

# ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA



## 2023 FEDERAL CONFERENCE BOARDING SCHOOLS/HOSTELS/SECOND HOME PORTFOLIO REPORT Wendy Henning

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The breadth of the Boarding/Hostels/Second Home Portfolio continues to be extensive although the 2022-2023 Federal Council year has certainly not seen the intense activity which COVID-19 created in the previous two Council years.

### **Boarding and COVID-19**

Fortunately, a semblance of normality has returned in boarding facilities with decreasing COVID-19 complications. ICPA (Aust) remains conscious that the distressing experiences of members during this unprecedented time will not be forgotten and that in the future, we will do everything possible to ensure due consideration is given to our vulnerable rural and remote students. Four motions presented at the 2022 Federal Conference reflected the ongoing concerns of members resulting from the challenging pandemic rules and restrictions for boarding students. Motions raised the need for:

- Boarding staff to be considered as Essential Supervisory Staff at all times.
- Remote boarding students and their immediate families be classified as Essential Travellers in emergency management plans.
- The creation of an essential traveller exemption for interstate students and their families.
- Considerations for the emotional well-being of boarding students.

Following conference, Federal Council wrote to relevant Ministers, MPs and Senators endeavouring to ensure that the motions passed at conference and the situations highlighted therein, served to create heightened awareness and understanding of the issues experienced by rural and remote boarding students and their families to ensure they do not endure the same adversity in any future situations. Federal Council received a response from the Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education, advising of the complexities for COVID-19 management and the further difficulties of the various state and territory jurisdictions setting their own pandemic control plans. The implementation of the National Code for Boarding School Students remains in line with the relevant health advice and state, territory or non-governmental education authorities.

A key focus for ICPA (Aust) this year has been raising awareness of the ever-increasing out-of-pocket costs associated with accessing boarding school for geographically isolated children or to establish a second home. Motions at the 2022 Conference once again reiterated the urgent need for an increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance.

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance**

Two motions at the 2022 Federal Conference called for an increase in the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance citing that this would help ease the financial burden on families who grapple with increased boarding fees from their educational facilities. A third motion sought an increase in the allowance to reflect rising costs of boarding schools resulting from the Direct Measure of Income School Funding Methodology.

ICPA (Aust) has been seeking an increase to the Basic Boarding Allowance for many years. Following the Federal Conference, we corresponded with all relevant Ministers, Members of Parliament and



Senators requesting an increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children Basic Boarding Allowance. Once again calls for an increase to the allowance along with costings and recommendations was included in the ICPA (Aust) 2023-2024 Pre-budget submission, citing the exponential rising costs of living as one of many factors which justifies a substantial increase. Unfortunately, other than the annual increase with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), no substantial boost to the allowance was made in the Budget. Most recently, Federal Council focussed extensively on this topic during our May 2023 delegations to Parliament House. We were pleased to receive a degree of understanding from a number of Members of Parliament and Senators we met with and welcomed various commitments to forward this vital issue.

In order to further define and validate our advocacy for an increase to the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA), Federal Council recently conducted a survey with a cross-section of ICPA members nationwide, seeking updated information on the out-of-pocket expenses endured by geographically isolated families educating their children at boarding school. Responses showed that more than 75% of those surveyed bear out-of-pocket expenses, over and above the AIC BBA, of over \$5000.00 per term just for boarding fees and essential travel. That is an out-of-pocket gap of over \$20,000 per year per student. These calculations do not include the additional costs of educating your child away from home. This data is staggering and certainly serves to emphasise the extraordinary cost burden endured by many families. Federal Council would welcome any data or case studies from members to further support this advocacy.

Another motion relating to the AIC again requested a separation of the AIC to include a standalone category for Geographically Isolated Children (AGIC) to ensure that given the growing number of students who receive the AIC for reasons other than geographical isolation, adequate recognition of the unique costs for families who require this payment due to their geographic location and lack of other viable educational options for the student continues. This separation of categories is especially important when advocating for increases to the AIC specifically for geographically isolated students. This request was raised in a motion letter to the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Minister for Social Services. We have also taken the opportunity to discuss this in the quarterly meetings held with the Department of Social Services and Services Australia and have been given assurance from their representatives that there is acute recognition of the unique needs of geographically isolated students compared to others within their staff. Federal Council will however continue to raise this issue wherever possible.

### **Direct Measure of Income (DMI) School Funding Model**

ICPA (Aust) has also continued to raise concerns on the impact of the Direct Measure of Income (DMI) funding model for non-government schools and the flow on effect that this will have on school fees and therefore families who have no choice other than to send their children to boarding school to access their compulsory secondary education. Federal Council wrote to the Minister for Social Services and other relevant Ministers regarding this, and the topic was also raised during our October 2022 and May 2023 delegations with specific reference made to the need to increase AIC to mitigate any increased fees as a result of funding shortfalls. Most recently we have raised these issues with the Australian Department of Education's newly appointed Deputy Secretary of Schools Ms Meg Brighton, as well as other department representatives in an endeavour to continue to seek a solution to address these issues which have been identified by our members as most pertinent in relation to access and affordability of boarding schools:

- Effects on the viability of boarding schools essential to education for rural and remote students.
- The need for increases in boarding fees further exacerbating financial challenges for rural and remote families, especially families affected by drought, floods and fire.



- The inappropriateness of using the fluctuating taxable incomes of primary producers and farm-reliant businesses.
- The fact that the 'capacity to contribute' does not account for other considerable educational expenses incurred by rural and remote families apart from school fees such as travel, extra-curricular activities, siblings' educational costs, distance education costs.
- The risk that the collective 'capacity to contribute' of parents in many independent boarding/day schools will be skewed by metropolitan families at the expense of the smaller rural and remote cohort.

Federal Council's priority is always to ensure educational equity, school viability or educational choice is not diminished for rural and remote students with the implementation of this methodology.

ICPA (Aust) has also worked with the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA) on this topic, and we understand that organisations such as ABSA and also the Coalition of Regional Independent Schools (CRISA) have also been raising concerns of the impact of the DMI funding model.

### **Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program**

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the announcement in March this year that the Federal Government would be implementing a pilot program which would provide scholarships for students from regional, rural and remote areas, to assist with boarding fees and associated costs for low to middle income families from 2024. The pilot will provide 50 scholarships of \$20 000 per annum for up to six years being made available for low income families and 50 scholarships of \$10 000 per annum for up to six years for low to middle income families. This information is available on the Department of Education website:

<https://www.education.gov.au/commonwealth-regional-scholarship-program>.

While details are currently limited on the eligibility criteria and application process, Federal Council has had the opportunity to be involved in discussions with the department to provide feedback and recommendations as the scholarship program is being designed. We look forward to sharing further developments with members as they come to fruition.