

Rural Hardship Education Fund

The Isolated Children's Parent's Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), is calling on the Federal Government to introduce a Rural Hardship Education Fund to address the grave concerns of the many families in drought-stricken areas and in other times of rural hardship who simply cannot afford to educate their children.

Despite the introduction of many drought reform packages including subsidising the freight on fodder and water for stock, and assisting families to put food on the table, the huge cost of educating children who must live away from home in order to access a compulsory education is largely ignored.

Financial assistance to lessen the burden of educational costs must be established urgently as rural families are struggling to keep their children at school. Approximately 4150 students are currently receiving the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Boarding Allowance right across Australia, so the numbers living in drought affected areas at any one time are estimated to be significantly less than the total number of AIC Boarding Allowance recipients.

The implications of educating children from drought-stricken areas are causing serious side effects, including but not limited to:

- Unsustainable out of pocket costs of boarding school for rural families, particularly in times of drought.
- Families removing children from boarding school, splitting the family and moving to town in order to access schooling or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep their children in boarding school.
- Mental health of both parents and students already affected by the continuing drought compounded due to the worry over finding the funds for schooling.
- Many rural families do not qualify for the Farm Household Allowance, primarily due to asset tests, this allowance, even if it is received, is not designed to assist with children's education.

Drought continues to severely affect many rural families in several states, in particular Qld and NSW. Dairy farmers in Victoria and other states are facing a financial crisis. A Rural Hardship Education Fund would ensure that assistance could be made available for these children who are not able to access mainstream schooling while living at home. As the previously referred to Exceptional Circumstances no longer exist, safeguards must be put in place as a matter of urgency to ensure educational continuity when the huge out of pocket costs associated with boarding children away from home cannot be met during times of long-term drought, drought recovery periods or other rural hardship, when families experience years of little to no income.

Droughts can carry on for numerous years with long term effects. The drought itself and the recovery process once the drought has broken, are times of limited income and meagre means for rural communities and families who sustain their livelihoods from the land. Other unforeseen industry impacts (live export ban, dairy crisis) also adversely affect rural families at times. The cost of boarding school continues to rise and the federal and state allowances which assist families with the cost of accessing education, are not keeping up with the actual cost of boarding and tuition. Our members have indicated that the out of pocket costs range anywhere from \$17,000 to \$35,000 per child, per year depending on where students live or allowance/scholarship that may be available.

Boarding schools have been supportive of rural students during the current drought, but at the end of the day, they must run as a business and many are finding it difficult to continue to carry multiple students whose families cannot pay the required fees over such a long period.

Members of ICPA Federal Council are hearing heartbreaking stories of families who cannot meet the costs of boarding and removing children from school or trying to decide which child will be educated and which child will not. No Australian parent should have to choose between their children when it comes to accessing compulsory schooling. Other families have made the decision to move to town in order to access state school education, effectively splitting the family home and often leaving the father at home to cope on his own in these tough times. When a child is removed from boarding school, this can mean the end of the education for this child, particularly if they have completed Year 10.

Mental health is a large concern in rural communities and struggling to pay educational fees exacerbates the pressure. Parents are agonising over not being able to fund a basic requirement for their children. The children themselves are well aware of the cost and financial sacrifice that their families are making in order for them to be educated. This places a huge amount of self-burden on these children, as they feel they should be at home helping when employee numbers have been reduced and their parents are trying to hold on to core breeding stock to generate income once the drought has broken, and at the same time knowing that educational expenses are driving the family further into debt. These feelings of guilt and helplessness are very difficult for children to handle and a burden a child should not have to bear when it comes to education.

When natural and non-natural catastrophic events occur in urban areas, as terrible as they are, they do not affect children's schooling for the most part- once the danger has passed, students still have access to their schooling and their families do not have to worry about whether or not they will be able to afford to keep their children in school.

There is precedence for government assistance in previous droughts and times of rural hardship through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme. In 2005, during a period of drought, there was a major increase in the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance. Again, in the next drought, between 2008 and 2011 a small supplementary payment was added to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance, before reverting back in 2012.

In addition to the aforementioned, families living in an Exceptional Circumstances declared area received AIC Additional Boarding Allowance automatically. This scheme no longer exists, and no Exceptional Circumstances have been granted in the current drought. However, the need for assisting rural families with educational costs in times of drought and rural hardship remains as relevant now as it was previously.

ICPA (Aust) calls for the immediate creation of a Rural Hardship Education Fund to assist rural families with the cost of their children's education in times of long-term drought, periods of recovery and other rural hardship. There may be provision for inclusion of such a fund under the current Federal Drought Package or a special circumstances criterion within the AIC Scheme. Drought declarations are not made in every state despite properties experiencing extremely dry conditions. This assistance, however it is distributed, must be available to all of those being affected by extreme rain deficiency events over a period of time.

Geographically isolated children should not be disadvantaged or unable to attend their studies at boarding school due to ongoing long-term droughts or times of rural hardship. Educational expenses are an investment for the future prosperity of all our rural and remote communities and ICPA (Aust) urges the Federal Government to assist rural families in educating their children in these tough times. While 5,211 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2017, the number impacted by long-term drought and needing Rural Hardship Educational Assistance at any one time would be considerably less.