



2026 Boarding/Second Home allowance Conference Report

Amber Driver - NT

Each year, ICPA Australia (Aust) members come together at federal conference with a shared purpose; to represent their local branch, sharing lived experience, identifying emerging issues and potential solutions by presenting motions that shine a light on issues families in geographically isolated areas face when trying to gain access to education.

Over the past 12 months, the Boarding Portfolio together with the Federal Council, has worked tirelessly to ensure the 'motions carried' during 2025 Federal Conference are presented to Federal Government, Ministers, Senators and relevant Departments through detailed letters, policy submissions, Ministerial correspondence, face to face meetings in Canberra and quarterly stakeholder meetings.

The Boarding Portfolio has continued to champion improved access to boarding facilities, financial assistance and educational equity for rural and remote students by ongoing collaboration with everyone committed to work and meet with ICPA (Aust).

While not every issue has yet reached resolution, every motion has advanced the conversation, every meeting has reinforced the importance of equitable education access, and every letter has strengthened ICPA (Aust)'s reputation as the trusted voice of families whose children rely on boarding schools, second homes, distance education and government support simply to access the same educational opportunities as their metropolitan peers.

This boarding report highlights the significant work undertaken during the past year and demonstrates how member-led advocacy continues to influence National discussions surrounding access to secondary education, boarding school, financial assistance and educational equity.

Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program.

Continuing the momentum, the future of the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program (CRSP) remained one of the boarding portfolios priorities following motions submitted by the Walgett Branch (NSW) and South Australia State Council. Members continue to recognise the CRSP as one of the most significant initiatives introduced by the Commonwealth to assist geographically isolated families in accessing secondary education through Boarding School. However, members also made it clear that limiting assistance to a small pilot cohort fails to meet the needs of many eligible families.

Following conference, the Boarding Portfolio again wrote to the Prime Minister seeking clarity around the future of the program and urging Government to commit to both its continuation and expansion. The submission included powerful feedback from members, including families from Walgett Branch who shared: *"We would like to advocate for this program to continue and be expanded by increasing the number of scholarships on offer. This will allow many more families the opportunity to stay in their rural or remote communities where local alternatives don't exist."*

ICPA (Aust) reinforced that educational opportunity should not depend upon luck or limited pilot numbers.



“Assistance as outlined in the CRP intended outcomes should be available to all families who fit the criteria, not just a select few”

The recommendations presented to Government called for:

- Continuation of the program beyond the pilot.
- Expansion to include all eligible applicants.
- Publication of the review process and outcomes.
- Recognition of the overwhelming support the program has received from rural families, ICPA members, the Australian Boarding Schools Association and other educational stakeholders.

While the response received confirmed that the six-year pilot will not undergo comprehensive review until closer to its completion in 2029, the correspondence also confirmed that ICPA (Aust) will again be invited to contribute to the formal evaluation process.

Although this outcome was not the immediate commitment members had hoped for, the response provided important certainty regarding governments intentions and reaffirmed ICPA (Aust)'s position as a recognised stakeholder in future policy discussions. Advocacy for the Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program will remain a standing priority until equitable access is available for every eligible family.

Building financial equity for boarding families

For many rural and remote families, boarding school is not a lifestyle choice. It is the only pathway to secondary education. This reality continues to underpin much of the boarding portfolio's advocacy.

Throughout the year, considerable effort has been directed towards strengthening the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) scheme and ensuring it reflects the genuine costs associated with accessing education from geographically isolated locations.

The Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA) and the Additional Boarding Allowance (ABA) have been on our National Agenda for decades. Despite bi-partisan support and submitting official Federal budget costings that outline the investment of increases to the BBA and ABA, equity of education for all children in Australia seems to fall on deaf ears. The AIC Scheme was introduced in 1973, with the Basic Boarding Allowance designed to meet around 55% of the average boarding fee. Today, despite annual indexation, government assistance covers a significantly smaller proportion of boarding costs, reinforcing ICPA (Aust)'s continued advocacy for reform. The Federal Government must do better.

The growing GAP

Conference motions in the Boarding Portfolio highlighted an increasingly concerning reality. Boarding fees continue to increase between 4 and 8% annually, while the Basic Boarding Allowance increased by only 3.79% during 2025, and even less in 2026.



The financial gap continues to widen, with rural and remote children and families continuing to be the collateral damage.

Families are absorbing increasing costs associated with boarding accommodation, transport, and educational services, while government assistance struggles to keep pace.

Members consistently remind Government that the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA) is not simply a financial payment, it is an education access payment. Without appropriate support, educational choice disappears.

As one submission stated:

“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 Basic Boarding Allowance and index it appropriately to reflect ongoing increases.”

Looking beyond the income tests

During the 2025 ICPA Federal Conference, Branch motions also called for a significant reform to the Additional Boarding Allowance (ABA). Many families continue to face genuine financial hardship despite exceeding current income thresholds. Members argued that support should reflect the actual cost of boarding, rather than relying solely on parental income testing.

The purpose of the ABA is to assist geographically isolated families whose boarding costs exceed the Basic Boarding Allowance. However, many families experiencing substantial financial pressure remain ineligible for assistance despite meeting significant educational expenses.

ICPA (Aust) has advocated that entitlement should instead be based upon demonstrated boarding costs ensuring assistance better reflects the realities faced by isolated families.

Recognising significant geographic isolation. Perhaps one of the strongest messages delivered to government this year came through the Broken Hill Branch. Members highlighted that not all geographically isolated families experienced the same level of disadvantage.

Survey results demonstrated the scale of these challenges:

- 46% of members live more than 100kms from their nearest Secondary School.
- Half travel more than 50kms on unsealed roads to reach educational services.
- Every responding family undertakes at least a 600km round trip from their home to their nearest boarding school.

These statistics reinforce an important principle. Equal assistance does not necessarily deliver equitable outcomes.



Another motion carried at Federal Conference supported the Boarding Portfolio to recommend the creation of a ‘significantly geographically isolated’ category within the AIC Scheme, recognising those families who experienced the greatest barriers to accessing education.

Government responses acknowledged these changes while indicating current arrangements remain under review. Although legislative change has not yet occurred, the detailed explanations provided by members have ensured these issues are now firmly before Government. There is still more work to be done.

Supporting Australia's boarding schools

The sustainability of Australia's Boarding Schools remains fundamental to educational access for thousands of rural and remote students who have no other choice for accessing a full complement of secondary education outcomes.

Throughout the year ICPA (Aust) continued its longstanding advocacy surrounding Fringe Benefits Tax and the unintended financial burden it places on boarding providers, employers and ultimately families.

Employers in geographically isolated areas assisting with the educational costs of children of employees should be exempt from Fringe Benefits Tax for these payments. The cost of accessing compulsory education for geographically isolated children should not be subject to Fringe Benefits Tax. Affordable access to boarding schools for employees who work in remote areas provides their children with equitable access to school facilities like those in urban areas.

Accommodation provided to essential supervisory staff at boarding schools is not a luxury or optional benefit—it is a core component of student care and safety. Therefore, boarding schools should not be penalised through FBT to provide this essential service.

Working alongside the Australian Boarding Schools Association (ABSA), the Boarding Portfolio and ICPA (Aust) have effectively articulated to the Federal Government how current taxation arrangements increase operating costs and reduce affordability.

Advocacy has focused on three key areas:

- Exemption of Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) for essential boarding staff accommodation.
- Exemption of FBT for employers supporting employees boarding costs.
- Recognition of boarding facilities as essential educational infrastructure.

As highlighted in correspondence to government:

“Affordable access to boarding schools for employees who work in remote areas provide their children with equitable access to school facilities as those in non-remote regions.”

Although formal responses remain outstanding, advocacy on this issue continues through direct ministerial engagement and ongoing collaboration with the Australian Boarding School's Association (ABSA). On behalf of ICPA (Aust), Australian Boarding School's Association, thank you ABSA for your ongoing advocacy in this area.



Meaningful reform in this area has the potential to reduce costs not only for boarding schools, but ultimately for families who depend upon them because there are no local options for secondary school available in their geographically isolated communities and locations.

The cost of accessing compulsory education for geographically isolated children should not be taxed irrespective of who is bearing the cost.

Supporting Families during times of Natural Disaster

Natural disasters continue to place extraordinary pressure on rural and remote families already facing significant educational costs. Following a motion from Queensland State Council, ICPA (Aust) advocated for the establishment of a permanent Rural Hardship Education Fund to provide emergency educational assistance for families eligible for the AIC Allowance.

The proposal recognised that education should not become another casualty of drought, floods, cyclone or bushfire.

Government responses outlined several existing assistance programs, including emergency support for schools and funding mechanisms available through the Choice of Affordability Fund.

While these responses did not establish the dedicated Rural Hardship Education Fund sought by members, they have provided useful pathways for further investigation and future advocacy. ICPA (Aust) will continue exploring opportunities to strengthen educational support for disaster-affected families.

Improving Government Services

Not every motion seeks legislative reform. Sometimes meaningful improvements come through collaboration. Throughout the year, the Boarding Portfolio continued regular engagement with the Department of Social Services and Services Australia, ensuring members experiences directly informed operational improvements.

Improving AIC Payment Timing

Members have consistently highlighted the financial difficulties created by the timing of the Year 12 AIC BBA payments. Current payment schedules often leave families finalising boarding accounts before receiving their final instalment. Following ongoing discussions over several years, encouraging progress has now been made. Services Australia and the Department of Social Services confirmed they are bringing the 4th instalment forward to the beginning of Term 4. A solution strongly supported by ICPA (Aust). This represents genuine progress achieved through persistent, respectful engagement.

Faster ABSTUDY Processing & Online AIC Platform

One of this year's successes came through Motion S2 2025.

Following concerns raised by our members regarding lengthy ABSTUDY processing times, Services Australia invested in additional staff training and capability.



Since August 2025, claim processing has consistently exceeded the agency's Service benchmark with more than 70% of claims finalised within 21 days. This demonstrates exactly what can be achieved when members identify issues and government agencies work collaboratively with ICPA (Aust) to deliver practical improvements. As a result, Motion S2 2025 is now considered resolved. A positive outcome for families across rural and remote Australia.

Thank you, Services Australia, this result has been outstanding, and we are eager to see progress like this expand into development of the AIC online platform, another ongoing discussion.

Bringing our motions to life

One of the most exciting initiatives undertaken this year moved beyond policy papers, Ministerial correspondence and formal submissions. Recognising that the most powerful advocacy comes from real stories, ICPA (Aust) embarked on a new project to bring members' motions to life through film.

Working in partnership with Levi Goldspink, Director of Reel Gold Films, ICPA (Aust) has commenced production of a series of professionally developed short films capturing the lived experiences behind the motions debated at Branch, State and Federal Conferences. These films are more than promotional material. They tell the stories behind the statistics. They show children travelling extraordinary distances to access education. Families making enormous sacrifices so their children can attend boarding school. Families talk first hand about ICPA for the volunteers who dedicate countless hours advocating for educational equity.

Most importantly, they place rural and remote children at the heart of every conversation. These stories will remind Ministers, Senators and Government Departments and the broader Australian community that every motion begins with a child, regardless of race, from rural and remote Australia whose future depends on equitable access to education.

The project also celebrates the volunteers who are the lifeblood of ICPA (Aust). Across every Branch, State Council and Federal Council volunteers transform lived experience into practical advocacy, ensuring future generations of rural and remote children have opportunities that previous generations could only hope for.

These films represent a new and powerful advocacy tool, one that complements the written submissions and face-to-face meetings by allowing decision-makers to see and hear the experiences that statistics alone can never fully capture.

Looking ahead

The past 12 months have demonstrated the strength of member-driven advocacy.



Through countless volunteer hours ICPA (Aust) has continued to influence National conversations surrounding access to secondary education and boarding schools, government assistance, educational equity and government services, schemes and allowances. Significant progress has been achieved.

The Commonwealth Regional Scholarship Program remains on the agenda.

Discussions continue regarding improvements to the Assistance for Isolated Children Basic Boarding Allowance and Additional Boarding Allowance.

Abstudy processing times have improved significantly.

The 4th BBA payment for Yr 12 Students has been brought forward to the Start of Term 4.

The AIC online platform and the timeline for its completion continue to be discussed.

The Boarding Portfolio has strengthened relationships with Federal Government, Department of Social Services, Services Australia and Australian Boarding Schools Association, ensuring rural and remote families continue to have a respected voice in National policy decision, administration and operational aspects of allowances.

There is, however, still much work to do.

The growing gap between boarding costs and Government assistance remains one of the greatest challenges facing geographically isolated families.

Reform to the Assistance for Isolated Children's scheme, recognition of significant geographic isolation, sustainable support for boarding facilities and meaningful Fringe Benefits Tax reform all remain important priorities for the year ahead.

None of this advocacy would be possible without our members. Members motions, voices and lived experience have ensured meaningful advocacy at a Federal level.

Every motion begins with a lived experience shared at Branch level.

Every submission reflects the voices of families navigating the realities of distance, isolation and educational access. Every conversation with Government is strengthened by the evidence our members are willing to provide, especially in their Motion Explanations.

If your family has experienced barriers to accessing education, we encourage you to continue sharing your story.

Real experiences create compelling evidence, and compelling evidence drives meaningful change. Together we will continue to advocate until every child, regardless of post code, distance or geographic location has equitable access to the educational opportunities they deserve.