



# Briefing Papers

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## Overview of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia

### Background

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) 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 that meeting, an amazing organisation grew, with branches of ICPA springing up all over Australia. There are now State Councils in most States along with Federal Council otherwise known as ICPA (Aust), representing members at a national level. ICPA has achieved much for families and children who are isolated from access to educational services. ICPA continues to strive for equity of access to an appropriate education for these children.

### Objectives

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. Most 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 to achieve this. Children may be educated in small rural schools, by distance education, attend boarding schools or school term hostels and only sometimes have access to early childhood services. Our representation also includes tertiary students whose family reside in rural and remote Australia and who frequently must live away from home to access further education. ICPA (Aust) aims 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 for these children, factors which do not necessarily need to be considered within the context of metropolitan education.

### Achievements

- Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC). This is a Federal Government allowance, established in 1973 to help support geographically isolated students access an education through distance education living away from home, or in establishing a second home.
- 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 and rural education.
- Youth Allowance changes, which saw the introduction of a Relocation Scholarship, removal of the Family Assets and Family Actual Means Tests for Youth Allowance dependent students, changes to the Family Pool arrangements, the reduction of time, 18 months to 14 months rural and remote students need to be employed under the self-supporting criteria to qualify for Youth Allowance as an independent and the increase to parental income limits for rural and remote students applying for Youth Allowance as an independent.
- Provision of an education port with the introduction of the nbn Sky Muster satellite internet service.



## Boarding Schools, School Term Hostels and Second Home Portfolio

A unified and collaborative approach to the education of rural and remote students is vital to the retention of a skilled workforce in the remotest areas of Australia. Providing families with the means to provide their children equitable educational opportunities and outcomes to their urban counterparts will serve to foster a skilled and experienced labour force regardless of geographical location. All State and Territory Governments need to be united in their pledge to empower these families so students who must live away from home to access an appropriate education regardless of where they live, feel supported and valued.

### SUMMARY

#### 1. Access to Compulsory Education - Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme

- **Increase the AIC Allowance**
- **AIC Second Home Allowance should be paid at the same rate as the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance**
- **AIC criteria expanded to allow more rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance**
- **Separate Category for Geographically Isolated Students under AIC:** The unique needs of geographically isolated students should be recognised by categorising them separately under the AIC Allowance for geographically isolated Distance Education and Boarding students.
- **Online AIC Application/Renewal Process**
- **Review of the AIC Scheme:** A review of the AIC Scheme is called for to ensure the allowance is meeting the needs of those it was established to help, as the gap between the amount the AIC Allowance covers and the actual cost of educating geographically isolated children continues to widen. While ICPA (Aust) would certainly not like to see any of the current eligibility criteria for the AIC removed or diminished, we believe a review is timely to ensure the Scheme is adequately meeting the needs of all geographically isolated students.

#### 2. School funding model/s and impacts on regional and rural boarding schools

Safeguards are needed to ensure educational equity is not reduced for rural and remote students as the Direct Measure of Income school funding methodology is implemented so that these students are still able to access appropriate schooling.

#### 3. Resources for mental health programs in boarding schools

The provision of resources for mental health programs in boarding schools is vital. Support mechanisms and coping tools should be available and offered to students within boarding schools including processes to help children navigate through times of hardship.

#### 4. Fringe Benefits Tax

Employers in geographically isolated areas assisting with the educational costs of children of employees should be exempt of fringe benefit tax for these payments.

#### 5. Provision of additional resources to Boarding Schools for students with disability



## ISSUE 1 - Access to Compulsory Education - Assistance For Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme

The AIC Scheme was implemented in 1973 to assist rural and remote families with the extra costs of educating their children who are geographically isolated from an appropriate government school.

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

- **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 Allowance** for students living at home and undertaking distance education.

The AIC Allowance must adequately address the out-of-pocket expenses incurred by rural and remote families to access equitable educational opportunities for their children, whether they need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling. While the AIC Allowance increases annually with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), it is important to note there has been no significant increase to the AIC Allowance for many years, even though essential costs of educating geographically isolated children have continued to rise steadily.

### Boarding

Many rural and remote families must send their children away from home for their compulsory secondary education as they have no adequate daily access to a mainstream school. In Queensland alone, there are eight shires with no high school. Boarding School is a necessity for these students.

Families find it extremely difficult to afford ever-increasing boarding school fees, and this financial strain is exacerbated when more than one child is enrolled in boarding. Unfortunately, some families are forced to divide the family unit and move to a town in the bid to access affordable and appropriate schooling, or in some cases make the unenviable decision of choosing between sibling/s to attend boarding school as they cannot afford the cost of boarding for all of their children. This situation creates extreme distress, uncertainty and upheaval for students and their family and also negatively impacts the small communities and rural schools these families are associated with.

The disparity between the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance and actual Boarding School fees across Australia continues to grow. This gap impacts the intent and effectiveness of the allowance. Rural and remote families must contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education each year as the cost of educational provision and services rise.

While the AIC is indexed annually in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), boarding school fees continue to rise at a far greater rate than the CPI. On average, boarding facilities increase their fees by 4-8% per annum. The continual upward trend of boarding fees is further exemplified by data obtained from the Queensland Isolated Children's Parents' Association which showed that in 2018 across Queensland boarding schools, boarding fees rose at an average of 6% in that year.

The table below shows a comparison between the average boarding fees in Australian States and Territories and the assistance received through the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance.



Comparison of average Boarding fees and Assistance For Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme								
Basic Boarding Allowance 2015	Basic Boarding Allowance 2022	% Increase of AIC 2015-2022	State	Average Boarding Fee 2015	Average Boarding Fee 2022	% Increase of Boarding fees 2015-2022	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2015	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2022
\$7 897	\$8 856	12%	Vic	-	\$26 412	-	-	33%
			SA	\$19 991	\$23 304	16%	39%	38%
			ACT	-	\$28 885	-	-	33%
			Qld	\$17 288	\$21235	22%	46%	41%
AIC – Basic Boarding Allowance 2014	AIC – Basic Boarding Allowance 2022	% Increase of AIC 2014-2022	State	Average Boarding Fee 2014	Average Boarding Fee 2022	% Increase of Boarding fees 2014 - 2022	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2014	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2022
\$7 667	\$8 856	15%	NSW	\$20 331	\$24 345	19%	38%	36%
AIC – Basic Boarding Allowance 2016	AIC – Basic Boarding Allowance 2022	% Increase of AIC 2016-2022	State	Average Boarding Fee 2016	Average Boarding Fee 2022	% Increase of Boarding fees 2016 - 2022	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2016	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2022
\$8 015	\$8 856	10%	WA	\$19 636	\$23 315	18%	40%	38%
AIC – Basic Boarding Allowance 2015	AIC – Basic Boarding Allowance 2021	% Increase of AIC 2015-2021	State	Average Boarding Fee 2015	Average Boarding Fee 2021	% Increase of Boarding fees 2015-2021	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2015	% Boarding Fees covered by AIC 2021
\$7 897	\$8 557	8%	Tas	\$15 467	\$19 533	26%	51%	44%
			NT	\$14 233	\$24 830	74%	55%	34%

**RECOMMENDATION**

An urgent increase to the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance of at least \$4000 to cover at least 55% of the average boarding fee followed by indexation to the CPI Sub Index: Education to truly reflect the costs of education.

**AIC Second Home Allowance**

The AIC Second Home Allowance assists families with the cost of setting up a second home away from their principal 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 retaining families in rural and remote areas of Australia. Boarding school is not a suitable environment for every student. In many cases, the mother and children live in a second home during school times, returning to their rural area during school breaks and holidays. This allows the family to access schooling, maintain their connection and support with their



rural community and 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, further impacting the sustainability of these communities.

ICPA (Aust) is seeking that the Second Home Allowance be paid at the same rate as the Basic Boarding Allowance to alleviate the rising costs of living.

Boarding school is not a suitable environment for every student, resulting in some families establishing a second home to access compulsory schooling for their children. Living costs continue to rise, and incomes for geographically isolated families are comparatively low, with some farming families facing years of negative income as a result of drought. Currently, the AIC Second Home Allowance is paid at a substantially lesser rate than the AIC Boarding Allowances. For the 2023 year, the difference between the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance and the AIC Second Home Allowance is \$2280.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the AIC Second Home Allowance be paid at the same rate as the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance.

ICPA (Aust) has concerns about the scope of assistance for families educating rural and remote children. We would certainly not like to see any of the current eligibility criteria for the AIC removed or diminished; however, we would like to see the allowance criteria expanded to allow more disadvantaged rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance.

Due to the nature of the educational facilities in remote towns, students face limited subject choices and reduced educational opportunities. Rural and remote students who are accepted into specialised programs not offered at their local school who need to board away from home to access these programs should be eligible to receive AIC. Furthermore, a remoteness index applied to facilitate AIC eligibility would address the educational disadvantage some students face in rural and remote locations. An expansion of the criteria would:

- Address the inequities faced by families who live in or near rural and remote communities, where secondary schools are unable to meet the educational needs of individual students, by allowing them to access the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance or the Second Home Allowance.
- Consider socio-economic factors, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of a school and schools in or near those remote and very remote communities identified as severely educationally disadvantaged, in the "Educate Australia Fair", Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre Study.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Expansion of the AIC Scheme Criteria, including the Limited Program Schools Criteria, to allow more rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance.

### **Separate Category for Geographically Isolated Students under AIC**

While ICPA (Aust) does not begrudge any student receiving the AIC if they fulfil the existing criteria, geographically isolated students' educational needs and costs are very different to other categories of students who are not geographically isolated. It is imperative that geographically isolated students are able to be identified as a separate category to ensure their unique needs can be recognised and treated with autonomy.



### Online AIC Application/Renewal Process

A prompt, efficient, streamlined process of application and renewal through the migration to an online application and renewal platform and an improved customer service/helpline are essential to ensure the AIC application and renewal processes are efficient, flexible and unproblematic for eligible families.

Currently, when applying for the AIC Allowance, forms need to be downloaded from the Services Australia website or collected from the nearest service centre. Applications then must be submitted by manually uploading to Centrelink, post, fax or delivered in person which impacts the processing of the application considerably. Renewal forms are still physically mailed to recipients and then need to be manually uploaded, posted, faxed or delivered in person. Major errors with the distribution of AIC correspondence due to these manual processes have occurred in recent years resulting in ICPA (Aust) needing to correspond directly with personnel in the Services Australia to resolve these issues on behalf of its members. ICPA (Aust) requests the Services Australia implement an automatic online and phone option for applications and renewals for the AIC Allowance as an adjunct to the current paper-based, manual system.

### Review of AIC Scheme

The gap between the AIC Allowance and the actual cost of educating geographically isolated children continues to widen. Since its inception in 1973, formal reviews of AIC have been infrequent and ICPA (Aust) understand there has not been a formal review of the Scheme in over 30 years. While ICPA (Aust) would certainly not like to see any of the current eligibility criteria for the AIC removed or diminished in any review, a Review of the AIC Scheme is urgently needed and timely to ensure the scheme continues to adequately meet the needs of those it is designed to assist, namely geographically isolated students.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The expansion of AIC Criteria to allow more rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance.
- A separate Category for Geographically Isolated Students under AIC.
- Improvements to AIC Application/Renewal Process.
- A review of the AIC Scheme be conducted to ensure the allowance is meeting the needs of the geographically isolated students it was established to help.

### ISSUE 2 - School Funding Model/s and Impacts on Regional Boarding Schools

ICPA (Aust) represents many families whose children, due to geographical isolation, must attend Regional Independent Boarding Schools to access their compulsory secondary education. Safeguards are needed to ensure educational equity is not reduced for rural and remote students so that these students are still able to access appropriate schooling when any funding methodology is implemented. It is crucial that the Direct Measure of Income school funding methodology does not inadvertently diminish school viability or educational choice for geographically isolated students.

ICPA (Aust) believes the boarding operations in schools must be taken into consideration in conjunction with in-school costs in any funding model to ensure that for those rural and remote students who rely on these boarding schools, it can remain affordable and accessible.

Further to this, provision needs to be made to ensure due consideration is given to the fluctuating incomes and





possible inflated and inaccurate income data that the Capacity to Contribute (CTC) arrangements in the new school finding model may generate in relation to families involved in primary production. This could result in funding shortfalls for rural, regional and remote (RRR) schools not being identified and therefore not being adequately addressed in the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings.

Many rural and remote families are involved in primary production industries such as agriculture. The use of taxable income to determine their CTC is an inaccurate measure for a number of reasons. Income and operating expenses within the agricultural industry are highly variable and fluctuate from year to year depending on factors such as the season and commodity prices. Many agricultural operations are private enterprises, often asset rich and cash poor and disposable income is low.

Furthermore, the income of families involved in primary production is almost completely dependent on the weather, commodity prices, bushfires, drought, floods and other rural hardships which are entirely uncontrollable and unpredictable in nature. Often with family-owned agricultural businesses and other rural businesses in small towns, the “income” is actually the business earnings and any profit is reinvested back into the business rather than personal income to be used by a family for other needs. Rural and remote families are in an unusual position in that their children need to source an education, which comes at a considerable cost but they have very little disposable income even in productive years. ICPA (Aust) is extremely concerned that any reduction in Independent RRR School funding as a result of CTC arrangements within the new funding model will compromise the ability of schools to provide adequate resourcing such as technology requirements, specialist services and teacher professional development. The inevitable consequence will be that schools will have no other choice but to increase fees. Reduced enrolments as a result of rising school fees will inevitably make many of these schools unviable, further limiting educational choices for rural and remote students.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That recurrent funding for schools be extended to include the provision of boarding to ensure the continued viability of independent regional boarding schools and the accessibility and affordability of these schools for geographically isolated students.
- That the Capacity to Contribute methodology recognises the financial circumstances of geographically isolated families when applied to Independent RRR Schools and independent regional boarding schools which cater for geographically isolated students who board at the school.
- An immediate increase of the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance of at least \$4000 per geographically isolated recipient to address the rising expenses for families along with incremental annual increases to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance of \$500 per recipient to recognise the expected increase in boarding school fees incurred by their families to ensure affordable access to a compulsory education for their children.

### **ISSUE 3 - Resources for Mental Health Programs in Boarding Schools**

Provision of resources for mental health programs in boarding schools is vital. For geographically isolated students who have limited choice other than to attend boarding school to access their compulsory education, this can be a challenging experience. For many, leaving home from as young as 11 years of age to attend boarding school will be the biggest change they will make in their lifetime. It is vital that robust, consistent support mechanisms and coping tools are in place as these children grow into young adults without the comfort of family on hand to help them through these tough times.

Our members see first-hand the impact that a lack of support while attending boarding school has on their children. In the most recent *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)* report, suicide was the leading cause of death





among people aged 15–24 (35%). Alarming male youth suicide in regional, rural and remote areas as a whole is estimated to occur at almost twice the rate as in metropolitan areas. This is an epidemic that needs to be addressed urgently and ICPA (Aust) firmly believes that the appropriate support and intervention during a child's schooling years would be beneficial.

Provision of resources for mental health programs in boarding schools, to help children navigate through times of hardship, such as students from drought affected areas along with COVID-19 related boarding house and travel restrictions is urgently needed.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The provision of mental health resources to boarding schools and boarding institutions to better support this cohort of vulnerable students.

## **ISSUE 4 - Exemption From Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) for Employers Assisting with Educational Costs for Geographically Isolated Employees**

Currently in an effort to attract and retain staff in rural and remote locations, some employers offer their staff a financial contribution towards boarding school expenses of their children. This financial assistance is valuable in supporting families employed in remote areas of Australia as many are unable to afford the exorbitant expenses incurred when sending their children to board to access their secondary schooling. Without this assistance from employers, many employees have no choice but to leave their homes and place of employment to access their child's education in a larger centre, simply because they cannot afford the costs of boarding school. This leaves employers with a hard to fill gap in the remote workplace.

However, as these payments incur a fringe benefits tax which negatively impacts the employer and the intent of the contribution, employers are penalised for assisting their employees with these expenses. This is a deterrent for any business thinking of offering assistance to their employees.

Further, as employees are required to report payment of educational expenses as a fringe benefit, this can impact upon their taxation rate as well as their ability to access other income-tested educational assistance such as the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance or Youth Allowance. This can also occur if the employer chooses to pay a higher wage/salary to the employee rather than incur the FBT on education assistance.

The removal of FBT on contributions to employees' children's education expenses would allow more employers to offer financial assistance to their employees, increasing the recruitment and retention of valuable families and workforce growth in rural and remote locations.

In recognition of conditions in rural and remote locations, the Australian Tax Office already offers certain FBT concessions and benefits. For example the lack of sufficient residential accommodation in remote locations attracts concessions for employers to provide housing for their employees and also through the Commonwealth Living Away From Home Allowance (LAFHA) provides concessional treatment in relation to FBT.

In many rural and remote locations, there is also insufficient access to suitable compulsory education facilities and therefore boarding school is the only option available. ICPA (Aust) therefore believes similar concessions should be made for employers in geographically isolated locations to assist employees with the costs associated with their children's compulsory education and to support workforce attraction and retention in these challenging and isolated locations of Australia.



### **RECOMMENDATION**

The removal of Fringe Benefits Tax on employer contributions to employees' children's education expenses in a geographically isolated context.

## **ISSUE 5 - Additional Resources and Funding for Boarding Schools to support Students with Disability**

Boarding facilities need to be equipped with adequate resources to cater for boarding students with specific education needs. Further funding needs to be available to ensure students in residential boarding facilities needs can be met, and reasonable adjustments and accommodations can be implemented in accordance with The Disability Standards for Education 2005. The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) provides all Australian schools, education authorities and the community with a clear picture of the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they require to enable them to partake in education on the same basis as other students.

When a student with a funded disability (e.g., Autism) is enrolled at a school, the school is eligible to apply for schools plus funding or special education funding from individual state-based Departments of Education and federally through the Individual Disability Allocation (IDA) and Nationally Consistent Collection of Data for Students with a Disability (NCCD), via their individual system dependant on what type of school they are classified as, with the amount of funding allocated per student is in accordance with their diagnosis and needs. This funding is then dispersed at the schools' discretion for the purpose of education. However a boarding student (24 hours per day, 7 days per week in a school term) receives the same level of funding as a day student. For geographically isolated families, residential boarding is an important continuation of our children's education and there is currently no access to funding for a student with a disability in a residential boarding facility, to assist with the increased duty of care, responsibility, and accountability required to meet the needs of a geographically isolated student with a disability accessing a boarding facility.

When the significant role of boarding schools is taken into consideration, it is reasonable to expect that adequate funding and resources are provided to facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

- That funding is provided for students with a disability in residential boarding facilities, so that their needs can be met, and reasonable adjustments and accommodations can be implemented in accordance with The Disability Standards for Education 2005.
- The provision of additional resources to facilities, including boarding schools, where student requirements have been clearly identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) database.



## Communications Portfolio

ICPA (Aust) has nearly fifty years' experience advocating for educational issues on behalf of families living in rural and remote Australia. Our organisation is well positioned to contribute to the discussion on rural communications from a user's point of view. The majority of families ICPA (Aust) represents fall into the category of the approximate seven per cent of premises in Australia that will be serviced by either fixed wireless or satellite internet connections.

Families living in rural and remote locations frequently use their homes as the base for their businesses with the home often doubling as the classroom for distance education students as well. For our members, access to adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services is vital for the delivery of education, accessing government services and for enabling enterprises to conduct their business.

ICPA (Aust) has strong and clear views on the communication requirements for the non-urban population, which have come about due to the inequities experienced over the last decade or so in comparison to available metropolitan services.

### SUMMARY

1. **Adequate internet connectivity needs to be provided, maintained, improved and expanded for all students educated in regional, rural and remote locations, whether by distance education, in a small rural school or at a tertiary level.**
  - Internet services for regional, rural and remote students continue to be enhanced, improved and expanded such as the recent development of Sky Muster Plus. Due to the nature of education in geographically isolated locations, rural and remote student's need for connectivity is great and their education is often reliant on these services.
  - Data allowances in rural and remote locations should meet the needs of all aspects of education, including special needs (e.g. speech therapy), music and other extra-curricular services which are more easily accessed by urban student counterparts.
  - The continued unmetering of educational and health sites that need to be accessed for educational purposes and required by the curriculum.
  - The provision of an affordable and reliable transportable satellite internet (Sky Muster or similar) service solution for geographically isolated distance education students who do not have a permanent address or location.
2. **Telephony Services need to be provided and maintained in regional, rural and remote areas.**
  - Continued provision and maintenance of landlines in rural and remote areas is essential, especially where mobile coverage is not available and until such time as viable alternatives are made available to all areas.
  - Areas containing a rural school be prioritised in expansion of Mobile Black Spot Program coinciding with continued support and funding of the Mobile Black Spot Program.
  - Universal Service Obligation and Universal Service Guarantee conditions should be met, penalties enforced and include data and voice services.
3. **Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available.**
4. **It is essential that families living in rural, regional and remote Australia have access to communications services commensurate to their needs and comparable to those provided in urban areas.**



- Rural and remote families must have access to two sources of communications (i.e. voice and data must be separate services).
- Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available.
- The Regional Tech Hub needs to be maintained and supported to assist rural and remote families with the communications issues, questions and services.

5. The Distance Education school materials for geographically isolated students need to be classified as essential mail to ensure their delivery is prioritised during mail disruptions, such as natural disasters.

## ISSUE 1 - Adequate Internet Connectivity for all Students Educated in Regional, Rural and Remote Locations

ICPA (Aust) is aware that delivering services to the rural and remote population similar to what is available in metropolitan areas, is far more expensive and time consuming to deploy. Therefore, it is essential that the capacity of the nbn Sky Muster and Sky Muster Plus services are sufficient for both current and future demand. The roll out of nbn Sky Muster services have been welcomed but not without problems. Service provider call centres and volunteer groups have been overwhelmed at times with requests for assistance with problems that they often have no control over. A dedicated rural and remote communications information hub with trained staff that understand rural and remote needs will assist immensely with these issues. The establishment of the Regional Tech Hub in December 2020 was widely welcomed and this service should be maintained and well supported. Other forms of assistance such as nbn Local and the Telstra Regional Advisory Network, have also been a step in the right direction, however these services can be difficult to access for the average customer without an organisation or contact relaying the information. Volunteer groups such as Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia (BIRRR) have provided a tremendous advisory and support service, however, they cannot continue to deal with the number of cases they are presented with, nor should they be required to.

ICPA (Aust) supports nbn Sky Muster initiatives to assist with education needs (i.e. the Sky Muster Education Service, Sky Muster Plus and Sky Muster Plus Premium). The Education Service or 'Ed Ports' have and continue to provide dedicated services for some geographically isolated distance education students and members have requested that these services be made available to other students. However, ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that for connections that are required for education purposes, a Sky Muster Plus service is a comparable solution for students unable to access the Education Service such as tertiary, boarding or small rural school students, as, with Sky Muster Plus the unmetered content provides greater download capabilities at a better price point than the Education Port. Information about Sky Muster Plus and what it offers should be more widely promoted to help rural and remote families decide if it may be a better option for their students. For rural and remote students who require internet access for education, their service must remain affordable and accessible, therefore ICPA (Aust) supports the continuation of subsidised Sky Muster installs to ensure geographically isolated students are able to access an internet service. Where a family is eligible for a Sky Muster service, they are automatically also eligible for a Sky Muster Plus plan, however these Plans are not available with all Retail Service Providers (RSPs).

ICPA (Aust) also seeks the provision of an affordable and reliable transportable Sky Muster service solution for families who do not have a permanent address or location for distance education schooling, i.e. in stock camps, fencing camps, droving, etc. Some geographically isolated distance education students face further isolation as they are unable to participate in online lessons due to unavailability of Sky Muster when a family does not have a permanent address or dwelling to affix it to. With distance education now largely delivered in an online platform, access to the curriculum and resources, along with maintaining contact with teachers and peers, is essential for distance education students so that they can keep abreast of lessons and have consistency in their lessons. The students impacted are few, however these are students whose educational opportunities are already impeded by being some of the most isolated students in Australia and to be further disadvantaged from accessing their



schooling due to the inaccessibility of internet exacerbates this. A transportable means of delivering internet is needed for these types of families to ensure that their students can join in online lessons, interact with classmates, and keep up with schoolwork. The emerging Low Earth Orbit satellite (LEOsat) technology is providing transient families with alternative choices for internet connectivity however, unlike the Sky Muster hardware costs, currently there are no subsidies to assist families with costs associated with the use of LEOsat technology.

In addition, ICPA (Aust) encourages all governments and service providers, to investigate the utilisation of existing communications infrastructure and resources, (particularly in rural and remote areas) to provide alternatives to satellite internet delivery. This would allow more customers to access fixed wireless internet services and other alternative, viable internet solutions in rural and remote areas and reduce the number of people dependent on satellite internet, further reducing the risk of future satellite congestion.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- That adequate internet connectivity needs to be provided, maintained, improved and expanded for all students educated in regional, rural and remote locations, whether by distance education, in a small rural school or at a tertiary level.
- That an affordable and reliable transportable Sky Muster or alternative satellite technology service solution is made available for geographically isolated distance education students who do not have a permanent address or location.
- That resourcing and installation of Sky Muster satellite internet continues to be subsidised to ensure that rural and remote families who may have no other option for internet available to them can access a service.

## ISSUE 2 - Telephony Services in Regional, Rural and Remote Areas

Efforts should continue to increase the **mobile phone service coverage** in rural and remote areas to fill the void of telephony services. ICPA (Aust) requests that all mobile black spot areas containing a rural school be considered as a priority under future Mobile Black Spot Program rounds or similar future funding programs.

The Productivity Commission's Report on the Universal Service Obligation caused great concern among ICPA members that landlines, which geographically isolated families depend on for voice services, will cease to exist and Sky Muster customers moved to VoIP services as their only means of telephony. ICPA (Aust) reiterates that families living outside of city centres, due to the nature of where they live, require two separate forms of communications (i.e. phone/voice and internet/data as separate services and not relying on the same mode of delivery) so that if one fails, the other is still available. VoIP through Sky Muster at present is far from a reliable service and even nbn itself recommends that customers "Consider keeping your copper service active in nbn™ Fixed Wireless and Sky Muster™ satellite areas if you rely on landline phone services in emergency situations". Satellite services can be affected by weather events and power outages.

Continued provision and maintenance of adequate and reliable telephony services in regional, rural and remote areas is critical. As geographically isolated students rely so heavily on landline telephone services for their schooling, it is essential that these services are available to them and in good working order. In past years, delays in having a landline established in distance education schoolrooms was very problematic for some families. Until such time as viable alternatives are made available in these areas, landlines need to be maintained and upgraded as required. ICPA (Aust) and our members have welcomed the assurance from the Commonwealth Government that landlines in rural and remote areas will remain in service until such time as another form of voice service that meets the needs of those living in geographic isolation is widely available.



### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the USG remain on landline telephony services for those living outside of mobile coverage areas and that these landline services continue to be maintained and upgraded as necessary until such time as a dependable, affordable and reliable alternative is available.

### **ISSUE 3 - Prioritisation of Fault Reporting and Repairs (Internet and Phone) for Rural and Remote Students**

It is critical that telephone service repair times are kept to a minimum to ensure students' learning can continue. ICPA (Aust) requests a priority installation and repair service be in place for families educating their children via distance education due to geographic isolation. Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available. ICPA (Aust) eagerly awaited the announcement of an independent Regional Tech Hub. With the Regional Tech Hub commencing in December 2020, ICPA (Aust) recommends that the hub receives on going funding and support, including meeting clearly established goals and targets, to ensure regional Australians can get connected to services that meet their needs, learn how to stay connected and use their connections. The Hub should assist with the landline and data needs of rural and remote users. NBN LOCAL and The Telstra Regional Advisory Network are great incentives and should be operating at a level that can ease some of the pressure raised by groups such as the Regional Tech Hub, Better Internet for Rural Regional and Remote Australia and the Isolated Children's Parents' Association.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That phone or internet services required for rural and remote students to undertake their education experiencing outages and faults be attended to as a matter of urgency.
- Ongoing funding and support for the Regional Tech Hub to ensure regional Australians can get connected, stay connected to services that meet their needs.

### **ISSUE 4 – Two Sources of Communication for Families Living in Rural, Regional and Remote Australia (i.e. Voice and Data)**

The need for two services is imperative in rural, regional and remote locations due to the vast distances and isolation our members face. A further barrier to digital technology use in regional, rural and remote areas is the concern that in order to access these services, the equipment required needs electricity to work. Both mobile and internet services require power (especially if using fixed Smart Antennae or Cel-Fi equipment) and if there is a power outage, which are frequent in rural and remote areas, the service cannot be relied upon and many properties that are on self-generated power do not run their generators 24 hours a day. Families in the bush need communication services from different sources as when a service is not working, it can be a long distance to assistance. ICPA (Aust) advocates for rural and remote families to have a minimum of two communications services (voice and data) that are independent of each other. When communications services are down, it affects education and business for these families as well as being a safety issue.

A whole of government solution is needed to ensure that adequate, reliable and affordable communication services are available to those living in regional, rural and remote areas. This goes to the very heart of keeping our rural communities and schools alive. Connectivity is the silver bullet which will serve to provide the type of essential services such as education in rural and remote locations which families expect and deserve. It is essential that services are reliable and consistent as well as adequate in terms of speed, quality, capability and cost to ensure



telecommunication services and digital technology in regional, rural and remote areas are comparable with those in urban areas. Connectivity needs to be a priority for State, Territory and Federal Governments so that we can ensure the gap between urban and rural communities, and especially the education of students in these communities, does not continue to widen.

**RECOMMENDATION**

That families living in rural, regional and remote Australia have two independent sources of communications available to them.

**ISSUE 5 - Postage of Distance Education School Materials**

When mail is disrupted due to natural disasters, such as a flood, distance education resources necessary for the continuation of lessons in the geographically isolated home schoolroom are delayed, often for months at a time. Distance Education materials should be classified as essential mail and as such prioritised by Australia Post to ensure education can continue with as little disruption as possible.

**RECOMMENDATION**

That Distance Education school materials for geographically isolated students be classified as essential mail.





## Curriculum Portfolio

ICPA (Aust) is committed to ensuring that the national curriculum considers the unique needs of rural and remote students and the contexts in which they are educated and reside.

### SUMMARY

1. All sectors of agriculture including food and fibre production be embedded in the Australian Curriculum.
2. Safe driving practices to be added to curriculum.
3. National Assessment Program – Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN) – considerations for rural and remote students.
4. Any changes to the content of the National Curriculum be accompanied by funding to the States and Territories, to enable the development of independent specialised learning course materials for distance education students.

### ISSUE 1 - Agriculture in the Australian Curriculum

ICPA (Aust) seeks to ensure that a broad range of subject matter specifically related to Primary Production be embedded in the Australian Curriculum and taught to all students in schools across Australia to create a better opportunity for understanding and awareness of the significance of agriculture in Australia, where food and fibre comes from and how it is produced. ICPA (Aust) seeks to ensure that subject matter, related to food and fibre production, are included when Agriculture is taught by teachers in their classes. It is becoming increasingly apparent that there are misconceptions and misunderstandings around agricultural production in Australia. Our members feel this is a direct result of the actual “where, why and how” of producing food and fibre being omitted from the Australian Curriculum in favour of topics such as sustainability and environment in relation to “agricultural science”.

Agriculture and in particular, food and fibre production, is a critical part of the Australian economy and social framework, contributing more than \$60 billion to the Australian economy in 2017 and employing more than 1.6 million people across the supply chain, as well as producing almost 93% of Australia’s daily domestic food supply <https://www.nff.org.au/farm-facts.html>. ICPA members feel it is essential that Australians are aware of the significance of agriculture in Australia, where their food and fibre comes from and how it is produced. The inclusion of specific food and fibre production components would be both a positive and valuable addition to the Australian Curriculum, broadening and enhancing the learning experiences of students and fostering positive understandings of agriculture in Australia.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

That Agricultural Production studies are embedded in the Australian Curriculum and taught to all students in schools across Australia to create a better understanding of how Australian food and fibre is produced.

### ISSUE 2 - Safe Driving Practices

ICPA members have requested that topics on safe driving practices be embedded in the secondary curriculum, including:



- defensive driving practices
- safe driving practices
- basic first aid
- basic car maintenance
- obtaining a Learners' Permit.

While lessons in these topics or driving instruction may be available in some towns and metropolitan areas, rural and remote families struggle to access these types of services, leaving instruction up to families to do the best they can to source information and provide learning techniques. By including Safe Driving Practices in the National Curriculum, students would be assured of receiving consistent information and guidance in this very critical skill no matter where they live or the ability of their family to provide instruction.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the secondary Australian Curriculum include topics essential to safe driving practices.

### **ISSUE 3 - National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)**

There are critical issues associated with the delivery and implementation of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing for rural and remote students. With a move to wholly online testing, consideration needs to be given to geographically isolated children who may have a lack of internet access as well as inability to travel to a testing location due to the tyranny of distance. It is imperative that provisions are put in place to accommodate these students. It is also important that the inability to access NAPLAN testing and other external examinations e.g. ACER, ICAS, does not impede a students' eligibility to enrol at the boarding school of their choice.

Further, ICPA (Aust) requests that NAPLAN reporting timeframes should be reduced to enable schools to access students' results in a timely manner to identify the needs of the cohort and individual students and provide necessary support for the specific learning needs of rural and remote students. It is well documented that rural and remote students have unique educational needs and that there is a widening gap between metropolitan and rural and remote students in relation to results of NAPLAN testing.

It is difficult to effect change and improve student outcomes in the calendar year if there is a lengthy delay between assessment and access to results. If teachers and school administrators had access to NAPLAN results in at least term 2, there is a higher likelihood that supports could be made available to address areas of learning need, particularly for rural and remote children who are already educationally disadvantaged.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That unique circumstances of rural and remote students are taken into consideration in the implementation of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)
- That NAPLAN reporting timeframes are reduced to allow for better support of the specific educational needs of rural and remote students



## ISSUE 4 - Funding for Changes to the Content of the National Curriculum

Assurance that ongoing funding will be available to the States and Territories to support any national curriculum changes and enable the development of independent learning course materials for distance education and small rural and remote schools who must implement these changes.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

In order for any changes to the National Curriculum to be implemented effectively and efficiently in rural and remote schools and in distance education contexts, appropriate funding is made available for this to occur.



## Distance Education Portfolio

Distance education is a necessity for many geographically isolated students. For approximately 1000 families living in isolated locations of Australia, face-to-face mainstream schooling opportunities are unavailable due to their geographical location. Students therefore have no other choice but to access distance education. Geographically isolated distance education entails unique challenges and significant commitment for the families who access it to educate their children.

### SUMMARY

#### 1. Distance Education Teaching Allowance

- Recognition of the value and necessity of the distance education tutor in geographically isolated schoolrooms through a financial allowance.
- Families are required to provide and fund all costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) which limits their ability to assist with the family business or on the property where the family reside or participate in paid employment in order to fulfil this role.
- The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance assists with the expense of setting up a home classroom and ongoing costs associated with this method of education. Distance education is not possible without a tutor present in the home schoolroom.
- ICPA (Aust) is seeking the introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (*of at least \$6000 per family, per annum*), as remuneration for the essential work a distance education tutor performs.

#### 2. Schools of the Air/Schools of Distance Education

- It is critical that Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education who offer education to geographically isolated students, are based in rural and regional areas to best meet their students' needs.
- ICPA (Aust) includes geographically isolated non-government distance education students as well as geographically isolated government distance education students when addressing equity in education issues for rural and remote students.

#### 3. An increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) – Distance Education (DE) Allowance

#### 4. Appropriate Learning Resources for Distance Education Students

Learning materials for Distance Education students need to be readily accessible and available in a variety of formats, including print.

#### 5. Support for volunteer educator programs for geographically isolated students such as BushEd, Aussie Helpers Volunteers for Isolated Student's Education (AHVISE), and Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Children's Education (REVISE)

### ISSUE 1 - Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA)

Distance education for geographically isolated students who have no access to daily face-to-face schooling is founded on the assumption that a 'home or distance education tutor' is available to supervise the students in their home schoolroom. While most distance education services are well structured and distance education centres ably staffed, distance education provision and success require students to 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.

This is a significant barrier for geographically isolated families who must provide this tutor themselves. The distance education tutor 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 daily.

Tasks required of the distance education tutor include:

- setting up a classroom
- keeping students engaged in the curriculum
- providing duty of care supervision of the students
- 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 and marking schoolwork before it is returned.

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.

This role often falls on the mother, which means she is then unable to participate in other day to day work, either in the family business, on the property on which the family resides or elsewhere. In times of drought and other rural hardship, this can be exacerbated as the need for the family member, acting as the home tutor, cannot be assisting with the day-to-day running of the business as well as supervising their children's schoolwork. Some families may employ a tutor or governess however this comes at substantial cost and finding a governess/tutor often proves difficult in isolated areas.

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 1000 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate their children. The vital role of the distance education tutor should be remunerated through an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform.

While the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education (DE) Allowance assists distance education families with some of the incidental expenses incurred to educate their children when living in geographic isolation, this does not include covering the cost of someone to teach the children in the home schoolroom. According to the [AIC Guidelines](#), the intent of the AIC Distance Education Allowance since it was established has not been to cover costs for providing a tutor in the distance education home classroom.



**“5.4.1 Purpose**

*The Distance Education Allowance contributes towards incidental costs incurred by geographically isolated families whose student children are undertaking their education by distance education methods. This payment is not intended to meet the ongoing cost of provision of education (e.g. costs associated with teaching, tuition and supervision).”*

Specific support and remuneration for these families which recognises and acknowledges the vital role the distance education tutor plays in geographically isolated distance education is needed assist these families who are required to provide a tutor for their students. Provision must be given to the encumbrance on approximately 1000 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate children in the form of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) for all families eligible for and in addition to the geographically isolated category of the AIC – Distance Education Allowance.

ICPA (Aust) envisages:

- eligibility for a DETA would be linked to receipt of the federally funded AIC -Distance Education Allowance and therefore determined by the same geographical isolation criteria
- a DETA would be paid annually per family (approx. 1000 nationally) at a rate of \$6000.00 and indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

The calculations below highlight the average financial loss and implications of a mother undertaking the distance education tutor role.

<b>Family member as geographically isolated distance education tutor</b>	
Average hours per day	6-8 hours per day, approx. 40 weeks per year
Average years spent as DE tutor for one child	8 years (Kindy/preschool plus primary school)
Average total hours spent tutoring one child	9600 –12,800 hours
Minimum Wage	\$23.23 per hour
Unpaid Work/Wages forgone (number of hours x Minimum wage)	\$223,008 - \$297,344
Superannuation @ 11% foregone	\$24,530 - \$32,707

**RECOMMENDATION**

That the Federal Government introduce a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) as remuneration the essential work distance education tutors perform in geographically isolated distance education schoolrooms.

**ISSUE 2 - Schools of the Air/Schools of Distance Education**

ICPA (Aust) strongly believes that Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education who offer education to geographically isolated students should remain based in rural and regional areas so they can best meet their students’ needs. ICPA (Aust) understands that decisions of this nature are principally State- based, however Federal Council wishes to raise awareness of this topic with all levels of government and the community to ensure Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education remain in rural and remote communities and that the resources and support provided for geographically isolated students who have no choice but to be educated via these schools is maintained.



The value and importance of these schools to rural and remote students, families and their communities needs to be understood and appreciated. The tyranny of distance means that geographically isolated distance education students have limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction with their teachers and peers, learning, participation in a regular classroom, assessments, identification of any specific learning needs and other activities. Moving Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education to a centralised urban environment would further limit these opportunities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education which cater for geographically isolated students should remain in regional and rural locations to best serve the needs of these students.

### **ISSUE 3 - Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) - Distance Education (DE) Allowance**

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, incurring considerable travel and accommodation expenses. The AIC Distance Education Allowance assists distance education families with some of these necessary expenses to educate their children when living in geographic isolation. Increasing the existing allowance would assist families with the rising costs of educating children in isolated areas.

With the changing nature of distance education schools, ICPA (Aust) also requests a separate category for geographically isolated students to be established within the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme using existing geographic isolation (GI) eligibility to recognise the unique needs of geographically isolated students and ensure that adequate and appropriate assistance continues to be provided to these students who do not have daily access to face-to-face appropriate schooling due to distance as per the original intent of the scheme. The needs of GI students, regarding remoteness, lack of services and related expenses, differ considerably to other categories, which are now included in the scheme. It is also essential that the allowance adequately assists with the out-of-pocket costs incurred by rural families when their children need to study via distance education. Geographically isolated distance education students are a unique disadvantage group due to where they live and financial assistance needs to be maintained and increased to assist with and better reflect the costs associated with educating these students, as per the original intent of the AIC Scheme in order to allow them to access and achieve equitable educational opportunities and outcomes.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- An increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) - Distance Education (DE) Allowance
- A separate category for geographically isolated distance education students be established within the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme to ensure that adequate support and assistance is maintained and increased for these students.

### **ISSUE 4 - Learning Resources For Distance Education Students**

ICPA (Aust) is aware that provision of learning materials and resources for distance education is the responsibility of State and Territory Governments, however, request the support of the Federal Government to ensure appropriate resources continue to be supplied to distance education students across Australia.





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 readily 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.

A variety of methods of learning should be provided in Schools of Distance Education and delivery methods for geographically isolated families need to remain flexible. For example, students who may have difficulties in accessing an online program for a variety of reasons, would find their study compromised if they had to access their learning materials solely online. Distance education students access their daily learning in a variety of ways, and most depend on a blend of learning materials determined by the school and communications infrastructure. Working, well-maintained landline phone services and internet access are vital for geographically isolated distance education students as these services provide necessary access to distance education programs.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Appropriate Learning Resources are available and accessible for Distance Education Students in order to ensure equitable educational access, opportunities, and outcomes for these students.

### **ISSUE 5 - Support for Volunteer Educator Programs**

From ICPA (Aust)'s research, 85% of the geographically isolated distance education tutors across Australia are the mothers of the children who must study via distance education. This person receives no assistance, support, respite nor remuneration for this role as they are required to supervise and assist their students on an ongoing, daily basis in the schoolroom.

The volunteer remote educational support for rural and remote students programs, such as Bush Ed, Aussie Helpers Volunteers for Isolated Student's Education (AHVISE) and Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Children's Education (REVISE) aims to support the education of rural students and in particular isolated families involved in distance education. REVISE connects retired teachers with distance education families and coordinates visit by the tutors to these families for periods of approximately 6 weeks during the school year.

These tutors assist distance education families by taking over the role of home tutor the during their stay and provide students with learning guided by a retired teacher and in turn provide respite from the classroom for home tutor mothers/family members. These services are invaluable for the isolated families and ICPA (Aust) is dedicated to ensuring this service, which provides much needed help remains available for families.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Ensure continued support and funding for volunteer remote educational support services across Australia.



## Early Childhood Education and Care Portfolio

Accessing affordable early childhood education 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:

- lack of available services
- difficulty attracting and retaining staff
- inflexibility of service delivery programs
- high out-of-pocket costs
- uncertainty and inadequacy of funding for Mobile Early Childhood Services.

### SUMMARY

Rural and remote early childhood education and care issues fall into three broad categories.

#### 1. Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The Commonwealth Government is committed to Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025.

- Affordability of and access to an early childhood education continues to impede the participation of some rural and remote children.
- The extension of Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education (DE) Allowance to include three and four-year-olds enrolled in an approved pre-compulsory early childhood education program would improve access and affordability.
- Flexibility in the use of school buildings and flexibility in the qualifications of staff would expand the number of accessible early childhood education programs.

#### 2. Mobile Early Learning

Mobile Early Learning Services can be the ONLY early childhood service accessible to some rural and remote families.

- Funding of rural and remote Mobile Early Learning decreased under funding restructures and continues to be uncertain.
- No provisions for the establishment of new mobile early learning services are evident.
- Some rural and remote families have NO access to an early childhood service.

#### 3. Child Care

A myriad of issues affects families educating and caring for their children in these areas. ICPA members continue to raise concerns about the inappropriateness of current delivery models for geographically isolated families and difficulties associated with accessing early childhood education and care in rural and remote areas.

- The Commonwealth Government's In Home Care (IHC) program is part of the child care package and could provide flexible care that supports families' workforce participation and child care requirements where other options are not available or appropriate.
  - IHC can be the ONLY child care option for many rural and remote families.
  - IHC program guidelines are inflexible and consistently disadvantage rural and remote families. Distance education school rooms require a supervisor. IHC guidelines specifically preclude receipt of the Child Care Subsidy for supervision of distance education.
  - Workforce participation of rural and remote families with children on distance education is not supported by the IHC program.



- Changes to criteria of Working Holiday Maker and Temporary Work (Skilled) Visas could help alleviate workforce shortages.
- A National Working with Children Check would improve the ease of transitioning child care and education staff between States/Territories.

## ISSUE 1 - Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The Federal Government is committed to the Preschool Reform Agreement 2022 – 2025 and recognises that early learning is vitally important however, accessibility and affordability is a barrier for some geographically isolated families for whom distance education is the only option. ICPA (Aust) seeks continuation of the Preschool Reform Agreement funding of \$1.6 billion over four years from 2021–22 to be delivered to the states and territories through a new four-year funding agreement, with ongoing funding of \$589.0 million per year (indexed) from 2025–26.

A myriad of issues affects families educating and caring for their children in these areas. ICPA members continue to raise concerns about the inappropriateness of current delivery models for geographically isolated families and difficulties associated with accessing child care and education in rural and remote areas. Specialised model/s need to be established for rural and remote families; programs designed to address the unique disadvantages and needs associated with caring for and educating children in geographically isolated locations.

### RECOMMENDATION

The establishment of a stand-alone 'Rural and Remote Early Childhood Section/Branch within the Department of Education, encompassing all early childhood education and care such as preschools and kindergartens, mobile early learning services, Long Day Care and In Home Care to provide for the unique needs of rural and remote families.

**The extension of Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to include three and four-year-olds enrolled in an approved pre-compulsory early childhood education program would improve access and affordability.**

Three to four-year-old students enrolled in an approved pre-compulsory distance education program need to be supported while participating in their essential transition to formal schooling programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance should be extended to include these children as no other financial assistance is available for this cohort.

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 (Aust) remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions.

ICPA (Aust) 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, around 200 children access recognised 3-4-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 three to 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 approved 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 3-4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Extension of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to include 3-4 year-olds undertaking an approved pre-compulsory distance education program.

#### **More facilities for preschool education in rural and remote communities.**

The flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural towns to include preschoolers, more preschool distance education places and more facilitators are required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. Facilitators should include qualified primary school teachers and diploma qualified educators where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access. Students commencing formal schooling need to be school-ready, especially as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects in the form of Early Learning STEM Australia (ELSA) have also been introduced to the preschool curriculum. Rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very beginning if preschool has not been experienced in their early years.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Dispensations be made to improve access to preschool facilitators and school facilities in rural and remote areas.

### **ISSUE 2 - 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, mobile early learning services and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and interactions with 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 certainty of funding for these services is vital in providing the much needed



socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. Adequate funding needs to continue for mobile early learning services and early education programs for rural and remote children as well as funds and support for the creation of new services in geographically isolated areas where early childhood services do not exist. The following issues need to be addressed:

- Mobile early learning services no longer funded under Budget Based Funding (BBF) were transitioned to Indigenous Advancement Strategy funding or to new Child Care system funding. Neither model sufficiently caters for the unique services provided by mobile early learning services to rural and remote families, especially those services which do not include child care.
- No provision appears to be available for the establishment of new mobile early learning services.
- Funding continues to be inadequate and uncertain.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Mobile early learning services in rural and remote areas, be supported with adequate and secure funding.

## **ISSUE 3 – Child Care**

### **In Home Care (IHC)**

Families living in rural and remote Australia, who are able to provide accommodation, previously found the IHC program to be an affordable option when it came to accessing child care. However presently In Home Care is not meeting the needs of families, with the following four main concerns continually raised by our members:

- That the IHC program needs to remain accessible for all rural and remote families who have no other child care options.
- IHC educators should be allowed to supervise distance education where face-to-face schooling is not available as teachers are not present to look after the children.
- The difficulty of finding suitably qualified 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.
- Fees charged by IHC providers are rising and changing often without explanation.
- ☐ The limitations of the IHC National Guidelines which require educators to be at least 18 years of age, despite either working towards a minimum Certificate III level qualification or already obtaining the qualification. This limits the opportunity for young workers to be gainfully employed following graduation.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That an In Home Care (IHC) program, or sub-program thereof, be established specifically for rural and remote families.
- That amendments be made to IHC Guidelines to cater for the needs of rural and remote families.
- That Child Care Subsidy decisions make specific dispensation or consideration of IHC circumstances.
- That a specific IHC program be established for rural and remote families who have to provide board and lodging for their educators to reduce families' gap payments for IHC.



- That a flexible approach be taken with respect to the required qualifications for rural and remote teachers/educators.
- That IHC educators be allowed to supervise distance education where face-to-face schooling is not available as teachers are not present to look after the children in distance education schoolrooms.
- A review of and structure provided around the fees charged to families and educators by IHC providers.
- The amendment of the IHC National Guidelines to allow graduates with a Certificate in Early Childhood Education, or equivalent, who are less than the age of 18 years to be eligible for positions of employment through the IHC program.

### Funding of remote and very remote early childhood services

Services providing Childcare Subsidy Model childcare are currently capped at the maximum amount of Community Child Care Funding (CCCF) Sustainability funding (\$200,000 pa) despite the operational gap they are able to demonstrate, which is often significantly larger than metropolitan services. Remote and very remote services have to meet significantly higher staffing and operational costs, such as providing housing for teachers and meeting the pay package parity gap necessary to attract and retain adequately qualified teachers. Early Childhood Services in remote and very remote locations need to be able to provide a service with teachers and staff at the same level as their city cousins. Rural and remote children often have significantly more vulnerabilities according to the AECD (Australian Early Childhood Development) Census Data, therefore require adequate funding of Early Childhood Services.

### RECOMMENDATION

Additional funding to support the viability of remote and very remote centre based early childhood education.

### Short term child care services

There are short term child care services available to some rural and remote families who cannot afford to them as they do not attract the Child Care Subsidy through Services Australia.

Case Study: In South Australia, the Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise (RICE) provide an Outback Childcare program that enables families to receive short-term child care in the family home when they are in need of child care during busy times or if they need respite or emergency care. Currently this program does not attract any Government support or funding, resulting in RICE having to rely on community donations or asking families to pay an unsubsidised, full rate hourly fee for the service. The Child Care Scheme (CCS) can only be received when a child is enrolled through a centre-based child care facility or through the In Home Care (IHC) program which is currently unavailable for RICE member families due to provider limitations within South Australia. The cost to access child care without the CCS is an unaffordable option, leaving families to try find other ways to manage child care needs. Families living in rural and remote areas have no real option of child care like community creches, nearby centres or family or friends who could step in. Living on a remote cattle station 1000km from Adelaide makes asking your mum, sister or best friend to step in and help for the day unpractical and often impossible. With the recent report that indicated the Federal Electorate of Grey (which encompasses 90% of South Australia, including all of its rural and remote areas) has the worst access to child care in the country, just finding a facility, let alone accessing it, is a difficult undertaking in itself. The Outback Childcare service needs to be made affordable for families as well as being viable for RICE to manage and administer.



If the criteria for eligibility for the CCS was to consider the needs of rural and remote families, therefore allowing them to access child care through the IHC program, then the RICE based Outback Childcare and similar services would become more affordable and accessible for families in times of need.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Consideration of the uniqueness of child care needs and child care services in rural and remote communities with regard to these families accessing the Child Care Subsidy.

#### **Family Day Care in Rural Australia**

Small rural and remote towns across Australia struggle with the lack of access to childcare. These towns are too small to attract a private provider who offers centre based long day care as the demand profile makes it unviable. ICPA (Aust) seeks a small inclusion to current legislation to enable more than one approved family day care educator to care for children in an approved family day care 'in-venue' location. This provides a cost-effective solution to the government to cover childcare demand in small disadvantaged rural communities where no appropriate childcare exists. This change could provide essential and effective support to address the additional early childhood education challenges faced by rural and remote communities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

An inclusion to the Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011 SI 653) - Regulation 124 (NSW Legislation) to enable two approved family day care educators to care for children in an approved family day care venue in disadvantaged rural and remote areas of Australia where there is an absence, or limited supply, of Centre Based Day Care or Family Day Care services.

#### **Working with Children Check**

The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each State or Territory is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would help resolve this and was recommended in the Royal Commission into Child Abuse Final Report<sup>3F</sup><sup>1</sup>.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

That a National Working with Children Check (WWCC) certification be established as a matter of priority to ensure early childhood carers, teachers, educators and those assisting with education particularly in rural and remote areas can transition across states/territories more smoothly.

#### **Working Holiday Maker Program: Working Holiday Maker Visas and the Shortage of Distance Education Tutors and Nannies in Rural and Remote Australia**

Due to geographical isolation, there is a distinct lack of Australian workers, including qualified child care and educational workers, who are willing to undertake work where remoteness is an issue. It is extremely difficult to attract and retain Australian child carers, home tutors (distance education tutors) and teachers to rural and remote areas. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travellers looking for a cultural exchange experience and our rural and remote members rely on the employment of overseas workers to fill these positions. While these workers are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas they are not eligible for a second- year visa if they undertake employment in the area of child care in rural and remote areas.

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final\\_report\\_recommendations.pdf](https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_recommendations.pdf)





Plant and animal cultivation, fishing and pearling, tree farming and felling, mining and construction are currently the specific fields of work that qualify an applicant for a second-year visa. Measures including extending the eligibility for a second-year visa to include child care and education provision under rural work are incentives for backpackers to holiday and work in rural and remote Australia.

The Second Year Working Holiday visas 4170F2 and 4621F3, are not available for distance education tutors/teachers or nannies from overseas in rural and remote areas, despite being rural work. However, with recent developments in regional areas of Australia, second-year visa applicants could be accepted there, on the 462 Working Holiday visa, if having worked for six months in agriculture, tourism or hospitality the previous year. Also, in regional areas of Australia, if working for six months for one employer on a Working Holiday Maker visa 417, permission can now be granted to stay another six months with that employer. If child care or distance education supervision were eligible as Specified Work, this would help provide workplaces for distance education tutors in other rural and remote areas if the same conditions apply as for other second-year visa seekers. In the distance education schoolroom, 12 months' support would be more beneficial than just six months to support the importance of continuity and consistency.

At times, overseas couples wish to work on a rural or remote property; both would enjoy the cultural experience and one partner is able to work with the livestock, orchards etc., however the other partner may wish for a less physical type of work. She is unable to work in the distance education schoolroom or assist with child care on the property to gain eligibility for a second-year visa as this is not on the 'Specified Work' list.

Making the second-year visa accessible to nannies and distance education tutors under agriculture would provide a better solution for rural families seeking to employ staff and a better experience for overseas workers who wish to remain with one employer.

### Volunteer Work Activities

The removal of eligibility of volunteer work activities in application for a Second Year Working Holiday visa as of 1 December 2015, compounded the issue of shortage of work support in rural and remote areas. Families find it harder to find willing workers to assist in running the farm and managing their children's distance education. Many visitors to Australia appreciate 'real life experiences' on farm and are willing to volunteer their time in return for meals and accommodation e.g. 'WWOOF' program (Willing Workers on Organic Farms). If volunteer hours were once again reinstated as eligible for a Second-Year Visa, rural Australia's employment pool would expand relieving pressure on its families.

### RECOMMENDATION

The reinstatement of volunteer hours as an eligible activity for a Second-Year Visa.

### Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa (subclass 457)

This visa was replaced with the new Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) (subclass 482) Visa in March 2018 which supports businesses in addressing genuine skill shortages, particularly in rural and remote areas. Visa applicants are now required to be sponsored by a business up to two or four years as per their specified skill. Skilled Early Childhood teachers, Primary and Middle School teachers, Private Tutors, Regional Education Managers and Child Care Centre managers are all on the approved occupation list.

There is a real shortage of people willing to fulfil Distance Education supervisor/tutoring roles. If qualified teachers were happy to work with Distance Education students in remote classrooms, it would be an excellent option, however more often it is a skilled worker such as a nanny or governess who is willing to accept Distant Education opportunities. It would be extremely beneficial if nannies and governesses could be added to the TSS Occupations List and private tutors and teachers could then be approved for distance education classrooms.

<sup>1</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-417/specified-work>

<sup>2</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-462/specified-462-work>



### **RECOMMENDATION**

That teachers, Distance Education tutors and nannies be added to the current 'Specified Work' list for Working Holiday Visas so they can assist with child care and education for rural and remote families.

#### **Staffing and employment incentives and pay package parity**

For many years Education Departments have been aware of the need to provide pay and incentives to attract and keep teaching staff in rural and remote locations. We now need the same attention paid to attracting and retaining staff in the Early Childhood sector. In very remote areas, access to housing or subsidised housing can mean the difference between having an operational centre or not. Rural and remote areas need assistance to attract educators because our children deserve a 'good start' too.

We are losing university trained early childhood educators to the school system where the pay and conditions far outweigh that of long day care centres, yet we know how important those early years are. These educators are with our children during their years of greatest development, yet we are not prepared to pay or reward them accordingly. Pay parity of Early Childhood Teachers is a significant issue. An Early Childhood Teacher completes a four year degree course. If they elect to work in the public school system in a rural and remote location, the additional benefits they would get compared to working as an Early Childhood Teacher would include:

- Additional 7 weeks of annual leave (approx. \$10,000pa)
- Significantly shorter contact hours per week
- Approx. \$20,000-\$30,000 additional salary
- Professional mentoring by other teachers
- Structured Professional Development programs (\$10,000 pa)
- Access to teacher housing (at a 70% discount on market rates in Bourke) (\$10,000 pa).

Early Childhood services are significantly limited in their budgets.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Incentives and structures which allow Early Childhood educators to work in rural and remote areas without disadvantage in comparison to their urban colleagues.
- That pay package parity of Early Childhood Teachers in rural and remote locations across all Early Childhood Education settings be addressed.



## Rural Schools Portfolio

Rural schools across Australia can be disadvantaged in a variety of ways by the unique circumstance of being located in isolated areas. Conditions in rural schools often impact the whole school community, including students, staff, parents/families. These impacts also extend into the wider community such as local businesses and support services. These disadvantages need to be considered and addressed in order to ensure equitable educational opportunities are provided and educational outcomes are achieved for the geographically isolated students access these schools.

Remote and isolated locations in Australia encounter great challenges in improving delivery of education options and pathways for children and their families. The options for educating children in these locations continue to diminish and can be attributed to many families leaving these areas.

While all Australian governments recognise the social and economic benefits of a high quality and equitable school education system, ICPA (Aust) continues to devote an enormous amount of time holding relevant governments to account to address inequities in rural schools.

### SUMMARY

1. Incentive programs for experienced teachers to take up long term teaching contracts in rural, remote and regional schools.
2. Implementation of the recommendation made by Professor Dr John Halsey in the 'Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report' to “reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning” (Halsey, 2018, p.37)”
3. Seek production of a booklet containing a comprehensive outline of all the information, associated with eligibility and entitlements for rural students for secondary and tertiary education, including apprenticeships and traineeships, to be provided to all rural high schools and final year primary students.

### ISSUE 1 - Experienced Teacher Placement Incentives in Rural and Remote Locations

Students from rural, regional, and remote areas are at times facing constant disruptions to their education in the form of teacher shortages. Teacher retention in rural areas can be problematic and even in those schools where teachers are committed long term, their ability to access vital professional development days, long service and even sick days is limited due to the lack of relief teachers and or support staff in these areas. It is not uncommon for small schools to have only two classroom teachers across all year levels and minimal funding for additional support staff such as Education Assistants or Library Technicians. Additionally, the mental health of teachers is becoming worrisome due to their burdensome workload.

States have varying incentives to encourage teachers to take up positions in rural schools however they are at times not well publicised or restricted to graduate teachers. ICPA (Aust) urge the Federal Government to implement an incentive program, including advertising campaigns, to encourage experienced teachers to move from an urban school to a rural school with a program similar to that run by the Rural Health Outreach Fund (RHOF).

The Current RHOF program support outreach initiatives that improves access to medical specialists, general practitioners (GP's) and other allied health providers in regional, rural, and remote areas of Australia. The RHOF has several goals, one of which is to financially support health professionals who provide outreach services. A similar program to the RHOF could be set up to assist the states in making education in rural areas more equitable for our rural and remote students. More information on the RHOF can be found [here](#).



### **RECOMMENDATION**

A Federal Government Funding incentive program for experienced teachers to take up long term teaching contracts in rural, remote and regional schools

## **ISSUE 2 - Independent Review Into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report Recommendations**

In small schools we have witnessed our teaching principals being bombarded with training and administration duties, taking them away from the classroom and the important task of teaching our students. Professor Doctor John Halsey noted that “in a small school in particular where principals have a large teaching load, there is little time left for focussing on leading learning. Scaling back of the administration workload needs to happen to create more time for leading learning to be done and done well.” (Halsey, 2018, p.35)

Small school students require stability and continuity of learning just like their larger school counterparts and though we do not doubt our small school teaching principals are doing their utmost to ensure this occurs the amount of time out of the classroom is noticeable and disruptive. Time out of the classroom includes but is not limited to professional development, training and also the challenges that only a small school principal experiences such as co-ordinating trades people conducting maintenance, technical difficulties with information and communication technologies, break downs in equipment such as water pumps and important phone calls that require immediate attention. All of these responsibilities that are usually shared by many in a large school are only shared by two in a one teacher school. Planning, teaching and assessing students is a fulltime job. How does one person realistically do all of that as well as the added workload of a teaching principal? Teaching should be the main focus and administration tasks should be minimal and easy to achieve.

ICPA (Aust) recognises this is largely a State-based issue, however we would like to see the Federal Government advocate for State/Territory Education Departments to implement this recommendation made in the ‘Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report’.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the recommendation made by Professor Dr John Halsey in the ‘Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report’ to “reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning” (Halsey, 2018, p.37) be implemented.

## **ISSUE 3 - Future Pathways Information for Rural High Schools and Final Year Primary Students**

Increased awareness of incentives, entitlements and eligibility criteria encourage and expedite uptake of further education and training. This leads to upskilling of individuals and enhanced capabilities of entire communities. We call on Government Departments to be more transparent with what rural students are entitled to. Many families cite financial constraints as the main barrier to higher education for youth from regional areas. A booklet provided to final year primary students and high school students in rural and regional areas containing all relevant information for future pathways would help these students and families immensely and encourage them to explore higher education or vocational training they might otherwise consider being out of their reach.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That a booklet containing all the information associated with eligibility and entitlements for rural students for secondary and tertiary education, including apprenticeships and traineeships, be provided to all rural high schools and final year primary students.



## School Travel Portfolio

Families in regional, rural and remote areas often have vast distances to travel to not only to access appropriate education and learning experiences, but also specialist assistance. Families also need to travel at times to support their students who can be attending schooling hundreds if not thousands of kilometres away. This may include long distance travel on rural and remote roads, public transportation such as buses, regional air travel, or a combination of travel types to go between their home and their school or tertiary institution in a larger centre in order to reach locations where they can access the most appropriate education for their needs.

### SUMMARY

1. The inclusion of a Fares Allowance in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme similar to that of ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance.
2. Airfares and other travel concessions and dispensations available for geographically isolated students
  - Student concessions for airfares and other nationwide travel need to be made available for necessary boarding school travel and specific education appointments not covered by Patient Assisted Travel Schemes or the State equivalent available for medical specialist appointments.
  - Geographically isolated students who receive the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance should be able to access corporate travel airfare program discounts, similar to recipients of other government allowances.
3. Implementation of a national funding program that would guarantee no young geographically isolated children are left on school or child care buses by installing sensor devices that sense sound and movement, to detect and alert drivers if young children have been left in the vehicle.
4. Improvements are required to federally funded regional and remote road networks to ensure safe all-weather access standards for families who require these road networks in order for their children to access educational opportunities and support. Currently there are roads that have deteriorated and are in appalling conditions and therefore not safe.

### ISSUE 1 – The inclusion of a Fares Allowance in the Assistance For Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme

Geographically isolated students who receive the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance and Second Home Allowance who must live away from home to attend school often have to travel vast distances to access their place of study. There are inequities in Commonwealth Student Travel Allowances. While the Federal Government has in place Fares Allowances to assist with student travel under the ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance Schemes, there is no provision for travel in the AIC Scheme which is the assistance a large number of geographically isolated children fall under. Having a Fares Allowance available under the AIC Scheme would ensure that all eligible geographically isolated students would have assistance available to them to help offset the cost of travelling to compulsory schooling.

#### RECOMMENDATION

That a Fares Allowance be added to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme.



## ISSUE 2 - Airfares and Other Travel Concessions for Geographically Isolated Students

Student concessions for airfares and other nationwide travel need to be made available for necessary boarding school travel and specific education appointments not covered by Patient Assisted Travel Schemes or the State equivalent available for medical specialist appointments.

The availability of Air Travel in regional areas allows families to cover the distance necessary to travel to get to schooling or specialist services (such as speech pathologists) much more quickly and directly, however this travel often comes at a huge cost. In addition, many families must drive significant distances just to get to a regional airport before they begin their journey by air.

Air travel also offers the chance to access learning experiences that are not available in the regions where many of these students live, e.g. school excursions and camps. People also travel into regional areas such as specialist coaches, music teachers, artists and many others to work with children who live outside of city centres at various times of the year. The cost of bringing in these people with specialised skills can be very difficult to meet for rural and regional schools and school communities.

ICPA (Aust) is not aware of any “Student Concession” fares available for air travel. Bus services and railways often offer student concession fares to make student travel less expensive, but not airlines. Airlines also tend to have higher airfares for school holiday times, which are the times that many students who live in rural and remote areas need to travel to and from their place of schooling to their home.

[Geographically isolated students who receive the Assistance for Isolated Children \(AIC\) Allowance should be able to access corporate travel airfare program discounts, similar to recipients of other government allowances.](#)

Travelling vast distances to attend boarding school for many geographically isolated students necessarily means air travel. The cost of travel to and from boarding school can be prohibitive, even when there is competition in service providers. In many regional airports, there are few choices and airfares are consistently expensive.

A group booking scheme, attached to a Centrelink CRN number, for AIC students may assist in levelling out price spikes when isolated students need to travel to access education. This could assist with reducing the cost of travel borne by the families of AIC Boarding students accessing education vast distances from their home.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- That Governments consider further subsidisation of rural/remote/regional routes that show a demonstrated need.
- That National student concessions be available for air travel required by geographically isolated students.
- That Fares Allowance to be included in the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme similar to that of ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance. Uniformity is needed across all three schemes.
- That Residents Fares Scheme, Bush to Boarding and other rural student travel schemes continue and be expanded.
- That airlines retain several seats at “normal” pricing for a certain block of dates leading up to School terms beginning and ending.
- That the Commonwealth Fares Allowances be more uniform across assistance programs.
- That airlines should be encouraged to work together for the benefit of customers in forming partnerships and make connecting to destinations more seamless.





- That programs such as the Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme (RASS) be supported, and expansion provided for.
- That compensation is made available for plane cancellations, unexpected delays causing missed connections, particularly for boarding students from rural and remote areas, which is very distressing for younger students travelling alone.
- That geographically isolated students who receive the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance be able to access a corporate travel airfare program discount.

### ISSUE 3 - Children Accidentally Being Left on Buses

Buses in rural and remote areas are often driven by the supervising teacher who must oversee all logistics of transporting and supervising the group of students. Buses with seatbelts have highbacked chairs which make it harder for the driver to see every child on the bus. Rural and remote Australia is often very hot, making the risk of being left a bus a dire one.

#### RECOMMENDATION

Implementation of a national funding program to install sensor devices that sense sound and movement, to detect and alert drivers if young children have been left in a vehicle.

### ISSUE 4 - Federally Funded Regional and Remote Road Networks

Some roads in rural and remote Australia are federally funded. Poor condition and deterioration of remote roads has become a major concern for remote residents that have no choice but to travel on roads that are clearly not safe and are indeed impassable for weeks at a time.

Roads are vital and play an integral part of the safe delivery of students to face-to-face functions, correspondence materials delivery and the safe passage of Distance Education Staff to students' home visits and for all Department of Education and Community Services staff visiting communities as well as health workers and child care services.

Families and teaching staff have no option other than travelling on roads with extremely undesirable driving conditions which not only affects a safe environment but is also having a detrimental effect on education, and the business operations which sustain the lives of those in the bush.

This has been a continual safety concern for many of our members who must travel on such roads to access educational events on roads that are often in disrepair. The importance of continually improving regional and remote road networks to a safe and all-weather access standard for the benefit of our members to be able to access education and attend related services cannot be underestimated.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improvements to federally funded regional and remote road networks to ensure safe all-weather access standards for families who require these road networks in order for their children to access educational opportunities and support.
- That the Federal Government urgently commits to a long-term maintenance strategy with adequate funding to bring national roads back to all weather and safe trafficable surface.





## Specific Education Needs Portfolio

Children with specific education needs require access to educational opportunities appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Living in a rural or remote location should not compromise their access to such opportunities. Distance limits the choice of schools available to students in rural and remote areas, but for students with specific learning needs, this choice can be further reduced. The challenges of having both geographic isolation and learning difficulties can be seen as a "double disability". All students have a right to participate in education on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful, and dignified learning programs, regardless of their geographical location.

ICPA (Aust) members have highlighted issues impacting access to equitable education for students with specific learning needs. These have been summarised below, together with recommendations for implementation that will improve educational opportunities and learning outcomes for these children. Please note the wording children and student are synonymous throughout.

### SUMMARY

- 1. Provision of Medicare rebate for telehealth services where this is not already accessible**  
There is a need to expand subsidised telehealth services to cater for students with disorders directly affecting their ability to succeed at learning. Accessing Allied Health professionals and medical specialists via telehealth would provide another level of support to rural and remote children with specific learning needs.
- 2. Provision of travel and accommodation assistance for travel to face-to-face specialist services**  
Availability of travel and accommodation assistance for rural and remote families travelling to access face-to-face specialist medical services for students with specific learning needs is imperative to increase the accessibility of services and improve health literacy outcomes for children in rural areas.
- 3. Improved staff training for teachers in rural and remote locations**  
Teachers and support staff and distance education tutors in geographically isolated locations must have access to professional development which ensures children with specific education needs are adequately supported through their school years.
- 4. Workshops for rural and remote parents of gifted students**  
Parents of gifted children require improved access to appropriate workshops and support which enables them to effectively assist their children's personal and educational needs.
- 5. Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties**  
All rural and remote students must receive early and comprehensive screening for disorders which will affect their ability to participate fully in the school environment. Early screening can ensure children's educational needs are appropriately catered for throughout their schooling years.
- 6. Provision of additional resources in boarding schools for students with disability**  
It is imperative that additional resources are provided to boarding facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) database.



7. **Access for all Australians to federally funded health clinics**  
All families in remote Australia should qualify to access local, public health clinics to ensure they can receive timely treatment or assessments without having to travel unacceptable distances past such clinics.
8. **Incentives to attract qualified health graduates to live and work rural and remote areas**  
Rural and remote areas are struggling for health workers – Doctors, Nurses, Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists etc., all which are necessary for children who need these services in rural and remote areas.
9. **Rebates from Private Health Insurance companies for all Allied Health Services for children that are necessary for the improved educational development outcomes**  
Rebates for telehealth will ensure families in rural and remote areas can afford to access medical specialists and Allied Health professionals to manage specific health issues affecting their children's learning.
10. **Increase of age-appropriate Mental Health resources and programs for rural and remote children**  
There are shortages of school councillors and psychology services within rural and remote areas, and our children have not only faced the impacts of COVID-19 but also natural disasters.

## ISSUE 1 - Medicare Rebates for Telehealth Services

Utilisation of telehealth services can be of great benefit to families in geographically isolated locations who would otherwise have to travel considerable distances or encounter lengthy delays to access face-to-face consultations with relevant health professionals.

Students with learning disabilities and disorders affecting learning require frequent and timely consultations to enable a successful start to their school career. Providing appropriate support through their education, especially the early years can be assisted via telehealth services for many families who are unable to access ongoing professional care due to living in rural and remote areas.

There are Allied Health and medical specialist consultations which can be satisfactorily delivered using telehealth services where the technology is available. These services are already providing improved access to health services for some children in geographically isolated areas. The cost to families to access such services should also be equitable.

ICPA (Aust) understands provisions have been made for expanded Medicare rebates for telehealth services since COVID-19 and appreciate this expansion, but for rural and remote families these are still not without challenges. Unfortunately, in order to access Medicare rebates for Speech and/or Occupational Therapies, a child needs to first have a General Practitioner Management Plan (GPMP, previously Chronic Disease Management Plan). Further, Medicare benefits are only available for telehealth with the General Practitioner if the 'patient' has seen the GP (or been to the GP's practice) face-to-face in the previous 12 months. The well-known and ongoing issues associated with accessing a GP makes these restrictions extremely challenging for rural and remote families and result in long delays and increased expense at the detriment of the timely and satisfactory treatment and development of a child.



### **RECOMMENDATION**

That geographically isolated children with Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Aphasia/Dysphasia, auditory processing disorder, language processing disorder and visual processing disorders be permanently provided access to subsidised telehealth consultations with Allied Health professionals and medical specialists to support their specific educational needs and learning difficulties.

## **ISSUE 2 - Travel and Accommodation Assistance**

Children with specific education needs require access to appropriate professional support services which requires travelling for consultations. Financial assistance should be available to support geographically isolated families accessing face-to-face consultations with expenses such as travel and accommodation to attend these consultations.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That travel and accommodation assistance be made available for rural and remote families travelling to access face-to-face professional support services for students with specific learning needs.

## **ISSUE 3 - Improved Staff Training for Teachers In Rural and Remote Locations**

Distance education students often have no daily face-to-face access to appropriately qualified teachers and are reliant on distance education tutors who lack the necessary training to provide the support required. It is essential that professional development and support opportunities are provided to tutors to ensure that specific learning needs are catered for.

Similarly, teachers and support staff in small schools in geographically isolated locations require training and support for students with learning challenges such as Dyslexia and disorders affecting learning such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the "*Good to Great Schools*" initiative which will benefit the thirty-three remote schools located in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. However, funding for this initiative does not extend to students studying via distance education, or to the many other rural and remote schools in Australia which also teach children that have learning difficulties and require extra support.

Pre-service teachers should also be equipped with appropriate training to identify and provide the required support and assistance to children with specific education needs in the classroom. Modules on the identification of and how to cater for children with specific educational needs should be a component of teacher-training courses. The provision of a Rural and Remote major in pre-service teaching courses should also include instruction in recognition of specific education difficulties such as ASD and Dyslexia.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That teachers in rural and remote schools, including distance education teachers and distance education tutors, are provided training to recognise the signs of, and cater for, medical and learning disorders in students which impact their learning.
- That universities which provide teacher training include modules to help teachers better support students with disorders which affect their learning in their curriculum.



## ISSUE 4 - Workshops for Rural and Remote Parents of Gifted Students

Two Federal Senate Select Committees (1988 and 2001) identified gifted students as being the most educationally disadvantaged students in the nation; disadvantage magnified in rural and remote areas.

Ten years ago, with (then) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training funding, a series of highly successful and well-attended workshops for parents of gifted students were held across rural and remote Australia. In small communities, teachers often attended as well.

Now a new generation of students, parents and teachers need access to the education and support to cater for the personal and educational needs of gifted children in rural and remote areas.

### RECOMMENDATION

That the Federal Government provide funding for the delivery of workshops for parents of gifted students living in rural and remote areas.

## ISSUE 5 - Early Identification and Intervention For Learning Difficulties

Children in rural and remote areas often have little or no access to screening and early intervention services, setting some children up for a school life of frustration and failures.

The knowledge and resources to diagnose 4-year-olds at the risk of learning difficulties is readily available. ICPA (Aust) believes this knowledge would be best implemented in the first term of compulsory schooling. Access to early screening for phonological awareness by teachers in rural and remote contexts would identify students 'at risk' of having learning difficulties.

### RECOMMENDATION

That the Federal Government ensures all rural and remote children have access to early identification and intervention for learning difficulties.

## ISSUE 6 - Additional Resources to Boarding Schools for Students with Disability

Boarding facilities need to be equipped with adequate resources to cater for boarding students with specific education needs.

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) provides all Australian schools, education authorities and the community with a clear picture of the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they require to enable them to partake in education on the same basis as other students.

When the significant role of boarding schools is taken into consideration, it is reasonable to expect that additional resources are provided to facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.

### RECOMMENDATION

That additional resources are provided to facilities, including boarding schools, where student requirements have been clearly identified on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) database.



## ISSUE 7 - Access to Federally Funded Health Clinics

Feedback from members indicates that families are frequently turned away from the local federally funded rural and remote health clinics because they do not meet the criteria to access these services. However, for many of these families there are no other local health clinics available. They are then required to travel vast distances to access treatment for their children which could have been provided closer to home, thus impeding their learning and social ability.

### RECOMMENDATION

That all families in remote Australia should qualify to access local, public health clinics to ensure timely treatment or assessments without having to travel unacceptable distances past such clinics.

## ISSUE 8 - Incentives for Health Graduates

Rural and remote areas struggle to find and retain health workers such as Doctors, Nurses, Speech Pathologists, Occupational Therapists etc., all which are necessary for children who need these services in rural and remote areas. The turnover of staff is elevated, and many services are only available by telehealth. Health workers are often fly in-fly out (FIFO) in many rural communities. They are flown in by agencies and paid wages above the rates by health departments, as well as a huge fee going to the Agency who organises the workers. Early intervention is key to child development and positive outcomes and often in rural areas, issues are identified early, and referrals are done to Speech Pathology, occupational therapists and various Specialities. The wait for these services can be months and crucial time is being lost with these young children, which then has a flow on effect, as developmental issues are unresolved by the time they get to start school. They then, in rural areas, have issues accessing the services they need through the education system. This often leads to many families with children with such needs relocating from the rural and remote areas to metro areas where they can access the services for their children.

### RECOMMENDATION

The provision of incentives and structures which encourage health graduates to work in rural and remote areas without disadvantage in comparison to their urban colleagues.

## ISSUE 9 - Private Health Insurance Rebates for Telehealth Allied Health Services

Rural and remote areas have been struggling with access to face-to-face health services long before the pandemic. It is a known fact that Early Intervention is the key to a child's development and assists in improving positive outcomes in educational development and mental health. Families of children with specific education needs that are living in geographically isolated areas of Australia are faced with significant challenges such as:

- Access to face-to-face health professional services to assess and diagnose specific learning needs
- Vast distances and expenses of travel to attend appointments
- The distance to appointments, which necessitates significant time away from school not only for the student but their siblings, who cannot be left at home on their own
- Lack of medical specialists and Allied Health professionals
- High cost of the telehealth therapy services which are not eligible for Medicare Rebate or covered by private health insurance.



ICPA (Aust) believes private health insurers' permanent acceptance of telehealth with Allied Health professionals and medical specialists would enhance the educational outcomes of geographically isolated members' children.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

That private health insurers recognise the importance of telehealth Allied Health Service appointments for geographically isolated children, fund telehealth services and ensure no disparities in refunds between telehealth and face-to-face appointments.

### **ISSUE 10 - Increase of Age-Appropriate Mental Health Resources and Services**

For the youth of today, the world has changed and become increasingly technology based, with the easy access of smart phones, text messaging and multiple social media platforms. This has meant that the outside world is ever present in our homes, and often the youth are unable to escape these negative influences.

We need to ensure that early signs are picked up, not only within the home, but also the school systems. Once recognised, the appropriate help at school and after hours is accessible.

According to Headspace "74% of young people surveyed reported that their mental health was worse since the outbreak of COVID-19"<sup>1</sup> and "Children and young people in drought ravaged New South Wales have told UNICEF Australia that the natural disaster has meant they have had to prematurely "grow up", facing difficulty in balancing increased farm work with their education, as well as experiencing escalating levels of stress and other adverse psychological outcomes."<sup>2</sup> With these two factors in mind we should be ensuring that mental health services are easily accessible and available within all areas of regional and remote Australia.

If there was more funding spent on helping these children/youth deal with these situations, we will create stronger and resilient children for the future.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Increase mental health resources and services for rural and remote children.

<sup>1</sup> Coping with COVID: the mental health impact on young people accessing headspace services, August 2020 pg. 2, from <https://headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/COVID-Client-Impact-Report-FINAL-11-8-20.pdf> on 28th May 2021

<sup>2</sup> Media Release: UNICEF Australia, Children in drought affected areas have a "You just get on with it" attitude, when the reality is their need for psychological support increases by the day, 19 February 2019 from <https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Documents/Drought-Report-2019-Media-Release.pdf> May 2021



## Tertiary Portfolio

Engaging in tertiary education at an institution of their choice should be an option for all Australian students who have the ability, ambition, motivation and desire to pursue their goals regardless of socio-economic status, geographic location or circumstances.

Rural and remote students continue to be under-represented at tertiary level and have lower participation and completion rates compared to their metropolitan counterparts. They experience multiple challenges and barriers to accessing higher education including cost, socioeconomic status, distance and school experiences, preparedness and aspiration in pursuing tertiary education. These in turn influence their tertiary education aspirations, access, retention and success and are key considerations if a student can take up the option of tertiary education. The single greatest barrier to rural students' access to tertiary education is cost.

### SUMMARY

ICPA (Aust) believes that the following issues need to be addressed in order to alleviate these barriers for rural and remote tertiary students and the recommendations herein seek to ensure rural and remote tertiary students have access to a high-quality tertiary education commensurate to their needs and aspirations:

1. **Appropriate financial assistance for relocation and ongoing costs associated with living away from home to access tertiary education**

The high cost of relocation and ongoing costs such as securing accommodation, travel to the place of study initially and travel home during the year and upfront and ongoing living away from home expenses.

2. **Access to financial assistance**

- Youth Allowance eligibility barriers including parental income limits.
- Centrelink Processes
  - engagement of appropriately and well trained staff to provide accurate information and assistance in relation to allowances particularly Youth Allowance.
  - address the unacceptably lengthy waiting times when contacting Centrelink.

3. **The implementation of tertiary measures and recommendations from reviews and election commitments**

4. **Appropriate Training and Incentives for Rural and Remote Educators and Allied Health Professionals**

### ISSUE 1 - Appropriate Financial Assistance for Relocation and Ongoing Living Costs

To further their education, rural and remote students must relocate from home to access tertiary studies. One of the key considerations in determining whether a student can access a tertiary education is the ability to access adequate financial means to fund their education. Appropriate financial assistance to relocate and live away from home is imperative to increase the engagement of rural and remote students at tertiary level and to address the under-representation of this cohort.

The logistics for these students relocating to an institution offering tertiary studies of their choice include the high up-front set-up and ongoing costs associated with relocation from the family home: travel to the place of study initially and back home during the year, securing accommodation, relocation set-up costs (rental housing bond, electricity connection or residential college fees), ongoing living expenses and communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of basic living commodities, all impact on rural and remote student access and often





involves expenditure beyond their financial means. These costs are borne not only in the first year of a student's course but are recurrent over the duration of their tertiary education.

The current income support mechanisms for eligible students (Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and Austudy) and part-time work that many students undertake, contribute to assisting with the living costs of students once they can actually access their chosen tertiary institution but do not adequately recognise the additional costs incurred by all rural and remote students having to relocate each year to access higher education. While the costs associated with relocating have been recognised through the provision of Relocation Scholarships, only students receiving Youth Allowance as a dependent have benefited from this payment. Until recently there has been no specific standalone allowance which addresses the unique costs incurred by geographically isolated students when they must relocate and live away from home in order to access tertiary study, based solely on the fact that these students do not have access to tertiary study where they live and must relocate and live away from home in order to access this study.

### Tertiary Access Allowance

ICPA (Aust) has been advocating for a Tertiary Access Allowance for many years and is immensely grateful for the inception of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) as part of the Job Ready Graduates Plan which serves to provide financial assistance to rural and remote students in the form of an up to \$5000 payment to assist eligible inner regional, outer regional or remote students with the costs of relocating for study. However, there are some fundamental provisions which need to be included in the Tertiary Access Payment in order to address the aforementioned barriers for rural and remote students.

Despite recent changes to the Youth Allowance criteria, designed to assist rural and remote students, and the commencement of the Tertiary Access Payment in 2021, these measures still fall short in providing the well documented assistance needed by all geographically isolated students to relocate for tertiary study. ICPA (Aust) will continue to advocate for the introduction of a Tertiary Access Allowance or an enhanced version of the Tertiary Access Payment, equal to the Relocation Scholarship, available for all rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access a tertiary education and not be contingent on the receipt of Youth Allowance as a dependent.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the provision of this allowance should be:

- available to all geographically isolated students regardless of whether or not they are a recipient of student income support payments such as Youth Allowance.
- an annual payment for the duration of the student's full-time course.
- equivalent to the Relocation Scholarship (2023 - \$5080 in the first year, \$2541 in the second and third years and \$1269 in the fourth or subsequent years).
- available for all geographically isolated students who relocate to access higher education including those who take a gap year not just those who relocate to study the year immediately following year 12 or equivalent.
- paid in a timely fashion similar to the Relocation Scholarship.

### Rent Assistance

For rural and remote students relocating to major regional and large cities for tertiary studies, accommodation is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. The rental market is very competitive and accommodation costs are rising significantly. Rent Assistance has not kept pace with the increases in rental costs experienced by students and does not reflect the real living costs for these students who have to live away from home in order to access tertiary education. Students from these areas experience differing circumstances to those students residing in urban areas and they must be recognised as a separate disadvantaged group for rental assistance. Affordable rent is paramount to these students' retention and success at tertiary level and ongoing support is critical.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- That the Federal Government maintains and enhances the current financial assistance for rural and remote students who must relocate from home to access tertiary education.
- That Rent Assistance be substantially increased for rural and remote students receiving Youth Allowance to more closely reflect the real cost of living for this cohort.

## ISSUE 2 - Accessing Financial Assistance

### Parental Income Limit for Youth Allowance

#### **Dependent Students**

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the changes to Youth Allowance (YA) eligibility criteria for dependent students (removal of the Family Assets Test and the Family Actual Means Test and the changes to the Family Pool), however, the current parental income limit (2023 - \$58,108 to receive the full Youth Allowance payment if only one child is in the family pool) remains extremely low.

The cost of relocation and the ongoing costs for supporting a rural and remote tertiary student for the duration of their tertiary course can be extremely challenging for families to financially support these students and is often beyond the means of rural and remote families particularly if they are also supporting other full-time student family members either through compulsory education away from home or at tertiary level.

#### **Independent Students**

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the increase to the parental income cut-off limit from \$150,000 to \$160,000 and the family pool arrangements of \$10,000 for each additional dependent child in the family along with the option to select one of three financial years to use to calculate parental income, for those regional, rural and remote students who are applying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the part-time work or earnings criteria.

If rural and remote students are assessed as independent for the purpose of receiving Youth Allowance, ICPA (Aust) believes their parental income should not be considered. Those students, who must relocate to access a tertiary education should be able to access income support in their own right and should be considered independent of their parents for the purpose of accessing financial assistance.

### Relocation Scholarship

The introduction of the Relocation Scholarships was an acknowledgement by the Government that students who need to relocate to access higher education face much higher costs than those who can reside in the family home. However currently it is only available for recipients of dependent Youth Allowance and does not adequately recognise the additional costs incurred by all rural and remote students having to relocate to access higher education. The high up-front set-up and ongoing costs associated with relocation: travel, securing accommodation set-up costs (rental housing bond, electricity connection or residential college fees), living expenses and communication (telephone, internet) along with the rising costs of basic living commodities are all impacting on access to a tertiary education for rural and remote students.

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the introduction of the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) for those rural and remote students that commence Certificate IV or above studies in the year following year 12 and meet all other criteria. However the TAP only assists rural and remote students with relocation costs in their first year of tertiary study. Extending the Relocation Scholarship would acknowledge that all rural and remote students endure significant relocation costs over the duration of their tertiary education.



## Liquid Assets Waiting Period

Rural and remote students who have proven their independence through part-time work or earnings and have been assessed as eligible for Youth Allowance as an independent, require saved income to fund the relocation and ongoing costs of living and attending university. These students are penalised for having saved these funds when the Liquid Assets Waiting Period is applied. This is impacting on rural and remote student ability to meet these high up-front set up relocation costs and ongoing living costs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- That the parental income limit for dependent students applying for Youth Allowance be significantly increased to reflect the actual cost of supporting a dependent student at tertiary level.
- That the Parental Income Test be removed from the eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying for Youth Allowance as an independent under the workforce participation criteria.
- That the criteria for the Relocation Scholarship be extended for those rural and remote students who must relocate and live away from home to access a tertiary education and not be contingent on the receipt of dependent Youth Allowance.
- That the Liquid Assets Waiting Period be removed for rural and remote students who have fulfilled the self-supporting criteria for Youth Allowance as an independent and who have to relocate to access tertiary education.

Tertiary students and their families from geographically isolated locations face unique disadvantages and barriers to accessing a tertiary education, indeed rural and remote students continue to be under-represented in higher education. While ICPA (Aust) acknowledges and appreciates the current support mechanisms in place to assist these students, it is essential they are recognised as a separate and unique disadvantage group and that support continues and is improved to address these unique disadvantages.

## Independent Youth Allowance Eligibility Criteria

Students from rural and remote Australia who often have no choice but to relocate to access a tertiary education, are independent of their families by virtue of the fact that they must live away from the family home, are the very ones that should be considered for eligibility for Youth Allowance as an independent. Many students are ineligible for dependent YA, are unable to defer their chosen course to qualify for independent YA and deferral can be a disincentive for some students. For many of the students who are ineligible for dependent Youth Allowance there is no other source of government fiscal assistance available, resulting in a cohort of geographically isolated students severely disadvantaged while attempting to undertake tertiary studies.

The implementation of the 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy - Final Report Recommendation two: Improve access to financial support, to support greater fairness and more equal opportunity by allowing greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent Youth Allowance' would assist in greater access to Youth Allowance for rural and remote tertiary students and their families who are unable to support their children through this education pathway.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Students isolated from tertiary education due to location, must be recognised as a separate disadvantaged group when being assessed for support mechanisms such as Youth Allowance to address the distinctly unique requirements of rural and remote students.
- That changes be made to the Youth Allowance qualifying criteria for rural and remote students who must relocate to study so that, on course commencement, they are considered independent for Youth Allowance purposes (where students are ineligible for dependent Youth Allowance).

#### Centrelink Processes

Issues and difficulties associated with contacting Centrelink in order to access and clarify information regarding Youth Allowance and other Centrelink allowances include lengthy wait times, calls being answered by general Centrelink staff not conversant in Youth Allowance criteria and applications, misinformation being given and callers not being forwarded onto specialist staff in the particular payment type such as Youth Allowance. This is negatively impacting our rural and remote students. ICPA (Aust) is

aware of cases where applicants have “given up” furthering their application because they have found it too hard or have been given incorrect information that indicates they are ineligible when in fact they are eligible.

It is imperative that personnel at Centrelink Service Centres and Call Centres are appropriately and well trained to provide appropriate service and assistance for students. Staff must be able to competently provide accurate information and answer student-related queries on the Youth and Student line (132490) to assist student and apprentice applicants who are enquiring about or applying for Centrelink allowances including Youth Allowance. It is important to bear in mind that accessing Service Centres can require lengthy and time-consuming trips for rural and remote students as they often live large distances from the closest centre.

ICPA (Aust) suggests a solution to the lengthy wait times experienced is the establishment of a call-back service for Centrelink related Call Lines such as Assistance for Isolated Children and Youth Allowance, so that callers can hold their place in the queue and receive a call back when they reach the top of the queue. A call back system works very well in other areas and could result in callers being able to speak to a trained Youth Allowance staff member when they were available.

### RECOMMENDATION

That issues associated with Centrelink processes in accessing and clarifying information regarding Youth Allowance and other Centrelink Allowances are addressed.

## ISSUE 3 - The Implementation of Tertiary Measures and Recommendations

### Recommendations from Tertiary Reviews

ICPA (Aust) applauds the Federal Government’s prioritisation of tertiary education to ensure rural and remote students have access to a tertiary education that is accessible and affordable and the implementation of the recommendations from the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey review)* and the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine review)*. These measures have considerably improved access, outcomes and opportunities for regional, rural and remote students in relation to higher education. To further reduce the disparity in access to and participation in tertiary education for rural and remote students, ICPA (Aust) strongly believes implementation of all the recommendations from the *Inquiry into Education in remote and complex environments Report* must be implemented.



The implementation of all recommendations would see important measures introduced and available for rural and remote students including:

- A Review of the current government income support policies and arrangements for students that relocate from the family home to access further study or training and improvement of income support information.
- The provision of greater flexibility in pathways to qualify for independent Youth Allowance.
- Improvements to the quality and range of student support services including pastoral care, mentoring programs and academic support.
- Improvement and support of high quality career information and advice.
- The improved availability and information on accommodation support for relocating tertiary and training students.
- Improved access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet services.
- Improved access to high quality VET programs in regional, rural and remote Australia.
- Support for tertiary providers to implement tailored initiatives experiencing rural hardship.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

The implementation of all recommendations from Tertiary Reviews - *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey review) and the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* (Naphthine review) and the *Inquiry into Education in Remote and Complex Environments*.

## **ISSUE 4 - Appropriate Training and Incentives for Rural and Remote Educators and Allied Health Professionals**

ICPA (Aust) welcomes any measures implemented to address education workforce issues and improve educational access and equity in rural and remote Australia.

### **Early Childhood Educators**

The shortage of Early Childhood educators in rural and remote Australia needs to be addressed to ensure that every child, regardless of their location, receives the high-quality early childhood education they deserve.

It is imperative that Early Childhood diplomas and degrees are made more accessible by offering targeted programs and incentives including financial support, scholarships, flexible and accelerated learning pathways, professional development opportunities, mentorship programs and community engagement initiatives to increase uptake of Early Childhood education, recruitment and retention in remote communities.

### **Certificate qualifications for geographically isolated distance education home tutors**

Availability of certificate courses for geographically isolated distance education home tutors need to be expanded across Australian education providers who offer education courses. Families whose children are being educated through distance education in geographically isolated home schoolroom, which is reliant on a tutor to support the students, are doing it with little or no support. These geographically isolated distance education tutors require an appropriate level of understanding, knowledge and skills to manage the distance education home school room, so they can effectively deliver the components of the school day and strategies to support the students' education and to ensure positive learning outcomes for rural and remote students.



## HELP debt incentives for those moving to rural and remote Australia to work

### **HELP loan incentives – teachers**

Recruitment and retention of early childhood, preschool, primary and secondary teachers continues to be of concern across rural and remote Australia. The expansion of the current HELP debt to include teachers who commit to teach in all rural and remote locations would assist in the attraction and retention of high-quality teachers to these areas and encourage them to live and work in rural and remote Australia thereby supporting their local communities. It will also assist in reducing the current teacher shortage and the high turn-over of teachers in rural and remote locations which has a detrimental effect on the educational outcomes of students, which is evidenced by worsening indicators such as pre-school enrolments, NAPLAN results and year 12 completion rates which are already negatively influenced by remoteness.

This reduction in HELP debt by either the waiver of the indexation on accumulated HELP debt or the reduction of accumulated HELP debt could be pro-rated based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Structure.

### **HELP loan incentives – allied health professionals**

The extension of the current scheme to reduce the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt for rural doctors and nurse practitioners needs to be expanded to include allied health professionals including speech pathologists who work in rural, remote or very remote areas of Australia including those who work with geographically isolated children with specific education needs. These allied health professionals play a vital role in the educational and developmental well-being of children particularly in the early assessment, identification and management of specific needs children.

This would incentivise necessary professionals to work in rural and remote areas, ensuring that essential services are accessible, available and affordable to those in need and may also encourage young individuals from rural and remote backgrounds to pursue careers in healthcare, with the prospect of returning to their local communities to contribute positively.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Targeted programs and incentives to improve accessibility to Early Childhood courses.
- The expansion of courses for geographically isolated distance education home tutors.
- The expansion of HELP debt repayments schemes for teachers and allied health professionals in rural and remote Australia.



## Training Portfolio

ICPA (Aust) is committed to ensuring all rural and remote students and young people have the opportunity to pursue courses and careers that best suit their interests and capabilities, regardless of their geographical location. Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways, and Australian Apprenticeships play a vital role in many students' career aspirations and it is vital that these opportunities are affordable and accessible for all rural and remote young Australians.

### SUMMARY

#### 1. Relocation Scholarship

ICPA (Aust) seeks inclusion of students and young people who must relocate from their home to access Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses and apprenticeships, in the Relocation Scholarship eligibility criteria.

#### 2. Commonwealth Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA)

- ICPA (Aust) seeks an immediate increase in the Commonwealth Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA) and indexation to the Consumer Price Index (CPI) similar to other payments to better assist Australian Apprentices with the rising cost of living.
- Eligibility criteria for LAFHA is based on the recognition that an apprentice has moved away from their parental or legal guardian's home for the first time to access an Australian Apprenticeship.
- The current rate of LAFHA payments is inadequate to support an apprentice with the cost of living, including rental bond and rent, food, household goods, fuel, utilities, clothing and the myriad of expenses required to set up and maintain a household.

#### 3. Inclusion of Australian Apprentices in Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

- ICPA (Aust) seeks the inclusion of rural and remote Australian Apprentices in the established TAP.
- Many rural and remote apprentices experienced immense financial hardship during their relocation to establish themselves in locations that allow them daily access to their employment and training on an apprentice wage. For many this is prohibitive in the absence of adequate financial support.

#### 4. Increased non-financial supports for rural and remote Australian Apprentices through Australian Apprenticeship Support Networks (AASNs)

- The assurance of comprehensive and timely audits of AASNs services.
- Specialist support staff within the AASNs for rural and remote Australian Apprentices.

### ISSUE 1 - Relocation Scholarship

Tertiary students who are eligible for Youth Allowance as a dependent or ABSTUDY recipients are eligible for the Relocation Scholarship, which is an adjunct payment to dependent Youth Allowance. However, access to this Relocation Scholarship is not extended to Australian Apprentices or Vocational Education Training (VET) students even if they do receive Youth Allowance as a dependent.

For many rural and remote students and young people who, due to geographical isolation, must relocate from home to undertake an apprenticeship, traineeship and/or Certificates and Diploma level courses, the cost of relocation is beyond their financial means.

The high up-front costs of relocating from the family home, which could extend for periods of up to four years depending on the chosen pathway, is exorbitant and includes:





- accommodation costs (rental bond and ongoing rent)
- connection of utilities e.g. power and water
- equipping the home with basic living commodities necessary to maintain a reasonable standard of living

These inordinate and unsubsidised costs are compounded by the fact that these young people are often leaving home for the first time to relocate to centres which can be hundreds, if not thousands of kilometres away from family.

Improved financial assistance to support rural and remote students and young people moving away from home to embark on a VET pathway can only strengthen the VET sector and increase the number of young people returning to their communities armed with skills and qualifications that can meet the needs of business.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

Eligibility to the Relocation Scholarship for VET students and Australian Apprentices who receive dependent Youth Allowance.

## **ISSUE 2 - Commonwealth Living Away From Home Allowance (LAFHA)**

Eligibility criteria for LAFHA is based on the recognition that an apprentice has moved away from their parental or legal guardian's home for the first time to access an Australian Apprenticeship and is only available for those who are ineligible for Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY or Austudy payments. It is not annually indexed to the CPI.

LAFHA is available to eligible full and part-time Australian Apprentices and Australian School-based Apprentices during the first three years of training at a rate of:

- \$77.17 per week for the first 12 months
- \$36.59 per week for the second 12 months
- \$25.00 per week for the third 12 months

For a full-time apprentice who has moved away from home to access a full-time apprenticeship, costs include food, rent, fuel, utilities, clothing and much more. While ICPA (Aust) is extremely appreciative of this allowance, it does not adequately provide meaningful support for the cost of living in the current economic climate.

The *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) Systems* reported that low wages for up to four years was cited by respondents as one reason why young people are less attracted to the traditional apprenticeship model.

The weekly minimum rate of pay for a junior first year apprentice under the [Vehicle, Manufacturing, Repair, Services and Retail Award 2010](#) is \$482.68 and even less if the young person has not completed Year 12. Without additional support to subsidise their costs of living, apprentices face extreme financial pressure when pursuing this pathway. This financial hardship creates a lack of incentive for rural and remote young people to pursue these pathways and many simply do not complete their qualifications as a result.

While ICPA (Aust) recognises and appreciates that Trade Support Loans are available to eligible apprentices to assist with everyday costs while completing an apprenticeship, it is often not ideal for a young person to enter into a loan arrangement to help cover the costs of living.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

- An immediate increase to the Commonwealth LAFHA to better reflect and adequately assist with living costs for Australian Apprentices.
- The indexation of the LAFHA to the CPI to ensure the Allowance keeps pace with the rising cost of living.

### ISSUE 3 - Inclusion of Australian Apprentices in the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

Australian Apprentices relocating to undertake their trade and training face similar relocation and set up costs (travel, bond/rent, uniforms) as students relocating to undertake tertiary study. Australian Apprentices are also doing modules of study in order to complete their trade qualification. They are generally school leavers, moving vast distances from the family home for the first time with very little financial security. To make apprenticeships more attractive and increase retention rates, it is imperative that apprentices are well supported financially with relocation costs. This is particularly important in the initial stages of their apprenticeship as the established TAP scheme recognises for Tertiary students.

### RECOMMENDATION

That TAP criteria be expanded to include Australian Apprentices who must relocate from a rural or remote location to access their apprenticeship.

### ISSUE 4 - Increased non-financial supports from Australian Apprentice Support Networks (AASNs) for rural and remote Australian Apprentices

There are two groups represented within rural and remote apprentices -those who live and work within a rural or remote location and those who relocate to a larger centre from a rural or remote location to undertake either or both of their on-the-job and off-the-job aspects of their apprenticeship. These students are dependent on the non-financial supports available to them through one of Australia's seven current Australian Apprentice Support Network (AASN) organisations.

With a nationwide skill shortage, it is imperative that apprentices are well supported during their apprenticeship. With national apprenticeship completion rates alarmingly low (55%), AASNs are integral to ensuring that the sign up, administration and management of apprenticeships occurs. Government websites clearly state that one of the key roles of the AASN is "to provide advice and support during the apprenticeship". To ensure this support is ongoing and comprehensive, it is essential that Government conduct more rigorous and timely audits of all AASNs which include gathering feedback from apprentices and their guardians (of those under 18 years of age), and face to face follow up within three months of the contract sign up.

It is also imperative that there are trained rural and remote specialist support staff within the AASNs. These staff must be accessible by employers, trainers and apprentices/trainees (and their families if the contract is signed before the apprentice is 18 years of age).

Assistance for the rural and remote apprentice requires mandatory actions from the AASNs including (but not limited to):



- visits to the workplace and/or training facility to check that the apprentices are being suitably trained, educated and supported
- documented semester reviews on all parties involved
- knowledge and assistance with state and federal financial supports such as Living Away From Home Allowance (LAFHA)
- follow-up contact and interviews should the apprentice/trainee or employer terminate the contract prior to its completion
- knowledge and documentation of the home and residential addresses of apprentices - it is concerning that some employers and trainers do not know and subsequently support apprentices who have relocated vast distances from family and supports to undertake the working and training aspects of the Australian Apprenticeship, with minimum wages and increasing living expenses.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Regular comprehensive audits of AASNs to ensure that the delivery and support intended by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) is actually received by rural and remote apprentices/trainees.
- DEWR mandate specialist support structures for regional, remote and rural apprentices/trainees from within the AASNs.



## Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF)

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation working on behalf of our members for equity of access to appropriate education for children living outside of metropolitan areas.

ICPA (Aust) is calling on the Federal Government to introduce a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) addressing the grave concerns of the many families who struggle to afford to educate their children to ensure rural and remote students' education continues unchanged in times of drought and other rural hardship, including a personal crisis, whether students are boarding away from home, attending a local rural school/kindergarten or studying via distance education.

ICPA (Aust) believes a Rural Hardship Education Fund would assist families with the cost of education when the following occurs:

- natural disaster (i.e. drought, fire, flood)
- non-environmental economic factors (e.g. the Live Export Ban, Dairy Crisis)
- personal hardship such as an accident, injury or illness including prolonged terminal illness of a direct family member.

The need to assist rural families with educational costs in times of drought and rural hardship has been addressed in the past and remains as relevant now as it was previously. There is precedence for government assistance in previous droughts and times of rural hardship through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme and other initiatives. In 2005, during a period of drought, there was a major increase in the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance. In the next drought, the Exceptional Circumstances Program, which no longer exists, added a supplementary payment to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance, during the years 2008-2011 before reverting back in 2012. Budgetary Measures including Drought Assistance for Schools, were included in the 2009-2010 Budget to provide additional funding for rural schools located in areas of drought in recognition of the financial impact of years of drought on Australian families and school communities. In March 2019 an additional \$1000 per student supplementary payment was provided through AIC to students living in North Queensland flood affected areas, which families were extremely grateful to receive. However, there is currently no specific education assistance for rural students in existing drought packages.

Furthermore, when Distance Education is the only education option for families living remotely and a personal crisis directly affects the parent (who is frequently the Distance Education Tutor), the dependent school aged children stand to be disadvantaged due to the parent's incapacity to fulfil their normal duties within the schoolroom, resulting in the student/s falling behind in all areas of curriculum.

In 85% of geographically isolated distance education families, it is a parent who fulfils the role of the distance education tutor, a full-time, long-term commitment, yet as this role is not formally recognised as employment, there is no remuneration available. ICPA (Aust) understands that this lack of an employment classification also impacts on the ability of a family to use insurance to cover the parent who performs this role in lieu of acknowledged farm/off farm work. In a mainstream school setting, relief teachers would be sourced to cover classes if a teacher is unable to fulfil their duties and the education of children would remain unchanged, however in a distance education context where the tutor cannot fulfil their role, there is no one to replace them.

If assistance were available to temporarily hire suitable paid help for the schoolroom (Governess or Nanny) to assist with the day-to-day school demands of children studying in a distance education setting during an emergency, this would alleviate some of the difficulty in accessing education for these students at a time of crisis. Presently, costs associated with covering the education of their children during the time a parent must be away due to crisis, is borne solely by the family, on top of the existing financial pressure a hardship of this kind causes. It must also be



noted that rural and remote families are also often paying boarding fees for children accessing secondary education, adding to the financial strain a hardship or personal crisis may cause. To compound this situation, families living in geographically isolated locations often do not have the support network of family or nearby neighbours in times of an emergency due to the vast distances between where they live and it is therefore often impossible for schooling to continue unchanged.

Due to the unique challenges faced by geographically isolated families in accessing education, some form of educational assistance program for times of rural hardship needs to exist on a permanent/long term basis so that critical time is not lost determining what type of educational assistance can be offered when a crisis occurs.

When natural and non-natural catastrophic events occur in urban areas, as terrible as these are, they do not affect a child's ability to attend school for the most part. Once the danger has passed and the clean-up completed, urban students continue to have a school available to them. This is not the case for many students living in rural and remote areas who do not have reasonable daily access to face-to-face appropriate schooling because of where they live. The ability of these geographically isolated children to attend school often depends on their family's capacity to pay a gap in cost to access their compulsory schooling. Measures should be put in place to ensure rural and remote students and their families are supported to maintain their schooling when events occur which decrease a rural family's ability to earn an income through no fault of their own.

Financial assistance to lessen the burden of educational costs must be established urgently for rural families battling to keep their children at school. This fund could be linked to the current Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme is a group of Commonwealth payments for parents and carers of children who cannot attend a local government school because of geographical isolation, disability or special needs. Rural and remote families rely heavily on the AIC to help them address the extra cost of providing compulsory education for their children because of where they live. Approximately 14,000 students in total received the AIC across all of its categories in 2022. The number impacted by long-term drought/hardship and requiring additional assistance through a Rural Hardship Education Fund at any one time would most often be considerably less. An established fund would not need to assist the total number of identified rural/ geographically isolated students receiving AIC all at one time, but could be designed to offer relief to those in affected areas as situations arose.

ICPA (Aust) appreciates that the Farm Household Allowance (FHA) has been created to assist eligible families with household expenses and financial circumstances. Some rural families do not qualify for the Farm Household Allowance, despite the new eligibility criteria announced in August 2018 and further announcements in September 2019. A person must be a farmer or the partner of a farmer to apply for the Farm Household Allowance. There are numerous families living in rural and remote areas who are not farmers but whose children must go away to boarding school as there is no secondary school available to them in their area. These families include truck drivers, contractors, and local business owners in and around the towns who also have their ability to earn an income severely impacted during drought. The Farm Household Allowance, even if it is received, for the most part is not designed specifically to assist with children's education. Families in receipt of the Farm Household Allowance do become automatically eligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children Additional Boarding Allowance, however many of these families may already be receiving this means tested portion of the allowance anyway due to low income. While ICPA (Aust) recognises that the Farm Household Allowance (FHA) may be used towards off-setting educational costs if a family is eligible and chooses to use it for these expenses, there is no additional loading per child in the FHA, or more significantly, a loading for those children attending school. A family that is paid the "Family Rate" of Farm Household Allowance receives no more funding if they have 4 or 5 school-age children than a family that may have one or two non-school-age children.

Natural disasters and other rural hardships can carry on for numerous years with long-term effects. The crisis itself and the recovery process following any rural hardship, are times of limited income and meagre means for rural communities



and families who sustain their livelihoods from the land. Other unforeseen industry impacts (live export ban, dairy and strawberry crises) also adversely affect rural families at times.

In recent years drought, flood and bushfires have severely affected many rural families across large sections of Australia, including Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, parts of Western Australia, Tasmania and Victoria as well as more recently the Northern Territory and despite the introduction of many drought relief and reform packages including subsidising the freight on fodder and water for stock, assisting families to put food on the table and preparing for future drought, the huge cost of educating children, particularly for those children who must live away from home in order to access a compulsory education, is largely ignored.

Geographically isolated children should not be disadvantaged or unable to continue their studies due to times of rural hardship or personal crisis. Educational expenses are an investment for the future prosperity of all our rural and remote communities and ICPA (Aust) urges the Federal Government to implement a program which assists rural families in educating their children through the unique hardships they endure.

When Geographically Isolated families experience an unforeseen hardship or crisis, such as drought and other natural disasters, non-environmental factors (i.e., The Live Export Ban, Dairy Crises etc.) or an accident, injury or illness including prolonged terminal illness of a family member, due to the distinct educational contexts associated with educating children in rural and remote Australia, these can cause significant challenges for families to maintain their children's education access.

## Impact of Natural Disasters and Rural Hardship on Rural Students' Education

### Boarding Away From Home

For many rural and remote students boarding away from home to access schooling is a necessity as they have no reasonable daily access to age-appropriate schooling where they live. Australia has vast areas with sparse population and governments recognise that a school cannot be built everywhere that children live, yet children need to attend school. It is not just "property" or "station" children who need to go away to boarding. Many rural towns only have P-6 primary schools and the children in these towns also often go away to a school that offers boarding. Queensland for example, has eight shires that do not have a High School within them and a further two shires that only offer to Year 10. There are other Queensland shires which may have some secondary schooling available, but it is often in a regional town which can be hundreds of kilometres from where some geographically isolated students live within the shire. These children live too far away to travel back and forth between home and a school regularly as there are no schools near them. It is often a misunderstanding that these children who board to access schooling are going past a local school to try to have an "elite" education, when in most cases these children have no school in near proximity to where they live.

Boarding for these children comes at a cost. Very few government schools offer a full-time boarding option. For example: New South Wales has two government run schools which offer boarding although one is for male students only, and Queensland has three with one of these schools having a modified program and being located in the Far North which is hard to access for students outside the region. The New South Wales schools are at capacity and it is very difficult for students to get a place. Queensland has 45 independent/Catholic boarding schools besides the government schools and if all of the boarding students from these schools required places in a government school, there would not be enough room to accommodate them. Hostels, which were once more prevalent in country areas have dwindled in numbers and often are only able to accommodate children on a Monday to Friday basis which does not work well for children living great distances away. Attending a non-government boarding school results in families needing to pay both a boarding fee for lodging and meals as well as a tuition fee for study, which can be prohibitive. Rural and remote students also have additional costs for travelling large distances to get to school (and regional airfares can be exorbitant).





Many rural families have more than one child away boarding at once, and families often need to pay for 2-4 students in boarding at the same time.

The implications of not being able to meet the excess education costs for children from natural disaster or rural hardship impacted areas who require boarding away from home in order to receive an education are causing serious side-effects, including:

- Unsustainable out-of-pocket costs of boarding school for rural families, particularly in times of natural disaster or rural hardship.
- Rural families increasing debt/overdraft to pay school fees.
- Families removing children from boarding school or not taking up offered places in schools.
- Splitting the family with one parent or family member moving with the children to town to access schooling.
- Departure of entire families rural areas to live in a town with access to schooling.
- Mental health of both parents and students already affected by the continuing drought compounded due to the worry over finding the funds for schooling.

Boarding schools have been supportive of rural students during the natural disaster or rural hardship however, they must run as a business and many are finding it difficult to continue to assist multiple students whose families cannot pay the required fees over such a long period. The concern that resonates across rural and remote Australia is, how does a geographically isolated student access schooling if their family cannot afford to pay the excess costs associated with their compulsory education?

Members of ICPA Federal Council have heard heartbreaking stories of families who cannot meet the costs of boarding and removing children from school or trying to decide which child will be educated and which child will not. No Australian parent should have to choose between their children when it comes to accessing compulsory schooling. When a child is removed from boarding school, this can mean the end of the education for this child, particularly if they have completed Year 10. ICPA (Aust) is also hearing from boarding schools themselves that enrolment places that have been offered to rural students are in some cases being left vacant as families realise they do not have the extra funding needed to send their children away for school. Other families have made the decision for one parent to move to town with the children in order to access state school education, effectively splitting the family home and often leaving the father back at home to cope on his own in these tough times. Sometimes the entire family leaves and moves to a more regional centre to access schooling and the rural community loses another family.

Mental health is a large concern in rural communities and the struggle to pay educational fees for compulsory schooling exacerbates the pressure. Parents are agonising over not being able to fund this basic requirement for their children. The children themselves are well aware of the cost and financial sacrifice that their families are making in order for them to be educated. This places a huge amount of self-burden on these children, as they feel they should be at home helping when employment numbers have been reduced and their parents are trying to continue to manage their stock, land and businesses in hopes of generating income once the drought has broken, and at the same time knowing that educational expenses are driving the family further into debt. These feelings of guilt and helplessness are very difficult for children to handle and a burden a child should not have to bear when it comes to education. ICPA (Aust) welcomed a report and nine recommendations released by UNICEF Australia in February 2019: "In Their Own Words: The Hidden Impact of Prolonged Drought on Children and Young People" which highlighted strong concerns from rural communities for the wellbeing of children experiencing drought, including a section on the unique challenges faced by boarding students.

Rural students cannot and should not be expected to defer their education during times of drought/rural hardship while their family's income is limited. It is crucial that rural students' education can continue at these times. Distance Education is sometimes suggested as a solution; however, distance education does not best suit every student, can be difficult to implement especially for secondary age students and requires a dedicated supervisor in the home





schoolroom. Rural families dealing with natural disasters or rural hardships often cannot provide or hire someone else to be in the schoolroom to implement school lessons when they are already struggling and shorthanded.

Safeguards must be put in place as a matter of urgency to ensure educational continuity when the huge out-of-pocket costs associated with educating geographically isolated students, especially those children who must board away from home, cannot be met during times of long-term natural disaster, recovery periods or other rural hardship, when families experience years of little to no income. While 4000 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2017, the number impacted by long-term drought/hardship and needing Rural Hardship Educational Assistance would be considerably less at any one time.

Drought and other rural hardship impact all types of schooling for rural and remote students, children in the towns can be affected as well as those on properties. This situation is often true for any situation of rural hardship in rural and remote communities.

### Rural Schools

Living in a constant bleak environment of natural disasters or rural hardship is very difficult for students, parents and communities. The draining, oppressive feeling of natural disasters or rural hardship is compounded when schools in the affected area are unable to participate in activities that they normally would. Many small rural schools depend on local community support and contributions in order to undertake school activities such as school camps, outings, events, sending sporting teams or representatives to competitions and bringing in artists or sports coaches to enhance education in rural areas. This is much more difficult, if not impossible, in times of rural hardship as members and businesses of local communities are suffering from limited income and do not have extra funds to spare to support their local school. If schools cannot raise funds in their local community, it can be nearly impossible for them to undertake extra activities that would normally be a part of their school program. Having extra support for schools in times of drought and rural hardship can enable schools to offer activities that the children would otherwise miss out on and even offer opportunity to take the children away from the harshness in the area for a short time. It can also assist them with the extra needs that students may have in times of hardship.

### Distance Education

Families whose children study by distance education also have challenges in natural disaster and rural hardship. Distance Education home schoolrooms require a home tutor or supervisor to be in the classroom to ensure students are able to understand and complete work, mark papers and keep the schoolroom running. This task often falls on the mother. It can be difficult for mums as the home tutors to find time to be in the schoolroom as they are required in the paddock to help with feeding stock and other tasks associated with managing their business. With a limited income, families struggle to hire and pay a governess to help the family, (many families put off staff in drought to minimise costs) and many people prefer not to work in drought areas. Distance Education students and their families require extra support in times of drought and rural hardship to assist these children in their learning.

### Early Childhood Education and Care

Educating younger rural and remote children in natural disaster or rural hardship impacted areas can also be financially difficult. Families incur expenses in travelling many kilometres to access mobile playgroups, In Home Care fees for child care, out-of-pocket costs of educating pre-schoolers. Long day care centres and country kindergartens struggle to remain open in times of rural hardship as the community fundraising which normally props up student fees and government subsidies is not available due to limited income in the community. An additional cost is placed on families with young children studying a preschool or kindergarten program through Distance Education as these children are ineligible to receive the

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) for these early learning programs. Even though these children need to set up their classroom, acquire a computer and resources to participate in the program and will receive the AIC when they begin their first formal year of schooling, they do not qualify for any assistance for schooling in their preschool program. It would be a huge help to these families (estimation is that approximately only 200 children per year who



study a preschool program via distance education Australia-wide) if the AIC could be extended to rural and remote students enrolled in a preschool program via distance education, so that their learning can begin at an early age along with their urban counterparts.

ICPA (Aust) thanks the Government for the 5 September 2019 announcement of the waiver of the In Home Care activity test for families experiencing drought or the monsoon event in North Queensland in recognition of the extra burden these events have placed on families in accessing child care.

ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) – *temporary financial hardship*, which is available to provide additional fee assistance with child care to support families experiencing financial hardship. This assistance is available for a maximum of 13 weeks of assistance per event. As droughts and other rural hardship may extend well past a three-month time frame and accessing child care in rural and remote areas can be extremely difficult, a long-term additional child care assistance should be included within a Rural Hardship Education Fund.

### Tertiary Study and Training

Rural and regional students are under-represented at university and one of the main reasons given for not undertaking tertiary study is the high cost to relocate great distances to access further study. This is a challenge that is exacerbated in times of drought. There are less training opportunities available in rural areas and in drought affected areas, it can be even more challenging. These students find it harder to go away to seek training as they have less chance to earn funds to do so. A Tertiary Access Allowance would assist rural and remote students with the cost to relocate in order to continue their study or training.

ICPA (Aust) calls for the immediate creation of a Rural Hardship Education Fund to assist rural families with access to education in times of long-term natural disasters, periods of recovery and other rural hardship. Specifically relating to drought situations, there may be provision for inclusion of such a fund under the current Federal Drought Package, Future Drought Fund Act 2019 or a special circumstances criterion within the AIC Scheme. As drought declarations are not made in every State despite properties experiencing extremely dry conditions, this assistance, however it is distributed, must be available to all of those being affected by extreme rain deficiency events over a period of time.

### RECOMMENDATION

A Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) be put in place permanently to assist rural and remote students with the cost of education during times of rural hardship to ensure their schooling can continue unchanged.

Geographically isolated children should not be disadvantaged or unable to attend their studies at boarding school, distance education or small rural schools due to ongoing long-term times of rural hardship. Educational expenses are an investment for the future prosperity of all our rural and remote communities and ICPA (Aust) urges the Federal Government to assist rural families in educating these children in tough times.

A Rural Hardship Education Fund should include but not be limited to:

- A supplementary payment made through the Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance (AIC) for rural and remote families identified as living in areas affected by hardship. A significant increase to the AIC is required to address the shortfall between the existing allowance rates and the actual cost of attending education for rural and remote students. Previous droughts (e.g. 2008) and the 2019 monsoon event saw a supplementary payment given to students receiving the AIC, however no additional assistance has occurred in the current drought. The AIC has been increased at times in order to reflect the needs of



geographically isolated families in order to maintain education of their children, particularly in times of disaster. The AIC consists of several components including Boarding, Distance Education and Second Home and is well designed to get assistance to rural and remote families to assist with access to education.

- Additional Funding for Rural Schools located in affected areas which can be used at the schools' discretion for students' needs including school activities, camps, resources, uniforms, visiting coaches, specialised teachers and artists/musicians. This type of funding has been given to rural schools previously in times of hardship/drought, (e.g. 2009-2010 Federal Budget Measure – Drought Assistance for Schools), providing precedence for this type of assistance (although it has not been initiated in the current drought).
- Additional itinerant and specialist teachers made available in affected areas to enable more support for Distance Education students and Rural Schools, including home visits in remote classrooms and other localised support resources.
- Adjusted rate/additional subsidy available long-term to assist affected families to access In Home Care and child care for young children.
- Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students enrolled in university, training courses, or apprenticeships.

Assistance should be aimed at geographically isolated students and consideration available for individual applications and not dependent on a State 'declaration' as some States do not declare drought officially. These families' income can suffer and their ability to pay for school costs be hindered just as much in what their State may call a 'rain depression' as if they were officially drought declared. Consideration should be available for individual applications in situations where a family is outside of a recognised assistance area or category but has similar circumstances and needs.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The establishment of a permanent/long term Rural Hardship Education Fund that remains in place so that each time a disaster/hardship hits a rural area, funds are automatically available for geographically isolated students' education assistance programs and should include:

- A supplementary payment made to the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance (AIC) for families identified as being in rural hardship. For example: living in drought affected areas/states.
- Funding for Rural Schools, Early Learning/Long Day Care Centres in affected areas.
- Itinerant and specialist teachers made available to enable more support for Distance Education students and Rural Schools, including home visits in remote classrooms and other localised support resources.
- Adjusted rate/additional subsidy to assist affected families to access In Home Care for young children.
- Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students enrolled in university, training courses, or an apprenticeship.
- Assistance for Isolated Children supplementary assistance amount should at minimum be reflective of previous AIC drought and flood assistance payment rates with consideration of rise in education costs and should be:
  - at least \$2000 per student per year.
  - available for Geographically Isolated/rural students