

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**"Access to Education"**



**Submission**

**to the**

**Review**

**to Inform a**

**Better and Fairer Education System**

**from the**

**Federal Council  
of the**

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.  
ICPA (Aust)**

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, apolitical, national parent organisation which advocates on behalf of our members for equity of access to an appropriate education for all geographically isolated children and students, 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 achieving equitable access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia, often live vast distances from services required to support the education of these students.

### 1. Improving how well students do at school

ICPA (Aust) advocates on behalf of geographically isolated families for adequate assistance to be available for their students to have equitable access to education opportunities commensurate to their urban counterparts. ICPA (Aust) believes that geographically isolated students need to be considered as a distinct disadvantage group in any discussions and consideration of education programs. To this end we are pleased that they have been identified as a priority equity group within the National School Reform Agreement context.

Barriers and challenges for educating children in rural and remote locations result in these students' educational outcomes and aspirations being less than that of their urban counterparts and can contribute to many families leaving rural and remote areas to provide their children with a more appropriate education.

Rural education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as fluctuating populations, economic influences, seasonal conditions and climate. It must be recognised that attempts to address inequities in the provision of quality education in remote environments would not be effective unless broader economic and social issues are also considered. To effectively meet the needs of rural and remote students, inequity issues must be understood and addressed. Some of these children are not considered vulnerable because they are not impacted by extreme levels of poverty. Rather, due to geographic isolation from services, many rural and remote families are expected to cover significant out-of-pocket costs for the education of their children from early childhood through to tertiary education. To improve education outcomes, options and pathways for remote students, a national approach is required which ensures a consistently high standard of educational delivery, regardless of where and how that education is accessed.

The teacher shortage, whilst now impacting many more areas of Australia has for a long-time impacted teaching in a rural classroom. Teachers in rural and remote schools are often expected to teach classes or students with learning difficulties which are not in their area of expertise.

#### **Rural and Remote Schools**

Rural and remote schools must be adequately funded and resourced to ensure that the students are given equitable educational opportunities to those in more metropolitan based schools.

Geographically isolated students also need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs, through pathways which provide educational parity with their urban peers. Viability of rural and remote schools is essential, and it is imperative for local families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions. Rural schools are often the centre of their communities and ensuring that these schools are well supported, resourced and staffed is vital to children's learning in these towns. Good schools can retain existing

and attract new families to the regions, but families will quickly move away if they believe they can access a higher standard of education in more urban areas.

### **Distance Education (DE)**

For many families living in remote regions, the only access to education for their children is distance education. While distance education services are well structured and their centres ably staffed, the provision of distance education is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated home classroom daily. This person is the distance education tutor who must be available and able to provide the practical, day-to-day supervision and support required for the effective delivery of a distance education program.

This is an extensive role which requires a high level of commitment and is the only way that geographically isolated distance education can be successful. The vital role of the distance education tutor, often the mother who has vacated the workforce to supervise schooling, should be recognised through the payment of an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform to deliver a high standard of education to these children.

Families who educate their children via distance education are required to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting, provide extra learning materials and resources and print necessary learning materials all of which are readily supplied to students at mainstream schools. In addition, distance education families often need to travel significant distances to participate in school activities that offer face to face learning, interaction and socialisation for their children. While the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education (DE) Allowance assists distance education families with some of these necessary expenses 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. Due consideration must be given to the encumbrance on approximately 1,500 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate children.

### **Boarding**

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must board away from home to attend secondary school as there is no school which offers the age-appropriate schooling needed within a reasonable distance. There are very few government-run boarding facilities that offer 24-hour care seven days a week and those that are available cannot accommodate the number of students who board away from home due to distance. Approximately 4,500 students receive the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA) nationally. In Queensland for example, there are eight local government shires that do not have a high school and a further two which only offer up to Year 10. In other rural and remote shires, the high school can be hundreds of kilometres from the students' home. It is not only "property/station" children who need to go away to boarding school. Many rural towns only have P-6 primary schools, so the town children also often must go to boarding school to receive an education. Geographically isolated students and their families need to be supported to be able to access appropriate and equitable educational opportunities as they move through their educational journey.

While distance education for secondary students is available, it can be very difficult to commit to and be successful at, especially if a student has attended a local school for their primary years and does not have a previous distance education background. Distance education, by its very nature has limited capacity to provide the holistically social, emotional and cultural education that is possible at a school where face to face interaction can occur and therefore boarding school is the best option for many families to achieve a well-rounded education for their children. High School age students undertaking distance education require a dedicated supervisor and families often do not have the resources or financial support to provide one.

There is often a misunderstanding that rural and remote students are going past the local school in favour of an “elite” education, however most schools across Australia that offer full-time boarding facilities are private, independent schools. State run hostels have dwindled to very low numbers and many only offer Monday-Friday boarding which is problematic for most boarders who must travel long distances.

Furthermore, for geographically isolated students from the ‘tri-border’ areas of Central Australia, the distance to the nearest secondary school, let alone a boarding secondary school, may be thousands of kilometres away and the only available public transport such as passenger flights may require these students to board interstate. Consideration should be given for these students to be able to access state allowances in the jurisdiction they attend boarding school, thus helping to make their schooling more affordable.

### **Initiatives to Support Remote Educational Outcomes**

ICPA (Aust) acknowledges and appreciates past and present government initiatives that have been effective in supporting and achieving greater educational outcomes in remote communities. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance, as mentioned above, was introduced in 1973 to provide financial support to families with children who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate government school. Since its introduction, the Allowance has provided geographical isolated students significantly improved access to educational opportunities, and ICPA members are extremely grateful to successive Australian governments for the ongoing provision of the scheme.

In addition to the AIC, ICPA (Aust) recommends that the following programs be considered complimentary, and necessary, to better meet the needs of geographically isolated families in the twenty-first century especially when face to face learning is not accessible.

**Broadband and Internet Access:** Enhance and expand high-speed internet infrastructure in remote areas to ensure that students have access to online educational resources, virtual classrooms, and educational platforms.

**Technology Grants:** Provide technology grants or subsidies to geographically isolated families to help them acquire computers, laptops, tablets, and other necessary devices to support remote learning.

**Professional Development for Remote Teachers:** Offer specialized training and professional development opportunities for teachers working in remote areas to improve the quality of education they can provide.

**Mobile Educational Units:** Introduce mobile educational units equipped with resources and technology that can visit remote communities and provide on-site support to students and teachers.

**Mentoring and Tutoring Programs:** Implement mentoring and tutoring programs, either in person or through virtual channels, to provide additional support to students who may face challenges with remote learning.

**Mobile Libraries and Resources:** Create mobile libraries and resource centres that can travel to remote communities, giving students access to a wide range of books and educational materials.

**Online Teacher Exchange Programs:** Facilitate online teacher exchange programs where educators from urban areas can temporarily teach in remote schools, bringing fresh perspectives and experiences.

**Specialised Subject Teachers:** Employ specialised subject teachers who can deliver online classes to multiple remote schools, providing access to a broader range of subjects.

**Recognition and Rewards for Remote Educators:** Recognize and reward teachers who choose to work in remote areas to attract and retain talented educators.

**Early Childhood Education Support:** Strengthen early childhood education support in remote areas, recognizing the crucial role it plays in a child's educational journey.

**Community Engagement:** Encourage community involvement in education by creating parent-teacher associations and involving local community members in school activities.

These initiatives, if effectively implemented and continuously improved upon, can complement the existing AIC Allowance and contribute to achieving greater educational outcomes in geographically isolated communities. The focus should be on empowering students, families, and educators with the resources, technology, and support they need to succeed in remote learning environments.

Other initiatives which promote improved educational outcomes in remote communities include flexible approaches to providing specialist subjects to students in remote communities and incentives to attract, support and retain teachers in remote areas.

**Secondary Schooling: The Aurora College (The Virtual Selective High School) is a new and unique secondary option for gifted and talented students in government schools in NSW.** Classes commenced in January 2015 with over 160 students from across NSW. Aurora College allows students in rural and remote areas to remain in their local school and community while studying specialist subjects which their home school cannot currently offer.

Students connect with their teachers and classmates through a virtual learning environment, which includes web conferencing software and the Department's virtual classrooms. Aurora College offers students expanded career options through innovative programs and strengthened partnerships between schools, TAFE, universities, business and employers. Mentoring opportunities and master classes are key features of both the online and residential school programs.

As connectivity continues to improve, it is anticipated that programs such as the Aurora College will expand. Caution should be taken when considering this platform as meeting the learning needs and learning styles of all students in rural and remote locations. Learning via distance education at the secondary level is not conducive to all learning styles. Students need to be independent, self-motivated learners if they are to achieve good results. While one or two subjects being taught through virtual classrooms can be beneficial, to go beyond that can be detrimental for many students, particularly when other life experiences are very limited in their community. The teenage years provide a critical window of opportunity for learning and growth, as children are becoming more independent of their parents and moving into adulthood. They are easily influenced by those around them and the opportunities available to them. Parents place a high priority on accessing education to ensure their children can reach their potential and grow into confident, capable adults, able to give back to society.

### **Curriculum**

Access and support to deliver the Australian Curriculum (including STEM) in a flexible way to meet local learning needs and interests of remote students is essential in remote locations. In remote communities with an existing high school, the curriculum is often modified to meet the educational and lifestyle needs of indigenous students, to address poor outcomes. This should be considered for all students in the remote context.

To access the curriculum provided by the educational centre, especially in distance education settings; adequate internet and telecommunications in remote areas is essential. For example, some rural and remote families work in stock camps or in other non-permanent remote situations and are unable to access their curriculum because of the lack of availability of an internet service which meets their needs. As the curriculum and education system becomes more reliant on internet, this is even more essential.

Rural and remote students require specialised curriculum resources and it is imperative that the development and supply of these resources is efficient and effective. Curriculum content must consider unique geographically isolated distance education contexts.

It is also vital that basic literacy, numeracy and computer literacy be considered essential skills and embedded in the curriculum for all students, regardless of location. Feedback from ICPA members indicates that there is also need for keyboarding and basic computer program and app skills to be embedded in the curriculum.

## 2.Improving Student Mental Health and Wellbeing

In rural and remote communities, students face a multitude of challenges in their day-to-day life unique to their geographical isolation that can impact heavily on their education, mental health and wellbeing. Many have unique needs, vulnerabilities and barriers which can be exacerbated by the limited support services provided (including Guidance Officers and healthcare professionals) in geographically isolated environments. 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 of that in metropolitan areas.

Many small rural schools are in very isolated and sparsely populated areas of Australia with limited access to telecommunications. The very nature of these small communities means that everyone knows everyone. This has its advantages, however, can also be detrimental for students seeking support because of personal issues. Moreover, the teacher shortage facing many schools means teachers are stretched and their ability to be a listening ear to students in need of support is limited. Programs specifically focussed on providing positive and valuable support for rural and remote students, teachers and schools are required.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the recently announced National Student Wellbeing Program (NSWP) be maintained to ensure the vulnerable cohort of rural and remote students who may have no or limited access to other support services are not further disadvantaged and given an opportunity to have a trained wellbeing officer or chaplain on staff and readily available to students.

## 3.Supporting Schools to Attract and Retain Teachers

With the delivery of education in rural and remote Australia involving teaching in small rural schools and Schools of Distance Education or Schools of the Air, teachers must be well-prepared for the unique circumstances surrounding these learning contexts. Education providers must ensure the initial teacher education content delivered, both theoretical and practical, is contextually appropriate and that all teachers working in geographically isolated schools are specifically trained and prepared to teach this cohort from day one of their teaching career.

ICPA (Aust) believes education providers who offer initial teacher education courses should implement a more extensive course structure to include:

- a major in Rural and Remote Education and
- modules on teaching students with specific learning needs.

### **Rural and Remote Education Context**

Teaching in rural and remote locations needs to be promoted as a rewarding, fulfilling and respected career that has intellectual and emotional rewards. Preparation for the complexities, challenges and uniqueness of teaching in rural and remote schools, including potentially multi-age classrooms, living remotely, engaging in the community and isolation from family, friends and colleagues is vital to

improve recruitment and retention of teachers and to ensuring optimum and successful educational outcomes for all students.

Graduate teachers need to be classroom-ready with the skills and knowledge to support a diverse range of learners including students with specific education needs. ICPA (Aust) believes initial teacher education courses should incorporate the range of unique challenges experienced when teaching in rural and remote areas requiring specific knowledge, understanding and skills around:

- an understanding of the nature of geographically isolated students' school environment
- multi-age classrooms
- multi-age curriculum tools
- online learning tools
- use of communications facilities including web conferencing
- strategies for coping with the unique dynamics that exist in small rural and remote schools and the wider community
- teaching out of specialist areas such as music lessons for a school concert or organising a school sports carnival and
- the distance education environment (i.e. remote learning): supporting the home tutor in the distance education home schoolroom, mastering remote communication platforms utilised for remote teaching, engaging students in meaningful learning when directly teaching in an online learning environment (particularly in the early primary years) and the ability to gauge student engagement, comprehension and understanding of learning concepts via remote learning platforms.

Student teachers undertaking practical practicum experience placements to develop and apply knowledge and skills in the rural and remote context and ensure graduate teachers would start their career job-ready with valuable insight into the structure, characteristics, practice and delivery methods of rural and remote education.

### **Attraction, Recruitment and Retention**

Financial and personal assistance throughout the teaching course should be provided for students who express a desire and commitment to attend practical experience placement and teach in rural areas upon completion of their course. Further, incentives for teachers to assume positions in rural and remote locations would assist in recruitment and retention.

These could include:

- Rural and remote school practical experience placements for teaching students to equip themselves with high-quality knowledge, skills and insight of these contexts.
- Support for classroom teachers who need to perform administrative duties.
- Support to live and work in a rural and remote area including assistance for travel, accommodation and living expenses for practical experience placements.
- Relocation incentives – accommodation, travel, rental assistance.
- Preparation for rural living and working in isolation from family, friends and colleagues.
- Quality induction programs that include “in classroom” programs and P&C and school board operations that are reviewed regularly.
- Access to essential services including communications.
- Competency attainment.
- Quality mentor programs with experienced, knowledgeable and skilled mentors who are supported to undertake this important role.
- Peer support networks both within and outside of the school.

- Additional support for professional development ensuring availability, accessibility and resourcing.
- Salary loading and other financial incentives.

### **Practical Experience Placements**

A high-quality practical experience placement for a student within a rural and remote community that is welcoming, supportive, enjoyable and rewarding may incentivise not only rural and remote students, but others, to undertake practicums in these areas. This will potentially see these skilled students returning to a rural and remote community as graduates, improving the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural and remote Australia.

Rural and remote practical experience should include:

- Adequate academic, emotional, financial and other supports.
- Timely, regular and adequate support from the initial teacher education course supervisors either face-to-face or alternative delivery either over the phone or virtually.
- Preparation and careful planning; pre-placement introductions (face to face or at very least online), inductions, ongoing checks and then final reviews managed and overseen by suitable mentors within the rural or remote host schools.
- Available professional development prior to the placement for mentors to ensure mentors can support a student teacher's successful transition from observer to supervised teacher within the practicum time.
- Timely reporting of practical experience placements experience needs to include feedback that contributes to the growth and development of the student teacher to support the student teacher's positive progression towards displaying the Graduate Teacher Standards.

This has benefits for the student and the community as the graduate is classroom-ready and community-ready.

### **Specific Education Needs**

It is vitally important that teaching graduates in rural and remote schools and distance education schools are also adequately prepared with an appropriate level of skills and knowledge to teach students with specific education needs, learning difficulties and behavioural issues as access to appropriate support staff, including allied health professionals can be limited in these locations.

The inclusion of modules relating to specific learning needs in undergraduate and postgraduate education courses would build capacity and equip teachers in small rural schools and distance education schools. Content pertaining to specific learning challenges and disorders affecting learning, including Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia and Dyslexia should be included as a foundation for educating teachers in supporting specific needs students, providing new teachers with the understanding, knowledge and skills to effectively:

- recognise learning difficulties in students.
- facilitate early recognition, identification and assessment.
- assist, manage and meet the needs and abilities of children with specific needs and learning difficulties.
- implement recognised learning programs designed by professionals experienced in the preparation and application of specific needs education.
- enable continuity of specific learning needs programs.
- develop management programs for students with specific needs and strategies to implement when students are in an escalating behavioural situation, as often all teachers/principals are



teaching so classroom teachers need to have strategies in place to deal with these behaviours unaided.

- deliver strategies to support the child's education and ensure positive learning outcomes for all students in their classes.
- assist and support distance education Home Tutors.

Regular, timely, affordable and appropriate access to and collaboration with specific needs teachers, allied health professionals and specialists such as behavioural therapists, speech pathologists, ophthalmologists and psychologists will further support rural and remote teachers in recognising, referring, managing and supporting rural and remote students with specific education needs. This would enable the continuity of specific learning programs and take the pressure off teachers to develop management programs for these students.

External assistance on management of specific issues, for example, a hotline that teachers could use for strategies to assist children with specific educational needs such as Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder would increase access to ensure best practice advice.

Teachers will encounter situations where a proportion of their class/es have specific education needs or learning disabilities. Neglecting to equip teachers, in already challenging circumstances, with knowledge of specific needs education will inevitably contribute to poor teacher retention rates and impact learning outcomes for rural and remote students.

Most states offer some form of incentives to encourage teachers to rural and remote locations, such as the transfer points system, whereby points are gained in order to transfer to chosen locations. The most effective initiatives in attracting and retaining top teachers seem to be those which prepare teachers for living and working in rural areas and/or offer mentoring support. Such initiatives include the following:

- **Pre-service teacher incentive programs** - for example the Kelvin Grove Teacher Education of Excellence<sup>4</sup>, which works closely with the QLD University of Technology (QUT) to improve teacher preparation into Prep to Year 12 with exposure to rural and remote placements.
- **Take the Lead** (Qld) –a leadership and development program to develop the skills and capabilities of selected participants as high performing school leaders. The program attracts and recruits high-performing teachers, associate leaders and principals who aspire to higher level school leadership roles in rural or remote locations in Queensland.
- **NSW- teach. Rural Scholarships**, “HSC students and university students currently enrolled in teacher education studies - get paid while you study to become a primary or secondary teacher in a rural or remote NSW public school!”
- **Remote Areas Incentive Scheme (RAIS) in Qld for rural and remote teachers** provides increased funding dependent on the remoteness of the school as well as the cost of several flights in and out of town.

Incentives to attract and retain other professionals such as psychologists, behavioural therapists and speech therapists in rural and remote areas will enable continuity of specific learning programs and take the pressure off teachers to develop management programs for students with specific education needs.

#### 4.Data Collection to inform Decision-Making and Boost Student Outcomes

There are already critical issues associated with the delivery, implementation, and use of results from NAPLAN testing for rural and remote students, specifically regarding timing, relevance and

accessibility and any future data collection initiatives needs to consider unique rural and remote contexts.

For many rural and remote students undertaking distance education or attending a small rural school, it can be difficult to receive the assistance in the areas identified through NAPLAN testing as requiring extra support. Small rural schools get very little specialist teaching or specific learning needs time, especially in a multi-age classroom and for geographically isolated distance education students, extra support can be non-existent. ICPA (Aust) requests that further consideration be given to identifying the number of students who may be missing the adequate support and assistance ascertained through NAPLAN testing and that processes be put into place to resolve this issue.

### **Timing**

The future ability of schools to determine when NAPLAN testing is taken will benefit rural and remote students as strategies may be implemented to address their needs early in the school year. It is widely known that often rural and remote students lag their urban counterparts across many aspects of education. The ability for schools to identify the areas where students need to be assisted and where intervention is needed early is advantageous in rectifying these issues. ICPA (Aust) recommends that with the move to an online platform the availability of students' results should be made available within a much shorter timeframe than in the past, which will benefit students enormously.

### **Relevance**

ICPA members highlight that often there is a lack of relevant and appropriate subject matter across the curriculum for rural and remote students. To build on students' prior knowledge, the materials presented must be relevant to students and be able to be clearly understood by them. The demographics of a school and its students should be considered to ensure student engagement is maximised, allowing for a more accurate measure of these students' capabilities.

### **Connectivity, Accessibility and Availability**

While the move to online NAPLAN testing comes with advantages for schools and students, in rural and remote areas online connectivity remains a significant concern. ICPA (Aust) has welcomed consultations with ACARA throughout the development, trialling and implementation associated with NAPLAN online to bring forth concerns for rural and remote students and schools. In 2022 and 2023 there were issues which affected access to NAPLAN testing for some geographically isolated children and this consultation enabled these issues to be addressed.

## **5.School Community, Funding Transparency and Accountability**

The adequacy of education for rural and remote students is notably hindered by a lack of choice and availability of education opportunity and facilities. ICPA (Aust) welcomes a move to limiting the availability of comparison information between schools as it can affect a school community greatly when it is perceived as having lower outcomes than other schools. In a remote area this is even more concerning when there is no choice but to attend the local school.

ICPA (Aust) believes that any standardised testing model, such as NAPLAN, should consider geographically isolated students as a unique disadvantage group to ensure they are provided with the necessary support and assistance to ensure NAPLAN is effective in assessing key outcomes for this cohort.

### **Adequate Financial Assistance to Educate Children in Rural and Remote Locations**

Due to geographical isolation, many rural and remote families must educate their children via distance education, boarding school or establishing a second home where schooling is readily accessible. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme was established to subsidise the extra costs associated

with accessing education when this access is hindered by the tyranny of distance, therefore enhancing equity for rural and remote students. However, while the Allowance is gratefully received by rural and remote families, it no longer meets needs of families as educational expenses and associated costs have increased significantly since the inception of the scheme in 1973.

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) – Distance Education Allowance (DE)**

Administering distance education in a geographically isolated location requires extensive planning and resources. It is necessary to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting in the home, provide extra learning materials and resources and print necessary learning materials which are supplied freely to students at mainstream public schools.

In addition, rural and remote distance education families often travel significant distances to participate in school activities that offer interaction and socialisation for their children. The AIC DE Allowance assists geographically isolated families with some of these expenses, however an increase to better reflect the actual costs associated with the provision of distance education is required.

### **Extension to the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance for 3 to 4 year-olds undertaking a pre-compulsory distance education program**

State Education Departments have created and are implementing appropriate preschool/kindergarten programs for geographically isolated children using funding through the Preschool Reform Agreement 2022-2025, formerly known as the Universal Access National Partnership, so these children are starting their distance education journey in the year before compulsory schooling starts. For many geographically isolated families, this is the only avenue available to access an early childhood education. Children undertaking these pre-compulsory 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. They are not recognised by the Federal Department of Education as needing the Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education access allowance during this year.

The cost of establishing a home schoolroom is significant and includes purchasing learning resources, stationery, furniture and much more. It is also 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 and pay for accommodation, all at their own expense, to attend school functions at the School of Distance Education/School of the Air centre which provide an opportunity for their children to participate in group activities, such as sport, practising conversation skills and interacting with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

These children are deemed ineligible for the **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance** as they are not recognised by the Australian Government as participating in compulsory schooling and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) either as these children are still in their parents' care while participating in distance education.

ICPA (Aust) therefore urges the Federal Government to extend the AIC Distance Education Allowance to these students. The need for this initiative to be implemented was also recommended in the Report on *Education in Remote and Complex Environment*<sup>2</sup> however no further action was taken thereafter.

### **Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA)**

For approximately 1,000 families living in geographically isolated regions of Australia, the only means of accessing education for their children is via distance education programs in the home. As outlined above, there are extensive extra costs associated with educating children through this mode of

delivery. While the AIC DE Allowance (paid at a rate of \$4,698/student/annum for the 2023 year) assists with various costs associated with participating in distance education, it is not permissible to use the allowance to help with costs related to teaching, tuition, and supervision as noted in section 5.4.1 of the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

The very nature of geographically isolated distance education means that a distance education tutor is required to be in every distance education home classroom. Families must provide and fund the entire costs associated with affording this tutor, which necessitates a family member (often the mother) sacrificing an income to assume this role, or the employment of additional staff to fill the role (or the mother's role outside of the schoolroom), often for the duration of compulsory primary (and sometimes secondary) schooling. The costs associated with the provision of a Home Tutor borne entirely by the families.

Further, in approx. 85% of families where the mother is the Home Tutor, this impacts employment opportunities and financial status. It can also significantly impact the viability of family businesses in remote locations when the mother is taken out of crucial roles in the office, paddock and much more to assume the responsibility of full-time tutor or a governess needs to be employed to fulfil the role. In situations where the family cannot provide a Home Tutor, they often move to a second home to access physical schooling. These impacts can be even further reaching on business, families and rural remote communities.

The "Australian Government Social Security Guide, version 1.307, released 8 May 2023, at 5.1.8.20 Common benefit rates" describes a payment for a "Single principal carer with an exemption from mutual obligation requirements if they are a home or distance educator of child/children in their care." This is currently \$949.30 and to be eligible as it currently stands, one needs to be eligible for Jobseeker payment and be a single parent who is teaching via home-schooling or distance education.

This Centrelink payment is an acknowledgement by the Federal Government that being a home or distance educator of a child is equivalent to full time work and has a value.

A Distance Education Teaching Allowance would assist to rectify the above issues and ICPA (Aust) envisages that:

- eligibility for a DETA would be linked to receipt of the federally funded AIC -DE Allowance and therefore determined by the same geographical isolation criteria
- a DETA would be paid annually per family (approx. 1,000 nationally) at a rate of \$6000.00 and indexed to the Consumer Price Index (CPI).

### **AIC Second Home Allowance**

The AIC Second Home Allowance assists geographically isolated families with the cost of setting up a second home away from their principal place of residence so their child/ren can attend a school daily. The option of establishing a second home while children are of school age is vital to retaining families in rural and remote areas of Australia. In many cases, the mother and children live in the second home during school times and return to their rural area during school breaks and holidays. This allows the family to access equitable schooling while maintaining their connection and support with their rural community. If the Second Home Allowance were not available, ICPA (Aust) foresees that many more families would move their entire family permanently to an urban area for schooling.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://guides.dss.gov.au/assistance-isolated-children-scheme-guidelines>

<sup>2</sup> [The Report into Education in Remote and Complex Environments.  
https://www.aph.gov.au/About Parliament/House of Representatives/About the House News/Media Releases/Report tabled education in remote and complex environments](https://www.aph.gov.au/About%20Parliament/House%20of%20Representatives/About%20the%20House%20News/Media%20Releases/Report%20tabled%20education%20in%20remote%20and%20complex%20environments)

### **Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Basic Boarding Allowance (BBA)**

Many children living in remote regions of Australia do not have adequate daily access to a physical secondary school and therefore must board away from home to attend school. Accessing compulsory schooling through boarding institutions comes at a considerable cost to geographically isolated families.

Rural and remote families are expressing growing concern about the affordability of accessing and utilising boarding schools to educate their children. Boarding school costs have increased significantly, and the financial impact can be exorbitant. The disparity between the AIC BBA and the actual cost of boarding fees across Australia continues to grow, impacting on the intent and effectiveness of the allowance. Rural and remote families are required to contribute increasingly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education year after year with only incremental annual increases to the allowance.

Recent survey data, collected from a cross-section of ICPA members nationwide, showed that more than 75% of respondents bear out-of-pocket expenses of over \$5,000.00 per term just for boarding fees and essential travel. This gap is their out-of-pocket expenses after they receive the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance. That is an out-of-pocket gap of over \$20,000 per year per student. These calculations do not include the additional costs of school or tuition fees. With the average boarding fee per year across WA, Qld, NSW and SA being approximately \$23000, the Basic Boarding Allowance or \$9396 covers only 40% of that average cost. An increase of \$4000 per year to the Allowance would see it cover at least 55% of the average boarding fee and alignment of the AIC with the Consumer Price Index: Education sub index would ensure the Allowance did not erode over time and is reflective of the true costs of educational expenses.

ICPA (Aust) has been raising this issue with the Federal Government for many years. Coupled with the current economic climate and significant increase in the costs of living being felt nationwide, we believe it is now a matter of urgency that this burden on families is addressed to maintain and support rural and remote students' access to education and to retain families in rural and remote Australia.

### **Direct Measure of Income (DMI) – Capacity to Contribute (CTC) School Funding Methodology**

ICPA (Aust) has voiced major concerns about current DMI-CTC school funding methodology, particularly for Regional Independent Boarding Schools which cater for students from geographically isolated locations.

It is deeply concerning that recurrent funding for schools covers in-school costs *only* and does not extend to supporting the provision of boarding. To effectively ignore the boarding operations of an Independent Regional Boarding School in a school funding model, whereby schools are providing an essential facility for the rural and remote students who rely on them indicates a lack of acknowledgement by government of the importance of educational equity for geographically isolated students, and more broadly the Australian rural industry and the communities and families it services. ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that the cost for the provision of boarding required by geographically isolated students must be taken into consideration in conjunction with in-school costs.

ICPA (Aust) believes the impact on Independent Regional Boarding Schools due to this gap in funding, along with the CTC Socio Economic Status Score Methodology will result in schools having no alternative other than to increase their boarding fees, thereby diminishing even further the choice of educational options for geographically isolated students as they become unable to afford the increased expenses. Furthermore, Independent Regional Boarding Schools may ultimately become unviable due to decreased enrolments, coupled with decreased funding.

Despite the existing AIC Boarding Allowance currently provided, the gap between the allowance and the actual cost of educating geographically isolated children in boarding schools is extraordinary and these expenses impede upon parents' "capacity to contribute." This will be extenuated if Independent Regional Boarding Schools increase their fees to counteract a decrease in funding due to the new model.

Many rural and remote families are involved in primary production industries such as agriculture. The use of taxable income to determine their capacity to contribute is an inaccurate measure for several 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, cyclones, 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.

Without due consideration of fluctuating incomes and possible inflated and inaccurate income data that the CTC arrangements may generate in relation to families involved in primary production, funding shortfalls for RRR schools may not be identified and therefore not adequately addressed in the Regional Schooling Resource Standard Loadings.

Further, students from geographically isolated areas are sometimes a very small percentage of an independent boarding school's student base, and the concern is that their numbers will be distorted in any calculations or averages of school community CTC, yet they may have the greatest challenge to access an education.

ICPA (Aust) believes:

1. Recurrent funding for schools should be extended to include the provision of boarding to ensure the continued viability of Independent Regional Boarding Schools and the accessibility and affordability of these schools for geographically isolated students.
2. The CTC methodology should recognise the financial circumstances of geographically isolated families when applied to Independent RRR Schools and Independent Regional Boarding Schools which cater for geographically isolated students, particularly in regard to the extra expenses incurred by these families, including boarding fees and other expenses associated with children attending boarding school.
3. Safeguards are needed to ensure educational equity is not reduced for rural and remote students so that these students are still able to access Independent Regional Boarding Schools using this funding methodology. Boarding operations of school and families who utilise them must be considered in the funding model to ensure that for those rural and remote students who rely on these boarding schools, it can remain affordable and accessible.
4. Alternatively a significant increase to the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance is required to mitigate the impacts of increased fees on rural and remote families must be implemented.

ICPA (Aust) has appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System on behalf of rural and remote students and families across Australia.