

ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



2022 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE REPORT

Julia Broad

Issues with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have continued to underpin and shape the disadvantage faced by children in rural and remote Australia, hence Federal Council's strong advocacy for giving these children a better start to their education.

ICPA (Aust) views quality Early Childhood Education and Care in rural and remote Australia as an educational imperative. Accessing affordable ECEC for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many.

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the acknowledgement by the new government that Early Childhood Education requires a dedicated ministry to address the endemic failures and disparities in the current centre-based childcare system. We particularly would like to acknowledge the Government's recent response to the New South Wales and Victorian Governments' commitments to preschool education that "Investment in early childhood education isn't welfare. It's critical economic reform."

Federal Council have taken the opportunity to introduce our issues to the new Minister for Early Childhood Education, the Hon Ann Aly MP, with a letter sent in June.

In Home Care (IHC)

ICPA (Aust) were pleased to welcome staff from the In Home Care (IHC) Project Management team to the 2021 Federal Conference and we have continued to engage in fruitful discussions regarding issues associated with In Home Care in rural and remote contexts. The IHC Management team sought feedback to ascertain why Family Day Care is not a viable option for multiple families on one remote property and has therefore not been a suitable solution to providing childcare in the above circumstances. ICPA (Aust) were advised that Department staff were conducting an internal review of the In Home Care program from December. This was expected to be complete in February however will be completed following the election of the new Government in May. We envisage there will be upcoming news from the Department over the coming months.

Ongoing correspondence and meetings will continue to seek opportunities to raise the unique needs of geographically isolated families requiring In Home Care.

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) for pre-compulsory distance education students

AIC Distance Education Allowance for 3-4 year old geographically isolated children accessing an approved distance education early learning program has continued to be on the agenda for this portfolio. Correspondence with then Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon Anne Ruston has, this year been answered with '*state and territory governments have the responsibility for supporting the participation of all children in quality early childhood education programs.*'

Currently all states and territories do provide distance education early learning programs, however, families who need to undertake these programs due to being geographically isolated incur expenses associated with accessing these programs, similar to those incurred by families with students studying primary or secondary distance education programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Guidelines, last updated May 2022, section 5.4.1 outlines the purpose of the Assistance for Isolated Children – Distance Education Allowance:

“The Distance Education Allowance contributes towards incidental costs incurred by geographically isolated families whose students are undertaking their education by distance education methods.”

Given that families undertaking early childhood distance education programs incur the same incidental costs ICPA (Aust) believes that it is incongruous that they are not eligible for the same assistance.

The topic was raised by ICPA (Aust) in a meeting with Minister Ruston’s advisers in December. It was also included as one of the six recommendations in Federal Council’s 2022-23 Pre-Budget Submission. It was also included as a key ask during the 2022 election campaign.

Thank you to State Councils, who helped Federal Council to ascertain there had been a slight increase in the numbers of children enrolled in pre compulsory programs across Australia from approximately 200 in 2018 to around 250 currently. Obtaining these numbers allowed us to provide clear costings within our Pre-Budget Submission as noted in the table below

AIC – DE Allowance for 3-4 year-olds

Number of Students	Funding required per Child	Total Funding per annum
250	\$4428	\$1 107 000

*student numbers are based on the 2021/22 figures in each State and Territory.

With a new government in place, ICPA (Aust) will continue to fervently call for this request to be implemented.

Mobile Early Childhood Services Funding

Addressing funding issues for remote mobile early childhood services is ongoing. The Katherine Isolated Children’s Services (KICS) and Remote and Isolated Children’s Services models were used as examples in our advocacy to the previous Minister for Education and Youth the Hon. Alan Tudge MP. Unfortunately, after changes in the leadership of this department, we were assured our letters were passed on, but no reply was forthcoming.

There is some hope for a new early childhood and mobile playgroup service in the Alice Springs region with RAISEducation receiving charity status and working with their sponsors and donors to provide individualised learning programs for remote classrooms and a mobile playgroup with professional assessment, intervention, and support of transition from early learning to primary school.

National Working with Children Check (WWCC)

In reply to correspondence from ICPA (Aust), The Hon Karen Andrews, the then Minister for Home Affairs, detailed the progress that has been made with the National Standards for Working with Children Checks (WWCC) through the National Office of Child Safety. Steps have been taken toward national consistency since 2017 and the release of the Working with Children Checks Report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission). National Cabinet agreed on December 10, 2021, to explore avenues to further improve national consistency in the WWCC. They aim to eliminate unnecessary red tape, duplication, and regulatory barriers around WWCC without sacrificing safety standards. I feel we’re making slow but steady progress on this issue.

Employment and training incentives for rural and remote early childhood education staff

Given the complexity of the issues affecting employment and training of rural and remote early childhood education staff, correspondence was sent to then Minister for Education and Youth as well as other key Government and Shadow Ministers citing examples of the shortfall in staff detailed at the 2021 Federal Conference and suggesting possible incentives to improve this issue. Federal Council would welcome any further case studies exemplifying challenges being experienced due to early childhood staffing shortfalls in rural and remote areas to strengthen our advocacy around this request.

Other Early Childhood Education and Care Advocacy

ICPA (Aust) has been part of the Thrive by Five Rural and Remote Action Group meetings and supported the launch of their Five Point Plan to address the lack of childcare services across regional, rural and remote Australia that were reported so clearly in the Mitchell Institute Report [Childcare deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia.](#)

The intention of the Rural and Regional Five Point Plan recently developed by Thrive by Five in conjunction with Royal Far West and other stakeholders is to consider the unique needs of this community. Research shows that two in five children, living in rural and remote areas, begin compulsory schooling developmentally delayed, and therefore not fully prepared for optimising their opportunities at school. This then translates into poor educational outcomes, possible mental health issues, higher risk of unemployment, social and emotional difficulties, and homelessness.

The Rural and Remote Five Point Plan is based around three pillars:

1. A fairer, more accessible funding model
2. Workforce incentives and assistance to attract and retain teachers in remote and rural areas
3. The need to have a unified system across States and Territories with fair and equitable access for all, no matter the postcode.

The Plan calls for the following actions:

1. A dedicated funding model for a sustainable and viable early childhood education and childcare system in rural and remote communities regardless of location, setting, income or hours.
2. Early childhood education and childcare to become part of the National Cabinet reform agenda to deal with complexities of the system and build a true national universal system.
3. Agree to a new national agreement to deliver universal three-year-old preschool across the country to match the partnership agreement in place for four-year-old preschool.
4. Make the Childcare Subsidy available to all children regardless of the setting and the income or work status of the parents. Lift the Childcare Subsidy to 95% for all children and set agreed fee caps.
5. Start workforce planning for universal access

This Plan has been supported by the following organisations.

- Royal Far West
- Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA)
- Contact Inc
- Bourke & District Children's Services - Yanmali
- Regional Early Education and Development (REED)
- Connected Beginnings - Yanmali - Bourke
- Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust)
- Royal Queensland Bush Children's Health Scheme (BUSHkids)

Thank you to our Federal ECEC team of Alana, Laura, Jane and Ali for your support and guidance as I have developed my understanding of this portfolio. I look forward to working with you further on these important issues.