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Remote Borders Long-Awaited Return Home Across Borders

Families who live in rural and remote Australia are hailing 'a win for education in the bush', celebrating the recent National Cabinet decision that supports consistency in cross-border movement of boarding students during periods of COVID lockdown.

The National Code for Boarding School Students (The Code) was endorsed by National Cabinet late last week, following strong advocacy from the Isolated Children's Parents' Association representing rural and remote families who have had to navigate uncertainty, a multitude of COVID restrictions, and forced separation simply to access education for their children.

ICPA Australia President Alana Moller said "ICPA Federal and State Councils across Australia pulled together and we all worked tirelessly with government to find a solution for rural and remote families, following prolonged border restrictions that have seen interstate boarding students separated from their homes and families in the bush."

"For many rural and remote students, boarding school is a standard means of accessing education, especially in the middle and senior years. Providing long-term, nationally-consistent guidelines for families whose students must traverse state borders to access education is essential to temper the uncertainty they've experienced throughout the pandemic."

ICPA NSW President Claire Butler added her appreciation for the decision "we have just had three students come out of hotel quarantine in Victoria and whilst this news is too late for them, we see this Code as a way forward that gives people clear rules and a right of appeal. It has been a very difficult time for our families, sandwiched by three states with three completely different rules and one of the biggest issues was not having a clear contact to deal with in health departments. This Code brings transparency and certainty, which is very pleasing."

ICPA NT President Sarah Cook said The Code is a huge relief for Northern Territory geographically isolated families "The Territory doesn't have a great deal of boarding capacity. A majority of our very remote secondary students attend boarding school across jurisdiction borders, in another state. Students must be able to move efficiently and effectively between their school and home. This Code gives rural and remote families access to education. It's a vitally important piece of work and our members applaud National Cabinet for endorsing it".

ICPA WA President Sally Brindal expressed concerns for Western Australian boarders, "Some boarding schools and agricultural colleges in Western Australia have seen a number of students not return to face to face learning. The uncertainty regarding border restriction for boarding students made the situation just too difficult."

The Code will provide welcome relief for an estimated 1,600 rural and remote families across Australia, impacted by inconsistent and often-changing State, Territory and Local Government Area travel restrictions. The enforcement of the measures in the Code will be reflected through relevant Public Health Orders or Emergency Management Directions or other mechanisms of each State and Territory.

"ICPA Qld has been very appreciative of the efforts Qld Health has made to adopt a class exemption to enable boarding students to easily cross the borders for the holidays, however, we encourage all States and Territories to implement The National Code as soon as possible. The consistency provided by a national code will avoid further confusion and upset for families, which has been affecting the mental health and wellbeing of many of our members" said Louise Martin, President ICPA Qld.

ICPA acknowledges fellow stakeholders, schools, government and others who have supported geographically isolated families to bring this outcome to fruition.

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