



# Briefing Papers 2025-2026

## 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 (Aust) 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 (Aust) has achieved much for families and children who are isolated from access to educational services. ICPA (Aust) 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. Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme - Access to Compulsory Education

- **Restore the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA)** to fulfil its original intent of covering at least 55% of average cost of boarding and alignment to the CPI Education Sub Index.
- **Address the gap** between the actual costs of boarding and the AIC BBA.  
The gap between the amount the AIC BBA increases and the actual cost of educating geographically isolated children continues to widen.  
Implement solutions:
  - Immediate increase of the AIC BBA of \$4000,
  - Ensure the BBA maintains 55% 'cover' of the cost of boarding (calculated as Australian boarding average OR individual family boarding actual costs)
  - Align AIC BBA with CPI education sub-index.
  - Honour annual increase in the AIC BBA to reflect the increasing cost in boarding fees and CPI in an ongoing timeline.
- **AIC Second Home Allowance (SHA)** 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.
- **Display separate categories within the AIC for:**
  - Geographically Isolated (GI) students; The unique needs of GI students should be recognised by categorising them separately under the AIC BBA to identify the needs of these geographically isolated boarding students. E.g. they do NOT have the luxury of choice, attending boarding school is their only option to secondary education.
  - Special Needs (SN) students; The unique needs of SN students should be identified separately to GI students to ensure they receive the appropriate support.
  - GI/SN students with special needs who reside in geographically isolated areas should be afforded their own category to ensure appropriate support is afforded to them.
- **Support and Implement an 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. While ICPA (Aust) would certainly not like to see any of the current eligibility criteria for the AIC removed or diminished, ICPA (Aust) believe a review is timely to ensure the Scheme is adequately meeting the needs of all geographically isolated students and not being taken advantage of by other groups within the community.

#### 2. School funding model/s and impacts on 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.
- The **Recurrent School Funding Model Includes provision for Boarding Schools** to receive a Fringe



Benefits Tax (FBT) exemption, on accommodation provided to staff where the school accommodates students from remote and very remote areas as defined by the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) score.

### 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

- Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) exemption for schools/boarding facilities providing on site living facilities for essential supervisory staff on that accommodation.
- Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) exemption for businesses who would like to provide financial assistance to employees residing in geographically isolated areas, to enable their children to attend boarding schools.

The cost of accessing compulsory education for geographically isolated children should not be taxed irrespective of who is bearing the cost. Affordable access to boarding schools for employees who work in remote areas provide their children with equitable access to school facilities as those in urban areas

### 5. Students with disability from rural and remote areas

- Financial support to boarding facilities / schools for students with disabilities from rural and remote areas.
- Financial support to families from rural and remote areas with students identified through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) who reside in a boarding facility for secondary education.
- An amendment to the 2025 review of the “Disability Standards for Education 2005”.

### 6. Continue and expand the ‘Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program’ pilot.

**The intended outcomes** (as stated on the Australian Government – Department of Education webpage) **of the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program are to:**

- Assist students from rural, regional and remote areas with boarding fees, in order to provide a quality education option where local alternatives may not exist or be suitable.
- Provide additional financial support to families who are unable to afford boarding school fees and associated costs, even with existing government support, with the intention to reduce family's financial contribution towards boarding school fees.
- Provide a supported boarding experience for students and families from low socioeconomic status backgrounds or experiencing financial hardship.

### 7. Permanent establishment of a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF)

The development and establishment of a permanent RHEF would provide emergency financial relief to families with students eligible for the AIC allowance who are located in disaster-stricken regions.

- In the wake of catastrophic flooding families lose their homes and schoolrooms where distance education takes place.
- Timely financial assistance, administered through the RHEF and linked to the AIC, can minimise the disruption to the education of disaster affected students ensuring they have the ability to access education during times of significant disruption caused by unforeseen disasters.



## ISSUE 1 - Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance - Access to Compulsory Education

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.

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.

**Federal Government commitment:** In April 2025, ICPA (Aust) received correspondence from the Prime Minister and Cabinet stating that:

***The Government is committed to ensuring that every child regardless of socioeconomic background or geographical location has access to high quality education.***

Despite this strong, supportive commitment, our members' children continue to be disadvantaged due to the inaction of the Federal Government to stand by their statement or apply our recommendations to the issues faced by our members in accessing education for their children.

2025 National Average - BOARDING FEES		% Covered by AIC
Australia by State / Territory	Average Boarding Fee	Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA) \$10338.00
Victoria	\$32,967.69	31.4
Northern Territory	\$32,945.00	31.4
Australian Capital Territory	\$32,190.00	32.1
South Australia	\$26,694.13	38.7
New South Wales	\$25,487.41	40.6
Queensland	\$22,876.83	45.2
Tasmania	\$22,700.00	45.5
Western Australia	\$22,266.33	46.4



### **AIC Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA)**

The gap between the AIC BBA and actual cost of boarding continues to widen, increasing the financial burden faced by rural families.

In 2025, Boarding fees increased annually by 4% to 8%, yet the BBA only increased by 3.79% Members continue to have their most basic needs ignored when it comes to accessing and providing an education to their children. The Basic Boarding Allowance must align with the rising costs of boarding.

Attending Boarding School for secondary education, for many geographically isolated students, is their only option. Boarding school fees continued to rise due to increasing operational costs including staffing, accommodation, transport and pastoral care. Meanwhile, the AIC BBA has seen only minimal adjustments over the years, resulting in a growing gap between the financial support provided on the actual expenses to the family space. This widening gap places an unsustainable burden on isolated families and erodes their educational choices.

As an equity measure, the AIC must be sufficient to ensure that students living in remote and rural areas can access quality education on a level playing field with their urban peers.

Without adequate support, families are forced to make difficult decisions that may compromise their children's educational opportunities, well-being and stability.

ICPA Members *agree* with the Prime Minister and Cabinet; Children in rural and remote locations across Australia should not be disadvantaged by distance or geographical location, especially when they have **no other option for secondary education.**

Some of these **students live hundreds of kilometers** from their closest town and **high school**. Some of these students have **no high school options in their small town** / community. Yet, these families are not adequately financially supported to access compulsory secondary education. If the Federal Government is serious about delivering equitable access to education for all Australian children, regardless of post code, it must commit to a meaningful increase to the AIC BBA and index it appropriately to reflect ongoing increases.

### **AIC Second Home Allowance**

Boarding school is not a suitable environment for every student. 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.

Providing families *the option of establishing a second home* when children are of school age is the best outcome for accessing education for some families / children. This option would provide families from rural and remote Australia, with the ability to educate their children when boarding is not a suitable option for their child.

In some 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.

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.



ICPA (Aust) has concerns about the scope of assistance for families educating rural and remote children.

ICPA (Aust) 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 the 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 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.

#### **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 Services Australia to resolve these issues on behalf of its members.

ICPA (Aust) requests 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 AIC 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.

Federal Government review and amend Rule 3 in the application for Assistance for Isolated Children from SY040 to remove the continuing requirement once the initial requirement has been met.



Rule 3: The student does not have reasonable access to an appropriate state school for at least 20 days in a year because of adverse travel conditions (e.g.: impassable roads) or other circumstances beyond the family's control.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restore the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA) to cover at least 55% of the average cost of boarding. As was its original intention when implemented in 1973.
- Implement formulas to ensure the AIC BBA allowing covering at least 55% of the average cost of boarding is met, appropriately adjusted, and honoured in an ongoing timeline.
- That A review of the eligibility criteria for the Additional Boarding Allowance (ABA) under the Geographically Isolated (GI) category of the AIC, so that entitlement is determined solely on the basis of actual boarding costs incurred as a family without being subject to parent parental income testing.
- That the AIC second home allowance be paid at the same rate as the AIC BBA.
- Expansion of the AIC allowance criteria, including the Limited Program Schools Criteria to allow more rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance.
- A separate category for Geographically Isolated (GI) students under AIC.
- A separate category for Special Needs (SN) students identified in the AIC.
- A separate category for GI/SN students identified in the AIC.
- Improvements to AIC application and renewal process include an online platform.
- A review of the AIC scheme be conducted to ensure the allowances meeting the needs of the geographically isolated students it was established to help.
- Create an option for their AIC payments to be made in either 3 or 4 instalments per year as per individual needs of the family of a year 12 student.
- That claims processing times for AIC and ABSTUDY services be reduced

### ISSUE 2 - School funding model/s and impacts on boarding schools

ICPA (Aust) represents many families whose children, due to geographical isolation, must attend 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 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 boarding schools and the accessibility and affordability of these schools for geographically isolated students.
- That the capacity to contribute methodology recognises financial circumstances of geographically isolated families when applied to independent schools and independent boarding schools which cater for geographically isolated students who board at the school.
- An immediate increase of the AIC BBA of at least \$4000 per geographically isolated recipient to address the rising expenses for families (Boarding Fees in 2025 rose between 4% - 8%, yet the increase to the AIC was only 3.79%)
- Annual increases to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance (ABA) 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%). Alarmingly 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 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 - Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT)

**FBT - Issue 1.** It is critical that the Federal Government change the policy on Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) as it currently applies to essential boarding school staff required to “live in” to perform their duty of care of residential students in metropolitan boarding institutions despite the boarding facility caring for children from the most geographical isolated areas of Australia.

These GI students have NO OTHER choice; they must attend a boarding facility to access a secondary education. This tax negatively impacts on the cost of an equitable education for isolated students.

The removal of the FBT on residential accommodation for essential supervisory staff employed by boarding schools will significantly reduce the costs incurred by boarding schools who care for students from GI locations. **Boarding Schools with GI students, who offer ‘live-in’ options for their staff should be recognised with a FBT exemption.**

The removal of the Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) on residential accommodation for essential supervisory staff could significantly reduce the costs incurred by some boarding schools. The Australian Boarding Schools’ Association (ABSA) estimates that the FBT on the residential accommodation for the boarding schools in large cities adds an average of approximately \$2000 per child. Staff accommodation is a fundamental necessity of a boarding school.

**Boarding school staff must live on site to supervise the boarders in their care.**

Educational expenses are considerably high for families who must send their children to boarding school due to geographical location. Unfair taxes are adding to the high costs of educating students from rural and remote areas. The Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) that is applied to essential boarding staff in large cities is one example of the taxes that are impacting affordability and accessibility to an equitable education.

In addition, the taxes appear to be levied across sectors in a most inequitable and inconsistent manner. For example, FBT is applied to boarding supervisors’ accommodation, yet it is not levied on aged care facilities or military establishments. As another example, GST is levied on boarding school food, yet not on the food provided in aged care facilities.

Boarding associations and boarding schools have been lobbying for the Fringe Benefits Tax on essential boarding school staff to be removed. ICPA (Aust) supporting this advocacy and assisting in raising awareness of this concern where possible would lend a greater voice to this issue on behalf of rural and remote students.

**FBT - Issue 2.** Employers in geographically isolated areas assisting with the educational costs of children of employees should be exempt of fringe benefit tax for these payments. The cost of accessing compulsory education for geographically isolated children should not be taxed irrespective of who is bearing the cost. Affordable access to boarding schools for employees who work in remote areas provides their children with equitable access to school facilities as those in urban areas.

Currently, when employers offer financial assistance towards the cost of schooling, the payment is deemed a Fringe Benefit and taxed at the rate of 47%. Any contribution made by the employer is compounded with almost half the amount again in tax.



## **Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) exemption for businesses who would like to provide financial assistance to employees residing in geographically isolated areas, to enable their children to attend boarding schools.**

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.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Exemption of the Fringe Benefits Tax on accommodation provided by boarding schools (with children enrolled as identified in the AIC allowance) who wish to assist essential 'live-in' boarding school staff, be approved and implemented.
- Removal of the fringe benefits tax for businesses wishing to assist employees residing in geographically isolated areas to enable their children to attend boarding school.
- The Recurrent School Funding Model includes provision for Boarding Schools to receive a Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) exemption, an accommodation provided to staff where the school accommodates students from remote and very remote areas as defined by the Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) score.
- The Federal Government support an instruct the Treasury to change the FBT policy to enable all boarding facilities who have students enrolled from rural and remote areas identified through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme to require that they are exempt from FBT under the existing guidelines; 58ZC Exempt Benefits - Remote Area housing Benefits (on campus accommodation)



## ISSUE 5 - Students with disability from rural and remote areas

### **Additional support to boarding schools for students from geographically isolated areas with a disability that have no local secondary school options available to them due to isolation.**

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 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.

A collaborative approach including stakeholders such as the Department of Education, Commissioner for Regional Education and the National Disability Insurance Scheme to work to include an amendment to the 2025 review of the "Disability Standards for Education 2005" to ensure financial support (as outlined above) is met.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 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 Schools Students with Disability (NCCD) database.
- The inclusion of an amendment into the 2025 Review of the 'Disability Standards for Education 2005' to encompass the needs of Geographically Isolated students with a disability residing in a boarding facility for secondary education.

## ISSUE 6 - Continue and expand the 'Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program' pilot.

The implementation of the CRSP in 2024, has allowed many families who were successful recipients of the Scholarship, the opportunity to stay in their rural or remote communities (*where suitable, local, secondary school alternatives do not exist*) and be able to meet the financial obligations of sending children to boarding school to



access a secondary education.

There are hundreds of eligible families who fit the criteria to receive a Commonwealth Regional Scholarship that were not successful in their application (or had the opportunity to submit an application) who are feeling more helpless as the financial, emotional and social burden increases.

There are hundreds of children who need to move away from home to attend boarding school to access compulsory secondary education because there are no local options in their area.

**Assistance, as outlined in the '*CRSP intended outcomes*' should be afforded to all families who fit the criteria, not just a select few.**

By extending the CRSP past its pilot and increasing the number of scholarships made available, the Australian Government will be providing long term meaningful access and assistance to education for students and their families who live and work in rural and remote locations with limited or no secondary school options.

**The intended outcomes (as stated on the Australian Government – Department of Education webpage) of the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program are to:**

- Assist students from rural, regional and remote areas with boarding fees, in order to provide a quality education option where local alternatives may not exist or be suitable.
- Provide additional financial support to families who are unable to afford boarding school fees and associated costs, even with existing government support, with the intention to reduce family's financial contribution towards boarding school fees.
- Provide a supported boarding experience for students and families from low socioeconomic status backgrounds or experiencing financial hardship.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- To continue the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program (pilot) into the future.
- To expand the number of Scholarships available in the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program.
- To award a Commonwealth Regional Scholarship to all students who fit the criteria.
- Publicly announce the review date and findings for the CRSP pilot and share with ICPA (Aust).
- Acknowledge that the CRSP has been a highly successful initiative that has been supported to expand and continue beyond its pilot program by: Regional Rural and Remote families from across Australia, ICPA Members, Australian Boarding Schools Association and the Busy at Work group.

### ISSUE 7 - Permanent establishment of a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF)

The development of a permanent RHEF would provide emergency relief to families eligible for the AIC allowance in disaster-stricken regions, ensuring their children have access to schooling, tertiary and trade opportunities and provide relief to parents who are educating their children by schools of distance education when their families are struggling to recover.

- Unforeseen disasters and industry crisis are not something that can be planned for.
- Overnight, family income and abilities to meet educational payments can be taken away.
- In rural and remote locations, gaining an education often requires students to leave their homes and communities, to attend boarding school and or to undertake tertiary or training pathways.



- Families who lived through natural disaster events are exposed to the impact on the affordability of boarding school fees or assisting children to further studies due to loss of crops, livestock, infrastructure and financial livelihood.
- In the wake of catastrophic flooding families lose their homes and schoolrooms where distance education takes place.
- Without financial assistance, the education of disaster affected students is significantly disrupted.

Key features include:

- Trigger events: natural disasters, economic shocks, or family crises.
- Eligibility: rural and remote families receiving AIC, children in local rural schools, and tertiary students from hardship-affected areas.
- Assistance types: supplementary RHEF payments (min. \$2,000/student/year), school grants, tutoring support for distance education, extended childcare subsidies, and tertiary access allowances, Additional funding for the Isolated Classroom (e.g.: loss of educational material during a flood event)
- Administration: delivered through the Department of Social Services, using existing AIC infrastructure, which is automatically triggered when an AIC family is identified in a 'trigger event.' This will ensure a rapid and meaningful response.
- Capacity for direct family application, irrespective of disaster declarations (this would encompass family crisis)

An example of how the Rural Hardship Education Fund can be implemented:

In 2019, widespread flooding occurred in Northwest Queensland. Financial assistance was automatically tied to AIC recipients. This provides a real-life example of how the RHEF can be implemented.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a permanent Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) is established to provide financial assistance to rural and remote families, ensuring their children can continue their education during and after periods of natural disasters and to reduce educational disadvantage.
- The RHEF payment is linked directly to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme with automatic payments and ensuring timely identification of children enrolled and educated by schools of distance education or geographically isolated areas.
- Provide a minimum \$2,000 (indexed with CPI) per-student supplement during hardship periods that is triggered automatically when a natural disaster / family crisis is identified.
- Extend funding to rural schools and early learning centers.
- Include distance education students (as identified via AIC) and childcare hardship provisions.
- Offer tertiary access support for affected students.
- Allow direct family applications irrespective of natural disaster declarations.
- Maintain and evaluate the REHF giving agency to the family's identified via AIC to ensure long-term impact is meaningful.
- Flexible eligibility not tied solely to state drought declarations.



## 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, reliable, affordable 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 Premium. 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.
  - Services need to be reliable, so families do not have to pay for two service providers.
  - 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 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. The School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) needs to be continued and expanded.
  - The provision of free nbn for connected families through the SSBI needs to continue until the end of the students' educational journey.
  - The SSBI continues to be available to eligible regional, rural and remote students until the cessation of their educational journey.
3. 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.



- Funding/rebate for rural and remote people who must upgrade their devices and infrastructure to access basic communication services for education purposes.
- 4. Families have access to communication services commensurate to their needs, including two sources of communication (i.e. voice and data) 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).
- The Regional Tech Hub needs to be maintained and supported to assist rural and remote families with communication issues, questions and services.
- 5. Addressing the decline in mobile network coverage since the closure of the 3G mobile network
  - reduced 4G voice coverage in regions that previously had strong 3G coverage
  - call dropouts in existing 4G areas
  - reduced call quality

#### **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 Plus Premium services and any alternative technology is sufficient for both current and future demand. The roll out of nbn Sky Muster Plus Premium 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 continuation of the Regional Tech Hub has been 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. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that for connections that are required for education purposes, a Sky Muster Plus Premium service is a comparable solution for students unable to access the Education Service such as tertiary, boarding or small rural school students, with unlimited data providing better streaming and everyday use. Information about Sky Muster Plus Premium 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 Premium plan, however these Plans are not available with all Retail Service Providers (RSPs).

Reliable communication internet connectivity is paramount for the education of rural and remote students. Currently, some families are maintaining two different providers of internet, to ensure reliability. Some families are paying for services provided by both nbn and Starlink, so if one drops out the other may still work. This is reflective of the historical unreliability of internet services, poor product and provider choices as well as large wait times for installation of hardware for new services, or repair of equipment. Families should not be having to pay for two



internet connections due to the unreliable nature of internet connectivity in the rural and remote areas.

It is critical that internet and 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) 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.

ICPA (Aust) encourages all governments and service providers 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. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the expansion of the nbn fixed wireless network which has transitioned some customers from satellite to fixed wireless, creating the opportunity for the unmetered Sky Muster products. However, internet connectivity demands are increasing at an exponential rate, so the fixed wireless expansion program must continue.

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.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- That adequate, reliable, affordable internet connectivity 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.
- Services need to be reliable, so families do not need to pay two service providers.
- Fault reporting and repairs need to prioritise (both internet and phone) rural and remote students.
- 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 continue 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 - The School Student Broadband Initiative (SSBI) needs to be continued and expanded

The Australian Government provided around 30,000 qualifying families with school age children a free nbn service through its SSBI (free nbn connection to families with school age children who did not have a working home internet connection), 33% of these families are rural and remote. Connected families receive free internet until June 2028. These families may be unable to continue funding connectivity services beyond the end of June 2028, due to their circumstances compromising educational accessibility and optimal learning outcomes which in turn leads to the student being unable to fulfill their potential.

The SSBI program has reached capacity and is fully allocated. No further applications are being accepted. To boost education opportunities and narrow the digital divide ICPA (Aust) advocates that the SSBI continues to be available to eligible regional, rural and remote students until the cessation of their educational journey.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- The provision of free nbn for connected families through the SSBI needs to continue until the end of the students' educational journey.
- The SSBI continue to be available to eligible regional, rural and remote students until the cessation of their educational journey.

## ISSUE 3 - Telephony Services in Regional, Rural and Remote Areas

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.

The Universal Service Obligation (USO) for voice services is currently under review. ICPA (Aust) understands that new technologies and alternative voice services are being introduced, however regrettably at this time some of these alternatives seem to be reliant on satellite technology or access to mobile service; many of our members, who currently rely on copper and HCRC landline systems, have limited to no mobile coverage in their area. The USO must remain on landline telephony services for those living outside mobile coverage areas to provide for the unique and challenging needs of regional, rural and remote locations and ensure any new voice services exceed the reliability and quality of existing voice services for those living in rural and remote areas. The Universal Service Obligation must continue to provide for the unique and challenging needs of regional, rural and remote locations.

Until such time as new viable telephony alternatives which have been tested in geographically isolated locations in weather and environmental events such as heavy rainfall, extreme and excessive heat and dust, and proven to be dependable, affordable and reliable, with appropriate back up power supply, HCRC and copper landline services need to be maintained and upgraded as required, ensuring that families in rural and remote areas have at least two independent communication sources available to them.

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.

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.

Rural and remote families are incurring large expenses to upgrade their devices and infrastructure to ensure they continue to be compatible with 4G/5G systems. Such changes to telecommunications systems do not have the same fiscal impact on urban areas, continuing to disadvantage rural and remote Australians.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Universal Service Obligation must continue to provide for the unique and challenging needs of regional, rural and remote locations.
- The Universal Service Guarantee 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.
- That phone or internet services required for rural and remote students to undertake their education experiencing outages and faults be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- Increase mobile coverage in rural and remote areas.
- Provide some form of funding/rebate to rural and remote people having to upgrade devices and infrastructure to access education.

### ISSUE 4 – Families have access to communication services commensurate to their needs, including two sources of communication (i.e. voice and data) and comparable to those provided in urban areas.

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 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. The emergence of LEOSat technology with its lower latency has the potential for an improved experience for voice services over VoIP, however it is still a satellite service that succumbs to the same reliability issues.

The need for two communication services is imperative in rural, regional and remote locations due to the vast distances and isolation our members face. 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 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. Rural and remote families need communication services from different sources as when a service is not working, it can be a long distance to assistance.

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the continued funding of the Regional Tech Hub and recommends that the hub receives ongoing 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 needs



to continue to assist with the landline and data needs of rural and remote users. Nbn local and the Telstra Regional Council 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 families living in rural, regional and remote Australia have two independent sources of communications available to them.
- Ongoing funding and support for the Regional Tech Hub to ensure regional Australians can get connected and stay connected to services that meet their needs.

### **ISSUE 5 – Decline in mobile network coverage since the closure of the 3G mobile network**

The public messaging narrative from Telcos prior to the closure of the 3G network assured consumers that equivalency of service will be achieved with 4G. The reality is it has not provided 'an equivalent or better coverage' for a number of consumers. Since the closure of the 3G network a constant theme amongst our members and all communication stakeholders has been:

- reduced 4G voice coverage in regions that previously had strong 3G coverage
- call dropouts in existing 4G areas
- reduced call quality

In the lead up to the 3G network shutdown, ICPA (Aust) members raised a number of concerns including reduced voice coverage in regions that previously had strong coverage and increased call drop out. In some areas, contacting the emergency services had been problematic.

Telstra conveyed that where areas currently had a 3G signal, showing on their coverage maps, they are committed to providing a 4G network. However, a number of ICPA (Aust) members, who previously had 3G coverage, have discovered they do not have access to the 4G network. The explanation has been that unbeknownst to them, their previous 3G coverage was fortuitous, that is, their property did not appear on the 3G coverage maps even though they were able to receive limited 3G coverage.

For some members, the availability of 3G mobile coverage gave them suitable voice call access which has resulted in the cancellation of their copper or High-Capacity Radio Concentrator (HCRC) landline services, especially in situations where the reliability and maintenance of the landline service was problematic. So, the reality for these families is a reduced voice service or no voice call service other than relying solely on satellite internet connections, with the unlikelihood of reconnecting their landline due to aging infrastructure.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

- There needs to be a continued focus and investment in improving the 4G network so that equivalency of service is provided to all Australian consumers.



## 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 are embedded in the Australian Curriculum and so need to be taught in primary and secondary school.
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

Accurate, relevant representations of Food and Fibre and Agriculture need to be taught in primary and secondary school.

- Food and Fibre is IN the Australian Curriculum and our students need teachers to integrate those resources into their lessons.
- Students need to learn that food and fibre are grown before appearing on shelves in shops.

ICPA (Aust) seeks to ensure that a broad range of subject matter specifically related to Primary Production be taught to students in Australian schools 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 has been 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. ICPA (Aust) looks forward to seeing exemplary implementations of the Food and Fibre Cross Curriculum Priority.



## RECOMMENDATION

- That Agricultural Production studies, as are embedded in the Australian Curriculum, be 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.

ICPA (Aust) notes that NAPLAN reporting timeframes have been 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. Now that teachers and school administrators have access to NAPLAN results in at least term 2, there is a higher likelihood that supports can be made available to address areas of learning need, particularly for rural and remote children who are already educationally disadvantaged.



### RECOMMENDATION

- That unique circumstances of rural and remote students are taken into consideration in the implementation of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

## 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

- Appropriate funding must be made available 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.

## 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. Remuneration for the Isolated Classroom Supervisor (RICS)

- Recognition of the value and necessity of the distance education supervisor in geographically isolated schoolrooms through the provision of appropriate remuneration.
- **Acknowledge** that families are currently responsible for providing and funding all costs associated with the supervision of students. This often requires either the employment of additional staff or the commitment of a family member, most commonly the mother.

#### 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.

#### 3. 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 rural and remote students.

#### 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 – Remuneration for the Isolated Classroom Supervisor (RICS)**

Distance Education schools require a supervisor to be present with the child in the DE schoolroom as part of the enrolment criteria. This obligation is outlined in most Distance Education school enrolment policies.

The success of the DE classroom relies on the home supervisor. The supervisor is critical in delivering the day-to-day program. The supervisor spends valuable time on supporting lessons, preparing resources, behaviour management, time management and facilitating strong communications with the distance education teachers. Supervisors do not just supervise but are the primary educators, particularly in the younger year levels.

Tasks required of the distance education supervisor 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
- being able to use educational online programs

Schools of Distance Education require a supervisor to be present with the student, as outlined in their enrolment policy. This requirement presents a significant barrier for geographically isolated families, who must supply this supervisor themselves. The supervisor is expected to dedicate between six and eight hours each day to teaching and supporting students, in addition to lesson preparation and planning time. This role demands considerable commitment, often spanning many years, and requires the supervisor to be capable and confident in delivering the program to ensure that rural and remote students can achieve educational parity with their urban peers, who have face to face access to qualified teachers and classroom support.

Distance education supervisors perform duties equivalent to those of classroom teachers in mainstream schools, spending substantial time preparing lessons, delivering instruction, and evaluating student progress, yet they receive no remuneration or formal recognition for this work. The success of distance education relies entirely on the commitment of these supervisors, who serve as the face-to-face educators for geographically isolated students.

The supervisor may be employed by the family, at the family's own expense, or may be a parent, most often the mother. In these cases, the mother forgoes paid employment, community involvement, or responsibilities within the family business. Both situations place significant financial and emotional strain on the family.

These pressures are often exacerbated during periods of dry times or other rural hardship, when the demands on family members are already considerable. The family member acting as the home supervisor is unable to contribute to the day-to-day management of the family enterprise while also supervising the children's education.



Some families choose to employ a supervisor or governess, however, this option comes at a substantial cost and is often complicated by recruitment challenges, particularly in remote locations.

Over recent decades, the roles undertaken by women in family agricultural businesses have expanded significantly. The additional responsibility of acting as the distance education supervisor further compounds their workload, placing pressure on other family members and, in some cases, necessitating the hiring of additional staff to meet business needs.

To acknowledge this critical role, the ICPA (Aust) has introduced the term Remuneration for the Isolated Classroom Supervisor (RICS). This initiative aims to advocate for financial compensation for those undertaking the compulsory task of supervising students in geographically isolated classrooms. The RICS scheme seeks to formally recognise the essential contribution of supervisors in providing equitable access to education for children in remote locations. Government support for this initiative would not only address a long-standing gap in educational equity but also strengthen Australia's commitment to supporting rural and remote students in achieving fair and consistent educational outcomes.

Distance Education supervisors must be paid, legally and fairly by the Government. Their work is not voluntary.

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 supervisor 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).”*

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

<b>Family member as geographically isolated distance education supervisor</b>	
Average hours per day	6-8 hours per day, approx. 40 weeks per year
Average years spent as DE supervisor for one child	8 years (Kindy/preschool plus primary school)
Average total hours spent supervising one child	9600 –12,800 hours
Minimum Wage	\$24.95 per hour
Unpaid Work/Wages forgone (number of hours x Minimum wage)	\$239,520 - \$319,360
Superannuation @ 12% foregone	\$28,742- \$38,323

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- That the Federal Government introduce financial remuneration for the individuals undertaking the role of supervising students in geographical isolated learning environments through a Distance education (DE) school



## 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 ICPA (Aust) 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 need 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 educating their children through distance education are required to establish and maintain a dedicated schoolroom, provide additional learning materials and resources, and print necessary documents, all of which are typically supplied to students in mainstream schools. In addition, distance education families travel long distances to attend school-based activities that provide essential opportunities for interaction and socialisation. These trips frequently involve significant travel and accommodation expenses.

The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education (DE) Allowance provides some support to help families meet these unavoidable costs of educating children in geographically isolated areas. However, increasing the existing allowance would better reflect the rising expenses faced by these families.

Given the nature of distance education, the ICPA (Aust) also requests that a separate category for geographically isolated students be established within the AIC Scheme. This category should use the existing Geographic Isolation (GI) eligibility criteria to recognise the distinct needs of these students and ensure that adequate and appropriate assistance continues to be provided to those who cannot access daily face-to-face schooling due to distance, in keeping with the original intent of the scheme.

The needs of geographically isolated students differ considerably from those of other categories now included in the AIC Scheme, particularly in terms of remoteness, lack of local services, and additional educational expenses. It is therefore essential that the allowance sufficiently addresses the out-of-pocket costs incurred by rural and remote families whose children study via distance education. Geographically isolated distance education students represent a uniquely disadvantaged group because of where they live, and financial assistance must be maintained and increased to better reflect the true cost of their education and to ensure they can access 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 rural and remote students.

### ISSUE 4 – Appropriate Learning Resources for Distance Education Students

The ICPA (Aust) acknowledges that the provision of learning materials and resources for distance education is the responsibility of State and Territory Governments. However, ICPA (Aust) seeks the continued support of the Federal Government to ensure that appropriate and high-quality resources are consistently supplied to distance education students across Australia.

Families who educate their children via distance education must establish and maintain a dedicated schoolroom, provide additional learning materials and resources, and print necessary study materials, all of which are routinely provided to students attending mainstream schools. Furthermore, these families often travel considerable distances to participate in school-based activities that promote interaction and socialisation for their children, often at their own expense.

It is essential that Distance Education schools offer a variety of learning methods, and that delivery modes remain flexible to meet the diverse needs of geographically isolated families. For instance, students who experience difficulties accessing online programs, whether due to unreliable internet connectivity, limited bandwidth, or other barriers, would have their education significantly compromised if they were required to rely solely on digital delivery.

Distance education students engage with their daily learning through a combination of methods, depending on school requirements and the communications infrastructure available in their region. Reliable, well-maintained landline phone services and stable internet access are vital for geographically isolated students, as these are their lifelines to teachers, peers, and educational programs. Ensuring equitable access to these services is therefore critical to supporting the educational success of distance education students across rural and remote Australia.

## 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

ICPA (Aust)'s research indicates that approximately 85% of geographically isolated distance education supervisors across Australia are the mothers of the children undertaking distance education. These mothers receive no formal assistance, respite, or remuneration for their role, despite being required to supervise and support their children's learning on a daily basis within the home classroom. The commitment and workload associated with this role are considerable, often equating to fulltime supervision and teaching responsibilities.

Volunteer remote educational support programs, such as **Bush Ed**, **Aussie Helpers Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (AHVISE)**, and **Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Children's Education (REVISE)**, play a vital role in



supporting rural and remote students and their families. The **REVISE** program, for example, connects retired teachers with distance education families and coordinates visits of approximately six weeks during the school year.

These programs provide invaluable assistance by temporarily taking on the role of the home supervisor, delivering lessons and educational guidance to students while offering much needed respite to supervising parents, often mothers. The support provided by these volunteers enhances the educational experience for students and contributes significantly to the wellbeing of isolated families.

ICPA (Aust) is committed to ensuring that these essential volunteer programs continue to receive the recognition and support necessary to remain available and sustainable for geographically isolated families across Australia.

### RECOMMENDATION

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

## Early Childhood Education and Care Portfolio

Access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the most important educational opportunity we can give our children. The first five years in a child's life are the most important for creating opportunities to thrive and be successful in later life. All children, regardless of where they live, should be able to access high quality early childhood education and care.

Early education is a vital tool in all children's development, along with being a foundation for learning, it is how they build confidence, interact with others, and learn important social and emotional skills

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](#) but is yet to negotiate and release their ongoing funding program beyond 2025.
- In ***A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care*** the Productivity Commission defined universal care as making quality services accessible to all children and families and agreed that achieving it will require tackling availability, affordability and inclusion gaps.
- The Federal/State agreement to fund universal care beyond 2025 needs to consider the unique circumstances in rural and remote Australia that require specific guidelines for funding to be used effectively including:



- 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.
- Ongoing funding agreements could designate funding be available for children who meet the criteria for the geographically isolated AIC DE in the year before school to make that year of their early childhood education affordable.
- 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

For some rural and remote families **Mobile Early Learning Services** providing a playgroup style program is often the **ONLY** early childhood service accessible. There are not enough of these services to provide effective ECEC for children who live in geographically isolated areas. Geographically isolated families have been without access to any early learning childhood services prior to preschool for more than a decade. Mobile early learning services could fill that gap if they were to be adequately funded for an extended period.

Playgroup Australia published ***Causal Inference in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) - Analysis of the impact of ECEC attendance on Child Development 2024***, detailing research from the University of South Australia showing:

- Playgroup attendance reduces the risk of being developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains by 40%, and developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains by 50%, a result similar to preschool.
- Attending any intervention, (i.e. preschool, playgroup or day care) reduces the risk of developmental vulnerability, but a combination of playgroup and preschool reduces the risk the most, by 60% for developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains and by 70% for developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains.
- The intervention/s which shows the largest benefit is attending playgroup and preschool together, which increases the chances of being developmentally on track on all five domains by 1.7 times.
- Preschool on its own and playgroup on its own increase the chances of being developmentally on track on all five domains by 1.4 times. Day care increases the chances by a more modest 1.2 times.

ICPA (Aust) believes that consistent delivery of mobile playgroup style ECEC programs to rural and remote families would be extremely beneficial to children meeting developmental milestones in the years before school.

Funding of rural and remote Mobile Early Learning decreased under funding restructures and continues to be uncertain so very few mobile services operate across remote and very remote Australia.

- No provisions for the establishment of new mobile early learning services are evident.
- To guarantee continuation of service a funding runway of more than 2 years is required
- 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 childcare 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 childcare 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 complete National Working with Children Check would improve the ease of transitioning early childhood education and care staff between States/Territories and would streamline and strengthen its purpose of protecting vulnerable children.
- Staffing and employment incentives and pay package parity

## **ISSUE 1 - Universal Access to Early Childhood Education**

### **Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025**

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.

ICPA (Aust) seeks **amendment** of the Preschool Reform Agreement to include the Geographically Isolated Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education Allowance for the year before children start compulsory schooling.

### **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.

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

### **Extension of Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance**

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 as per Recommendation 6.6 of the Productivity Commission's final report - ***A path to universal early childhood education and care.***

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.

Australian Government early childhood policy is guided by the clear evidence from international research showing that by the age of six, significant social and developmental gaps can emerge in children's functioning and achievement. Differences in cognitive, non-cognitive, and social skills at this stage are proven to be strong predictors of later academic success, workforce participation and broader life outcomes.

The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting formal schooling has never been stronger. This can be attributed to the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Yet despite this, The ICPA (Aust) remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions and the need for a more equitable delivery.

Future funding agreements with each State could designate funding and stipulate a requirement that each geographically isolated child completing the State approved preschool distance education program in the year before starting school, be eligible for funding to subsidise classroom setup and implementation costs and thus aid in the affordability and accessibility of their agreed 600 hours of early childhood education.

ICPA (Aust) believes that the lack of access to affordable early learning for children living beyond metropolitan boundaries is a key factor contributing to the gap in educational outcomes between rural and remote students and their peers in larger centres. This disparity is often linked to undiagnosed learning difficulties in the early years, coupled with very limited opportunities for children to socialise and interact with others.

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 of these young learners.

#### 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.

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.

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

The flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural towns to include preschoolers, increased 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.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

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

Where qualified Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access, facilitators should include qualified primary school teachers and diploma-qualified educators. Ensuring children are school-ready is critical, particularly as programs such as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Early Learning STEM Australia (ELSA) are now part of the preschool curriculum. Without access to preschool rural and remote children risk starting school already behind their urban peers.

#### **ISSUE 2 - Mobile Early Childhood Services in Rural and Remote Areas**

Mobile early childhood services are often the only exposure to such educational opportunities for children and families in small rural and very isolated communities. For many years they have delivered essential social contact, professional advice, early learning programs and development review for children, while also supporting parents. In many cases, these mobile services provide the only face to face interaction children have with like aged peers.

To sustain this vital service, flexibility and certainty of funding is essential. Ongoing, adequate investment is needed to not only maintain and encourage existing mobile services but also to establish new service in geographically isolated areas where none currently exist. Without this support, children in rural and remote communities risk missing the critical socialisation and early learning experiences their urban peers take for granted.

Key issues requiring urgent attention include:

- Mobile early learning services are transitioned from Budget Based Funding into other programs with consideration of this unique role and service delivery.
- Introduction of funding provisions that make the service attractive to establish and maintain for longer periods of time.
- Continuation of existing funding but with extended periods of time eg 2 years funding to be extended to 5 years.

#### **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 can provide accommodation, previously found the IHC program to be an affordable option when it came to accessing childcare. However, In Home Care is no longer meeting the needs of families, with the following concerns continually raised by our members:

- That the IHC program needs to remain affordable and accessible for all rural and remote families who have no other childcare options.
- In rural and remote areas where face-to-face schooling is not available, children rely on distance education programs such as School of the Air. While lessons are delivered remotely by qualified teachers, no teacher is physically present with the child. Families must therefore provide a supervisor—often a parent, governess, or tutor—to guide daily learning, keep students on task, and support lesson completion. Without this supervision, young learners cannot effectively engage with distance education. Fees charged by IHC providers are rising and changing often without explanation.
- The In-Home Care sector data being removed from major research and reports for Government use. Figure 7 on page 19 of the final Productivity Commission report *A path to universal early childhood education and care* shows out of pocket expenses as a share of family after tax income but it excludes In Home Care services. ICPA (Aust) request separate collection and analysis of geographically isolated In-Home Care data to inform future reform of the IHC program and hourly rate cap with accurate and specific data.

### 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 for infrastructure and operational costs ECEC in rural and remote areas.

Childcare services under the Child Care Subsidy Model are capped at \$200,000 per year in CCCF Sustainability funding, even when their operational shortfalls are far greater. Applying the same cap to regional, remote, and very remote services is inequitable. Remote and very remote services face significantly higher costs—such as staff housing and pay parity loadings needed to attract and retain qualified teachers—yet have no greater access to long-term funding. With limited eligibility for the CCCF-Restricted pool, these services are left without a fair mechanism to meet their real costs, placing the future of early learning in the most disadvantaged communities at risk.



There are currently limited opportunities for community based early childhood services to gain the required capital funding for significant infrastructure needs to meet demand in remote communities. This affects rural, remote, and geographically isolated children, because they end up in “childcare deserts” where early childhood services are not provided. The cost of infrastructure in remote locations is significantly higher than regional and metro settings yet there is no appropriate funding mechanism.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

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

#### **Short term childcare services**

There are short term childcare services available to some rural and remote families who cannot afford 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 childcare in the family home when they need childcare 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 childcare 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 childcare without the CCS is an unaffordable option leaving families to try find other ways to manage childcare needs. Families living in rural and remote areas have no real option of childcare 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 its rural and remote areas) has the worst access to childcare in the country, just finding a facility, let alone accessing it, is a difficult undertaking. 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 were to consider the needs of rural and remote families, therefore allowing them to access early childhood education and 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 childcare needs and childcare services in rural and remote communities regarding these families accessing the Child Care Subsidy.



## Family Day Care in Rural Australia

ICPA (Aust) fully support Recommendation 5.3 from the Productivity Commission's final report – *A path to universal early childhood education and care* to allow two-family day-care services to be run in a single venue in regional and remote 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.

[Final Report - Recommendations](#)

### 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 childcare 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 childcare in rural and remote areas.



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.

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 childcare 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. They are unable to work in the distance education schoolroom or assist with childcare 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.

### **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 Distance 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 childcare 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.

Rural and remote ECEC centres 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 working with children during their years of greatest development, yet the system is 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 NSW rural and remote location, the additional benefits they would get compared to working as an Early Childhood Teacher would include:

	<b>Childcare</b>	<b>School</b>
Base Salary	94,478.80	157,842
Directors Allowance	7,745.92	
Educational Leader Allowance	4,253.32	
Recruitment bonus		20,000
Rural & remote relocation support		8,000
Rural Teacher Incentive (Includes value of rental subsidy)		25,000
Stamp Duty relief (not paid if rental subsidy paid)		
Retention benefit		5000
Experienced Teacher Benefit		10,000
Climatic Allowance		3000 (approx.)
Additional Personal leave days		
Additional Annual leave value in \$ terms		26,307
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>106,477.24</b>	<b>255,149</b>

The table above demonstrates the not inconsiderable salary difference and contributes to the ECEC worker shortage for centre-based care in rural and remote Australia. Early childhood services are significantly limited in their budgets to make up this gap. It is important to find long term solutions to address pay parity of Early Childhood Teachers in rural and remote locations to ensure recruitment and retention of educators is achieved.

Federal Government budget top ups, whilst appreciated, then create a situation when these top up payments are finished the Early Childhood Centre, in continuing with increased wages, has no choice but to pass this increase onto the parents via the fees.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- 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

### ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY IN RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS

Rural and remote schools across Australia face distinct challenges due to their isolation. These challenges affect students, teachers, families, and the broader community — including local businesses and support services. Addressing these disadvantages is essential to ensure equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for geographically isolated students.

While all levels of government acknowledge the social and economic benefits of equitable education, the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) continues to advocate for practical measures to bridge these gaps.

#### SUMMARY

1. Incentive programs for experienced teachers to accept long-term placements in rural, remote and regional schools.
2. Implementation of Dr John Halsey's recommendation from the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRE)* to reduce administrative burdens on teaching principals.
3. The Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) scheme accounts for remoteness and ease of access to transport options for students travel to Canberra to participate in program.

#### ISSUE 1 – Incentives for Experienced Teachers

Teacher shortages and limited access to relief staff continue to disrupt learning in rural and remote schools. Small schools often rely on only one or two teachers, leaving little capacity for professional development, sick leave or workload relief. The resulting pressures contribute to burnout and high turnover.

Current incentive programs vary by state and are often targeted at graduates rather than experienced educators. ICPA (Aust) urges the Federal Government to establish a **national incentive scheme**—similar to the Rural Health Outreach Fund—to attract and retain skilled teachers in rural and remote schools through financial incentives and national promotion.

#### 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 – Implementing the IRRRE Recommendation

Teaching principals in small schools are overburdened by administrative demands, leaving limited time for classroom teaching and educational leadership. Professor John Halsey highlighted this in the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, noting the urgent need to reduce administrative workloads.

ICPA (Aust) calls on the Federal Government to **advocate for State and Territory education departments** to adopt this recommendation, enabling teaching principals to focus on their primary role: teaching and leading learning.



### RECOMMENDATION

- That governments implement Dr Halsey's recommendation to "reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning" (Halsey, 2018, p.37).

### ISSUE 3 – The Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) scheme

The Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) scheme accounts for remoteness and ease of access to transport options for students travel to Canberra to participate in program.

ICPA (Aust.) recommends the PACER distance, distance calculation method account for remoteness and ease of access to transport options for students travel to Canberra to participate in program. Students enrolled through Schools of the Air often live hundreds of kilometres beyond their school's administrative base and face substantial extra costs before even beginning the journey to Canberra from the school base.

Additionally, while the government's temporary loadings for very remote and disadvantaged schools have been beneficial, their uncertain status limits long-term planning and equity. Embedding these higher loadings permanently—and extending them to reflect both remoteness and socioeconomic factors—would ensure all students can access civics and citizenship learning opportunities regardless of their location.

Reforming PACER in these two areas would align the program more closely with its core intent: to make participation in national civics education genuinely accessible and affordable for all Australian students.

### RECOMMENDATION

- That the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate (PACER) be reformed to:
  1. Base rebate calculations on a student's actual place of learning or departure point rather than solely on the administrative location of their school; and
  2. Make current additional loadings for very remote and disadvantaged schools permanent, ensuring rebates accurately reflect the real costs faced by geographically isolated families.

### 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 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

- 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 access for rural and remote schools to specialists able to diagnose and support students.

- Many small rural schools find it difficult to access professional support for students with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties.
- It is vital students have ease of access to appropriate diagnosis and treatment to ensure they have continuity of support during their schooling.

### 4. 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.

### 5. 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.

### 6. 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 and timely intervention can ensure children's educational needs are appropriately catered for throughout their schooling years.

### 7. 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.

### 8. 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.



## 9. 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.

## 10. 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.

## 11. Increase of age-appropriate Mental Health resources and programs for rural and remote children.

- There are shortage 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.

## 12. NDIS Support in Boarding Schools

- Families of students with disabilities attending boarding schools in rural and remote areas face restrictions preventing them from using NDIS funding for individual support within boarding facilities. This measure seeks to allow such funding use to provide equitable access to care and reduce financial pressure on families.

## 13. Targeted Funding for Speech Pathologists in Rural and Remote Schools

- There remains a national shortage of speech pathologists, especially for students enrolled through distance education. Targeted Federal funding is required to improve access to these services and ensure early intervention for rural and remote students.

## 14. Access to Paediatrician Services

- Extended wait times, sometimes exceeding several years, for paediatric assessments continue to disadvantage isolated children. Improved accessibility through collaboration with the Royal Australian College of Physicians and relevant agencies is essential.

## 15. Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) Funding Access

- Many families are unable to use NDIS-administered ECEI funding due to a lack of local allied health providers. Enhanced access and flexibility are required to ensure early intervention is achievable for all geographically isolated children.

## 16. NDIS Travel Allowances for Allied Health Providers

- Proposed changes to NDIS pricing will limit travel claims for allied health providers, threatening service delivery in rural and remote areas. Advocacy is needed to maintain fair travel provisions and ensure ongoing access to therapy and support.

## 17. Boarding Transition Resources for Students with Specific Education Needs

- Families often struggle to find guidance when transitioning children with additional needs to boarding school. A national information pack developed in collaboration with the Australian Boarding Schools Association



(ABSA) would provide clarity and consistency during this process.

#### **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 (GMPM, 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 - Access for rural and remote schools to specialists able to diagnose and support students.**

Rural and remote schools often find it difficult to access professional support for students with intellectual disabilities and learning difficulties. Students with specific education needs require consistent and regular access to appropriate



professional support services. An approach which sees appropriate specialists practising permanently in rural and remote areas can ensure continuing and consistent support for teachers, students and parents. If specialists are readily available in rural and regional areas it would also ease the burden of travel that families face when seeking diagnosis and treatment.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- That rural and remote schools have more access to specialists who can diagnose, support and treat students with learning disabilities and offer ongoing education and support to students and their teachers.

#### **ISSUE 4- Improved Staff Training for Teachers In Rural and Remote Locations**

Distance education students with specific education needs 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 5 - 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 6 - 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, and with early identification of learning difficulties, intervention should begin as soon as possible, as timely intervention following diagnosis is key to a child's development.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

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

#### **ISSUE 7- 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 8 - 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 9 - 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 10 - 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 11- 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.

<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

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

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

#### **ISSUE 12 – NDIS Support in Boarding Schools**

Students with disabilities living in rural and remote areas often have no choice but to attend boarding schools in order to access secondary education. These students require ongoing, individualised support comparable to that



received in their home environment. Current National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) restrictions, however, often prevent participants from utilising their individual funding to employ support workers within boarding facilities.

Without the ability to use NDIS funding for this essential support, many schools are left with no option but to employ additional boarding staff to meet student needs. The cost of these staff members is then distributed across all boarding families, significantly increasing boarding fees and creating inequity.

Allowing NDIS participants to direct their funding toward support within boarding environments would provide equitable access to care and reduce the financial burden on families and schools.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- That geographically isolated students with disabilities attending boarding schools be able to utilise their NDIS funding to employ individual support workers within boarding facilities.

#### **ISSUE 13 – Targeted Funding for Speech Pathologists in Rural and Remote Schools**

There is a widespread shortage of speech pathologists servicing rural and remote Australia across both education and health sectors. This shortage is particularly acute for students enrolled through distance education programs. Early intervention and consistent access to speech pathology services are critical to ensuring that students do not fall behind in their learning and communication development.

Targeted Federal funding for the provision of speech pathologists within rural and remote schools would address this inequity and ensure students have the opportunity to reach their educational potential regardless of their location.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- That targeted Federal Government funding be made available for the employment of speech pathologists in rural and remote schools, particularly for students enrolled in distance education

#### **ISSUE 14 – Access to Paediatrician Services in Rural and Remote Areas**

Families in rural and remote Australia continue to face significant challenges in securing timely access to paediatricians. The waiting period for children seeking behavioural assessments can extend to several years, severely impacting their educational engagement, social development, and family wellbeing. These delays are particularly concerning for children who require formal assessment and diagnosis before the age of six to qualify for ongoing NDIS support.

It is imperative that accessibility to paediatric services is improved to ensure that children in geographically isolated areas are not further disadvantaged in their health and education outcomes.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- That ICPA (Aust) work with the Royal Australian College of Physicians and other relevant bodies to identify and address barriers preventing equitable access to paediatricians for children in rural and remote areas.



## ISSUE 15 – Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) Funding Access

Many rural and remote families are unable to utilise NDIS-administered Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) funding due to a lack of available allied health providers in their regions. As a result, children identified as needing early intervention often miss out on essential therapies that are critical for improving developmental and educational outcomes. Improved administration and flexibility within the ECEI framework would ensure that all children, regardless of location, are able to access the services necessary for early and effective intervention.

### RECOMMENDATION

- That the Federal Government and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) ensure improved access to and utilisation of Early Childhood Early Intervention funding for geographically isolated children by addressing provider shortages and streamlining administrative processes.

## ISSUE 16 – NDIS Travel Allowances for Allied Health Providers

The 2025–26 NDIS Pricing Arrangements and Price Limits introduce restrictions on travel allowances for allied health providers. These changes pose a significant risk to the continued delivery of essential therapy services in rural and remote Australia, where long-distance travel is unavoidable. Limiting travel claims will discourage clinicians from visiting isolated areas, thereby reducing access to critical services for students with disabilities.

Rural students must not be disadvantaged because of their geographic location. Ensuring equitable access to allied health care requires maintaining adequate travel funding provisions for service providers.

### RECOMMENDATION

- That ICPA (Aust) advocate against reductions to travel allowances for allied health providers under NDIS pricing arrangements, to ensure that rural, regional, and remote students with disabilities continue to receive equitable access to essential support services.

## ISSUE 17 – Boarding Transition Resources for Students with Specific Education Needs

Parents of students with specific education needs often experience significant uncertainty when navigating the process of selecting and transitioning their children to boarding schools. There is currently no centralised information resource outlining the steps, supports, and adjustments available to assist families and students during this transition. Collaboration between ICPA (Aust) and the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) to develop a comprehensive information pack would help families make informed decisions and ensure smoother transitions for students with additional needs. Such a resource would also raise awareness among schools and parents of the accommodations and supports available to neurodiverse and disabled students.

### RECOMMENDATION

- That ICPA (Aust) collaborate with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) and other relevant stakeholders to develop and distribute an information pack to assist parents of students with specific education needs in transitioning to boarding school.



## Student 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 childcare 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

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.

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.

### 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. Financial Barriers: Relocation, Rent and Living Costs

- Relocation costs remain prohibitive, including travel, rental bonds, residential college fees, technology setup, and transport.
- Rent assistance has failed to keep pace with market increases, particularly in urban centres.
- Motions call for increased Centrelink Rent Assistance, a dedicated rural/remote rent assistance program, and placement/travel allowances.

### 2. Youth Allowance and Income Support

- Current parental income limits are too low.
- Independent status often requires a gap year that disadvantages students.
- Liquid Assets Waiting Period penalises savers.
- Application processes remain cumbersome, especially in poor internet areas.

### 3. Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

- Provide dedicated TAP call centre.

### 4. Accommodation and Support

- Residential colleges to prioritise rural and remote students.
- Remote students studying from home require suitable facilities.

### 5. Practical Placements and Workforce Shortages

- Unpaid practicums in teaching, medicine, and allied health impose high costs.
- Commonwealth Prac Payments must be expanded to more disciplines.

### 6. Recognition of Rural Learning and Training Pathways

- Recognition of Home Tutors' experience as RPL.
- Expansion of agricultural education pathways, AgCareerStart program, and ag-focused teaching streams.

### 7. HELP Debt and Indexation

- Current timing of indexation is inequitable.
- Advocacy seeks reform to apply indexation after tax-return repayments, and expand HELP waivers for rural teachers and health workers.

#### ISSUE 1 - Financial Barriers: Relocation, Rent and Living Costs

For students from rural and geographically isolated communities, the most significant barrier to tertiary participation remains the financial burden of relocation and ongoing living expenses. Unlike metropolitan students, who often



have the option of continuing their studies while living at home, rural students must relocate to access higher education. This requirement imposes unavoidable costs such as travel to the city or regional hub, accommodation bonds, residential college fees, connection of utilities, and the purchase of essential items to establish independent living. These costs are compounded by the rising expenses of food, transport, and communication, placing tertiary study beyond the reach of many families.

The cost of rent is particularly prohibitive for geographically isolated students. With highly competitive rental markets in major regional centres and capital cities, students are often forced into insecure or unaffordable arrangements that compromise their study experience. Rent Assistance payments from Centrelink have not kept pace with escalating rental costs and do not reflect the true expenses faced by those who have no choice but to live away from home. Unlike their metropolitan counterparts, rural and remote students are a distinct disadvantaged group who face significantly higher costs simply to begin and maintain their studies. Without adequate support, many are compelled to take on excessive part-time work, which can jeopardise academic success.

These ongoing financial pressures also affect student retention and completion rates, with many rural students deferring, withdrawing, or never commencing tertiary studies despite being academically capable. Programs such as the Tertiary Access Payment have provided welcome assistance, but support remains limited to the first year and does not address the recurrent financial burden over the duration of a degree. Expanding relocation and rent support, introducing targeted assistance that acknowledges the unique costs faced by geographically isolated students, are critical to ensuring equitable participation and improving outcomes for this cohort.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Extend relocation support to all years of study, not just the first year.
- Substantially increase Rent Assistance and create a rural/remote-specific rent program.
- Ensure relocation and living cost support is accessible to all students, regardless of Youth Allowance eligibility.
- Introduce targeted financial assistance to reflect the higher living costs faced by geographically isolated students

### ISSUE 2 - Youth Allowance and Income Support

Youth Allowance remains one of the most critical support mechanisms for rural and remote students, yet its eligibility settings continue to disadvantage this cohort. The current parental income thresholds are set far too low and fail to reflect the true costs of supporting children who must live away from home to study. Families already face the added expense of relocation, rent, and ongoing living costs, making it unrealistic to assume they can contribute at levels set for metropolitan families. Raising the parental income thresholds, or applying rural-specific adjustments, is essential to ensure that financial support reaches the students who need it most.

Equally concerning is the requirement that many students must take a 14-month gap year of full-time work to qualify as independent for Youth Allowance purposes. While this workforce participation test was intended to create fairness, it can act as a deterrent to tertiary study, with some students never returning to education after the break. Those who do return often face disrupted study pathways and reduced motivation. Students from rural and remote areas, who are independent by necessity due to relocation, should be recognised as such upon commencing tertiary studies without being forced into a lengthy gap year.

Other barriers within the system further penalise responsible and proactive students. The Liquid Assets Waiting Period delays access to Youth Allowance for students who have saved responsibly during their working year, leaving



them without financial support at the very time they face the heaviest upfront costs of relocation. Compounding these inequities are cumbersome application processes reliant on internet connections, including the one-time passcode system that frequently fails in remote areas. These processes cause delays, confusion, and in some cases, students abandon their applications altogether. Streamlined, accessible systems and fairer eligibility settings are

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Raise parental income thresholds to reflect the real costs of supporting students living away from home.
- Grant automatic independent status to rural/remote students upon commencing tertiary study.
- Remove the Liquid Assets Waiting Period for students who relocate for study.
- Improve Centrelink processes and ensure application systems are accessible in low-connectivity areas.

urgently needed to ensure Youth Allowance functions as a true support, not an additional barrier.

### ISSUE 3 - Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)

The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP), introduced in 2021, has been a welcome initiative providing up to \$5,000 to assist eligible rural and remote students with the significant costs of relocation in their first year of tertiary study. This support acknowledges that geographically isolated students face unavoidable expenses simply to commence higher education, including travel, rent bonds, and the purchase of essential items to establish a home away from their family. For many students, TAP has been the difference between starting university immediately after school and deferring study due to cost barriers.

However, while TAP provides relief in the crucial first year, the costs of relocation are not confined to the initial move. Each subsequent year students must continue to fund rent, utilities, and travel back and forth from their home communities. Families from rural and remote areas often carry this financial burden for the entire duration of a degree, and yet TAP is currently restricted to a single payment. Extending the program to cover multiple years, or aligning it with the Relocation Scholarship model, would more accurately reflect the ongoing financial disadvantage faced by these students.

Further reforms are also required to ensure the payment is accessible and equitable. Providing dedicated TAP call centre staff, similar to the Assistance for Isolated Children line, would deliver much-needed expertise and support. Expanding access and streamlining administration are critical to ensuring that TAP achieves its intended purpose: enabling rural and remote students to pursue tertiary study without insurmountable financial barriers.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide dedicated TAP call centre staff trained to support rural/remote applicants.
- Align TAP with the Relocation Scholarship model for fairer ongoing support

### ISSUE 4 - Accommodation and Study Support

For many rural and remote students, access to suitable accommodation is one of the first and most pressing hurdles when commencing tertiary education. While some universities guarantee accommodation for first-year students, colleges may not extend this allocation beyond a student's first year. The consequences are significant. Students who



are newly independent and inexperienced in managing rental obligations such as leases, utility connections, and shared housing are left vulnerable. For those transitioning directly from boarding or home schooling environments, the lack of structured accommodation can compound the difficulty of adjusting to city life, affecting both wellbeing and academic success. Priority access to residential colleges for rural and remote students would alleviate some of these inequities and support smoother transitions into tertiary life.

For students who remain at home to study by distance, challenges are no less significant. Rural households often struggle to provide dedicated learning spaces equipped with essential technology, internet access, and study resources. An Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance tailored to tertiary students studying from home would help families establish appropriate facilities. Such an investment would recognise the additional burden of creating an effective learning environment in geographically isolated households and ensure students studying remotely are not disadvantaged compared to their peers in traditional campus settings.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Guarantee priority access to residential colleges for rural and remote students.
- Increase bursaries and scholarships tied to accommodation need, not location preference.
- Introduce an AIC allowance for students studying tertiary courses from home.
- Support universities to expand affordable housing options tailored to rural and remote students.

## ISSUE 5 - Practical Placements and Workforce Shortages

Mandatory practicums form a substantial component of many degrees, particularly in teaching, medicine, veterinary science, nursing, and allied health. While vital to professional training, these placements impose significant financial burdens on rural and remote students. Often unpaid and requiring relocation for weeks or months at a time, placements necessitate additional accommodation, transport, and living expenses — costs that are rarely offset by existing support. For students already managing the expense of living away from home for study, these additional burdens are untenable.

The introduction of the Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP) was an important acknowledgment of placement poverty, yet its scope remains limited to teaching, nursing, and social work students. This exclusion fails to reflect the reality faced by those in other professions who undertake equally demanding placements. Students in medicine, veterinary science, and allied health — professions critical to the sustainability of rural communities — are particularly disadvantaged, as they often undertake longer or more frequent placements in rural and remote areas where costs are higher.

Expanding the CPP to all disciplines with mandatory practicum requirements, and introducing a placement-specific travel allowance, would reduce financial stress and encourage more students to complete rural placements. This investment would not only improve equity for rural students but also strengthen workforce pipelines into areas experiencing chronic shortages. By supporting students during training, government policy can directly contribute to long-term solutions for rural education and health workforce sustainability.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand the Commonwealth Prac Payment to include medicine, veterinary science, and allied health.
- Introduce a dedicated travel allowance for rural/remote placements.
- Provide additional living cost support for students undertaking extended or multiple practicums.
- Incentivise rural placements to encourage future workforce distribution.



## ISSUE 6 – Recognition of Rural Learning and Training Pathways

The contributions of Home Tutors in geographically isolated communities represent a wealth of educational experience that is currently undervalued in formal systems. These individuals, often parents or caregivers, play a critical role in delivering school curricula to children through distance education programs. Recognising this experience as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) towards qualifications such as teacher aide or teaching degrees would provide formal acknowledgement of their skills and create clear pathways into the education workforce.

Beyond individual recognition, investment in rural learning pathways is critical to addressing systemic workforce shortages. Expanding agricultural education within secondary and tertiary systems — through elective offerings, specialist training pathways, and integration into teacher education courses — would help build capacity in an industry central to Australia's economy. Universities offering agricultural teaching pathways could address the shortfall of qualified teachers in this field and ensure that rural schools are better equipped to deliver relevant curricula.

Complementary programs such as AgCareerStart demonstrate the success of structured, funded initiatives that link students to careers in agriculture and related industries. Ongoing government support for such programs, alongside broader agricultural teaching streams and workforce incentives, would strengthen the rural education pipeline. Together, these measures would provide rural students with clearer career opportunities while simultaneously addressing pressing skills shortages in their communities.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise Home Tutor experience as RPL towards teacher aide and teaching qualifications.
- Expand agricultural education pathways in universities and teacher training.
- Provide ongoing government support for programs like AgCareerStart.
- Encourage universities to develop elective subjects and streams that prepare teachers in agriculture-related fields.

## ISSUE 7 - HELP Debt and Indexation

The Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) has long been promoted as an interest-free way for students to access higher education, yet the timing of debt indexation creates inequity. Currently, indexation is applied on 1 June each year before student repayments, withheld from wages through the tax system, are credited against their debt. This means graduates are penalised by having indexation applied to a higher balance than they effectively owe, despite having contributed throughout the year. For rural and remote graduates already burdened with higher study costs, this arrangement is particularly unjust.

Calls for reform centre on aligning indexation with the end of the financial year, after tax returns have been processed and repayments applied. This simple change would ensure fairness, allowing repayments to reduce balances before indexation occurs. The government's temporary measures, such as proposed one-off loan reductions, provide short-term relief but do not address the systemic inequity embedded in the current system. A permanent adjustment to indexation timing would create lasting fairness and transparency for all students.



Beyond timing, HELP debt policy has the potential to play a powerful role in workforce distribution. Expanding HELP debt waivers or reductions for teachers, allied health professionals, and medical practitioners who commit to working in rural and remote areas would provide strong incentives to address chronic workforce shortages. Such measures not only support graduates in managing their debt but also directly contribute to strengthening services and opportunities in the communities that need them most.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Align HELP debt indexation with the financial year so repayments are credited before indexation applies.
- Expand HELP waivers and reductions for teachers, health, and allied health professionals in rural/remote areas.
- Waive or reduce HELP indexation for graduates who commit to multi-year service in rural and remote communities.
- Review HELP repayment rules to ensure fairness for rural students with higher study and relocation costs.

## Conclusion

Rural and remote students face persistent inequity in accessing tertiary education. While measures such as Youth Allowance reforms and the TAP have provided partial relief, significant gaps remain. Without expanded financial assistance, streamlined Centrelink processes, targeted accommodation and rent support, and equitable recognition of placement costs, these students will continue to be disadvantaged.

The ICPA (Aust) calls for the 2025–2026 Federal Government agenda to address these inequities and ensure that rural and remote students have fair, supported access to tertiary education.

## 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. Implementation of recommendations made by the Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government
2. Inclusion of Australian Apprentices in Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) or the implementation of a parallel Australian Apprentice Access Payment (AAAP)
3. Eligibility to the Relocation Scholarship for VET students and Australian Apprentices who receive dependent Youth Allowance.
4. Increased non-financial supports for rural and remote Australian Apprentices through the Apprentice Connect Australia Providers (ACAP's), including recognising them as a Service Specialisation within the 2024-2026 ACAP contract guidelines.



ICPA (Aust) families continue to witness the recurring disparity between rural and urban opportunities for apprenticeships and other study forms undertaken in the post-school pathway space. Our members' children who undertake apprenticeships do so in one of two ways as outlined in Table 1. For the majority of students living in rural and remote areas, it is necessary to relocate to larger centres to access off-the-job training centres and businesses with the capacity to provide on-the-job training throughout an apprenticeship. This can be a barrier for rural and remote students commencing or indeed completing an apprenticeship.

*Table 1 – Full-Time Australian Apprentice delivery modes, within the ICPA (Aust) membership.*

Australian Apprentice from a Rural and Remote location*	Type A Off-the-Job Training	Type B Off-the-Job Training	Considerations
<b>Group 1</b> <b>On-the-Job Training</b> Secure an apprenticeship with an employer in a rural and remote location. NB – reported in NCVER as rural apprentices due to the on-the-job training location.	Local delivery - (near the employer's location and apprentice's home or residence) -face to face, -a visiting RTO or -online from another location but completed at work or at home.	-Require travel more than 90km for day or block training in another location.  -Accommodation may also be required.	-Still able to live at home, in a known and supported environment.
<b>Group 2</b> <b>On-the-Job Training</b> In order to secure an apprenticeship, the apprentices needs to relocate to a larger regional or metropolitan area, that is too far to commute from home. NB – Not reported in NCVER as rural apprentices due to the on-the-job training location.	Relocated delivery (near the employers' location) -face to face, -a visiting RTO or -online from another location but completed at work or at home.	-Require travel more than 90km for day or block training in another location.  -Accommodation may also be required.	-Relocation costs.  -Ineligible for Tertiary Access Payment (TAP)  -Excluded from the Relocation Scholarship even if apprentice is eligible for dependent Youth Allowance.  -The only relocation assistance available is when an apprentice must 'relocate' to another employer to continue an apprenticeship.

*\*Both of these apprentices are rural and remote but only one is recorded by NCVER as such, and as a result we are concerned there is a disparity between the financial and non-financial supports available to both the employer and the apprentice as a result.*

#### **ISSUE 1- Implementation of recommendations made by the Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System - Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government**

The Review made 34 recommendations to the Government. Three of these are focused on regional and remote apprentices, and one has fortunately already been delivered July 2025.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- All Governments work together to provide more financial support to apprentices through subsidies for their travel and accommodation expenses, purchasing tools, and reforms to apprentice support payment to increase the amount and frequency of payment.
- Increase the LAFHA payment and then index payments on an ongoing semi-annual basis in line with the Consumer Price Index, consistent with Youth Allowance. (Delivered 1 July 2025)
- Training providers provide more flexible training options for Regional and Remote apprentices such as block release training or with 'pop up' training centres.

### ISSUE 2 - Inclusion of Australian Apprentices in the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) or implement a parallel Australian Apprentice Access Payment (AAAP)

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.

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 or assist their necessary relocation through an Australian Apprentice Access Payment (AAAP).

### ISSUE 3 - 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

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

**ISSUE 4- Increased non-financial supports for rural and remote Australian Apprentices through the Apprentice Connect Australia Providers (ACAP's), including recognising them as a Service Specialisation within the 2024-2026 ACAP contract guidelines.**

- Specialist support staff within the ACAP's for rural and remote Australian Apprentices through the recognition of Rural and Remote Apprentices as a fourth Service Specialisation, withing the ACAP services.
- Recognition of Rural and Remote Apprentices who have relocated to a larger centre or an urban community to undertake an Apprenticeship as rural and remote, not just due to the employer's address.
- The assurance of comprehensive and timely audits of ACAP services.
- Documentation of Australian Apprentice's home and residential address, to identify and then support those who relocate. The ability to track an Apprentices is possible through the federally managed Apprentice Data Management System (ADMS) to ensure assistance and support is available to students who relocate to undertake an Apprenticeship post school. Australian Apprentices are currently categories as Regional, rural or remote due to the employer address, not the address of the Apprentice.

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 the current Apprentice Connect Australia Provider (ACAPs) 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%), ACAPs 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 ACAP 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 ACAPs 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 ACAPs. 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). ICPA appreciate that "Australian Apprentices in Remote Australian" are a Key Client Group in the 2024-26 contract guidelines, but this did not transfer over to a service specialisation, as it did with the other three key groups.

Assistance for the rural and remote apprentice requires mandatory actions from the ACAPs 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.

Documentation of the home and residential addresses of apprentices in the ADMS is necessary to meet the obligation of ACAP's to support Australian Apprentices from Rural locations. It is concerning that some employers and trainers do not know (and subsequently do not adequately support) some apprentices have relocated vast distances from family and supports to undertake the working and training aspects of the Australian Apprenticeship. Maintaining an independent life on minimum wages with increasing living expenses - these apprentices are struggling to sustain their engagement in employment and training and increasing numbers do not complete their apprenticeship.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Regular comprehensive audits of ACAPs 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.
- DEWR amend guidelines, so that the Apprentice Connect Australia Providers (ACAPs) ensure rural and remote Australian Apprentices are fully supported by each provider and are recognised as a Service Specialisation within the 2024-2026 AASS contract guidelines.”.
- Documentation of the Australian Apprentices home and residential address through the ADMS.

## Rural Hardship Education Fund

ICPA (Aust) urges the Australian Government to establish a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) — a permanent financial assistance mechanism to ensure that rural and remote students can continue their education uninterrupted during times of hardship.

Rural and remote families face unique vulnerabilities. When drought, natural disasters, industry downturns, or family crises occur their already high education costs often become unmanageable. Without targeted support, children's education can be disrupted, forcing families into debt, relocation, or withdrawal from schooling.

The proposed RHEF would directly assist families facing hardship to maintain educational continuity across boarding, rural schools, distance education, early learning and tertiary study.

### 1. The Need for a Rural Hardship Education Fund

Australia's vast geography means that many children grow up far from a school. For some, boarding is the only viable option; for others, distance education is delivered through a home classroom supervised by a parent. While governments recognise geographic isolation through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme, that program does not account for the additional financial and logistical pressures families face during hardship.

When rural families experience severe drought, flood, bushfire, or economic disruption, their capacity to pay school fees, fund travel or employ a tutor can collapse. For children who have no local secondary education options in their local area, boarding is their only option and boarding fees (not including tuition) exceed \$25,000 per year.

Families operating on minimal or no income may be forced to withdraw students, delay enrolment, or divide the household to access local schooling.

### 2. The Educational Impact of Rural Hardship



Boarding students, rural schools, distance education learners, and tertiary students all experience hardship differently. Boarding families accrue debt, withdraw children or face mental health strain. Small rural schools lose fundraising capacity and cancel enrichment programs. Distance education families lose supervision capacity when parents are needed elsewhere or fall ill. Preschool and early learning services often close when local fundraising fails. Tertiary students defer study because families cannot afford relocation costs.

### 3. Current Support Mechanisms and Their Limitations

- The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme is critical but limited. Payments lag behind actual costs and do not scale up during hardship.
- The Farm Household Allowance (FHA) excludes non-farming families and offers no loading for school-age children.
- New programs like the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program (CRSP) and the Future Drought Fund help in part but do not guarantee education continuity during crisis. While the CRSP is beneficial to the few families who receive it, the program has not yet progressed beyond its 2024 pilot.

### 4. The Case for a Permanent Rural Hardship Education Fund

ICPA(Aust) proposes that the Government establish a standing RHEF to ensure educational continuity, protect families' capacity to fund schooling, and complement existing schemes.

Key features include:

- **Trigger events:** natural disasters, economic shocks, or family crises.
- **Eligibility:** rural and remote families receiving AIC, children in local rural schools, and tertiary students from hardship-affected areas.
- **Assistance types:** supplementary RHEF payments (min. \$2,000/student/year), school grants, tutoring support for distance education, extended childcare subsidies, and tertiary access allowances, Additional funding for the Isolated Classroom (e.g: loss of educational material during a flood event)
- **Administration:** delivered through the Department of Social Services, using existing AIC infrastructure, that is automatically triggered when an AIC family is identified in a 'trigger event'. This will ensure a rapid and meaningful response.
- **Capacity for direct family application:** irrespective of disaster declarations (this would encompass family crisis).

### 5. Broader Context in 2025

Rising education and living costs, recurrent drought cycles, and escalating climate disasters continue to pressure rural families. Maintaining access to education amid these challenges is central to community resilience and national equity goals.

### 6. Benefits and Long-Term Outcomes

The RHEF would protect learning continuity, support family wellbeing, prevent population drift from rural areas and uphold equal opportunity for all Australian children. It offers strong social and economic returns by sustaining education, employment pathways, and community cohesion.

The establishment of the RHEF would also underpin the Federal Government commitment (in April 2025) from the Prime Minister and Cabinet stating that:



***"The Government is committed to ensuring that every child regardless of socioeconomic background or geographical location has access to high quality education".***

With modest annual investment (estimated under \$4 million nationally), the fund would deliver long-term returns through education retention, workforce participation and community resilience.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Establish a permanent Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF).
- Link the fund to the AIC framework for efficient, automated administration.
- Provide a minimum \$2,000 (indexed with CPI) per-student supplement during hardship periods that is triggered automatically when a natural disaster / family crisis is identified.
- Extend funding to rural schools and early learning centres.
- Include distance education students (as identified via AIC) and childcare hardship provisions.
- Offer tertiary access support for affected students.
- Allow direct family applications irrespective of natural disaster declarations.
- Maintain and evaluate the REHF giving agency to the family's identified via AIC to ensure long-term impact is meaningful.
- Flexible eligibility not tied solely to state drought declarations.

### **Conclusion**

Rural and remote families face extraordinary challenges providing education for their children. When hardship strikes, their ability to meet schooling costs is jeopardised. The Rural Hardship Education Fund offers a practical, equitable, and enduring solution. It ensures that every child, regardless of geography or circumstance, can continue learning even in the toughest times.

**Rural hardship due to unforeseen disasters, should never mean educational hardship.**