study, along with the cost of living away from home, all impact on rural and remote student access. ICPA considers it vital for the Federal Government to create an allowance that will enable these students to have the equivalent access to tertiary education that is available to most students living in the urban areas of Australia.

To further their education rural students must, by definition, leave home to access tertiary studies. The support mechanisms of Youth Allowance, and part-time work that many students undertake, contribute to supplementing the living costs of students once they can actually access their chosen tertiary institution. The greatest barrier rural students face when accessing higher education is the lack of adequate financial means to fund this access. The current measures for student income support, (Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY), do not adequately recognise the extra costs incurred by all rural and remote students attempting to access tertiary education.

Students, who wish to commence tertiary studies immediately following completion of their secondary education, invariably require assistance to get to their chosen tertiary institution. They have limited funds to assist in accessing their place of study and some students cannot defer their studies in order to meet the workforce criteria for gaining independent Youth Allowance and hence receive financial support for day-to-day living. Students receiving independent Youth Allowance, who must relocate from the family home, still require financial assistance with the relocation needed to access their tertiary establishment.

**ICPA requests that the Federal Government introduce a Tertiary Access Allowance as financial assistance to rural and remote students who must live away from home to access tertiary education.**

The Tertiary Access Allowance advocated by ICPA will enable rural and remote students to access their place of study including securing their place of accommodation, assisting with relocation expenses, travelling to their institution for enrolment to commence study and facilitating travel home during the year.

This allowance should:

- Not be reliant on students receiving income support payments such as Youth Allowance.
- Be an annual payment for the duration of the student's full time course.
- Will be \$4 333 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2 167 in the second or third year, \$1 083 in the fourth or subsequent year.
- Not be received in addition to a Relocation Scholarship.