

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



2016-2017 Pre Budget Submission

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), is pleased to provide a number of recommendations for consideration in the 2016-17 budget that contribute towards achieving equity of educational opportunity for children and students living in rural and remote regions, thus ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations rather than their location.

Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote students requires a nation-wide approach that ensures national consistency no matter where education is provided. The financial cost to families educating children in these locations continues to rise and can be attributed to many leaving these areas.

This submission forms part of our lobby for allowances to assist families and students in rural and remote areas of Australia in order to gain equity in accessing education.

Accessing affordable early childhood learning:

Extend the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Distance Education allowance to those taking part in early childhood programs in their transition to school- the only means of accessing early childhood education for approximately 280 children across remote Australia is through distance education programs. While states and territories have provided such programs, families living in remote areas wishing to access these are bearing the entire costs associated with taking part in them. The AIC Distance Education allowance must be extended to this cohort in order to make early childhood programs more affordable.

Funding required ≈ \$1 million dollars per annum.

Recognition of the financial impact on families who must provide a distance education tutor:

Distance Education Teaching Allowance- for around 1500 families living in isolated regions of Australia, the only means of accessing an education for their children is via distance education programs. While the AIC allowance assists with the setup of the classroom and ongoing costs associated with this method of education, it is not possible without a tutor present in the home schoolroom. Families are required to provide and fund the entire costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) who must forgo an income, often, for many years in order to fill the role. ICPA is seeking the introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6000 per family, per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a tutor performs.

Funding required ≈ \$9 million per annum.

Urgent financial assistance is required to overcome the unsustainable costs associated with accessing boarding school education:

Increase to the Assistance for Isolated Children's, (AIC), Boarding Allowance - Attending boarding school is a necessity for many children in rural and remote areas due to the distance they are from available schooling. Rural and remote families are expressing a growing concern about the affordability of accessing and utilising boarding schools to educate their children during the compulsory years of schooling. Boarding school costs have increased significantly and the financial impact for these families is enormous. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating. This is evidenced by the substantial increases in AIC second home allowance claims. This is a drastic measure by families to reduce educational expenses and negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools (due to the younger siblings being removed from primary schooling). A significant increase in the AIC Boarding allowance is required as a matter of urgency.

4 150 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015.

Financial assistance required to help with education costs during periods of long-term drought:

Drought Education Fund – ICPA requests the immediate establishment of a Drought Education Fund, to assist families with the enormous out-of-pocket costs associated with educating children at boarding school in times of long-term drought and the drought recovery period. The fund could be established as part of the Federal Government's current Drought Relief Package, possibly being administered and accessed through bodies such as the Rural Adjustment Authorities or as a special circumstances criteria within the AIC Scheme. The benefits would be far reaching for rural families when under financial duress due to their inability to generate an income.

Geographically isolated students should not be disadvantaged or unable to complete their schooling due to the exceptional circumstances of long-term drought.

While 4 150 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015, the number impacted by drought at any one time would be considerably less.

Affordable pathways to accessing tertiary studies:

Tertiary Access Allowance- despite the welcomed changes that will see multiple asset testing removed from Youth Allowance, ICPA continues to lobby for a Tertiary Access Allowance (TAA) equal to the relocation scholarship (1st year-\$4 269, 2nd year-\$2 135, 3rd and subsequent years - \$1 067). Ideally ICPA would like to see all students who need to relocate to undertake tertiary study, receiving financial support to assist them in accessing their place of study. However, in view of the current financial situation, support must be given to those most in need. Immediate assistance should be available for students from rural and remote areas who constitute a group currently under-represented at university. In 2014, independent Youth Allowance recipients living in regional areas totalled approximately 4 200 students. Students living in these areas, who are not receiving any form of income support, must have equity to tertiary education by way of financial assistance to allow them to access their chosen institution. We are unable to access these figures but suggest they would be few.

Funding these allowances would assist considerably in alleviating and overcoming the challenges families face when educating their children in isolated regions of Australia. Further details about our organisation and our main lobby areas can be found throughout this document. Please do not hesitate to contact ICPA Federal President, Mrs Wendy Hick or myself, ICPA Federal Secretary, Mrs Jane Morton for more information.

BACKGROUND of ICPA

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia had its beginning in the NSW outback town of Bourke, in April 1971. Families were struggling with drought and the consequences of such an event, and most importantly, the effects of the drought on the education of their children. The late Mrs Pat Edgley, MBE, called a meeting to save the Bourke Hostel, which serviced families in the outlying district, from closure. Out of this has grown an amazing organisation, with branches of ICPA springing up all over Australia, and eventually the national overarching body - ICPA (Aust). In its 45 years as a volunteer organisation, ICPA has achieved much for families and children who are isolated from access to educational services. ICPA will continue to strive for equity of access to an appropriate education for these children.

OBJECTIVE of ICPA:

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body, dedicated to ensuring all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of access to an appropriate education for their children and the provision of services required in achieving this. Children may be educated in small rural schools, by distance education, attend boarding schools or school term hostels and sometimes have access to early childhood services. Tertiary students whose family home is in rural and remote Australia frequently must live away from home to access further education.

ACHIEVEMENTS of ICPA:

- Assistance for Isolated Children scheme (AIC). This is a Federal Government allowance, established under the Australian Labor Party by the Hon Kim Beazley Snr MP, then Minister for Education, and is paid to parents to help support their isolated students as a distance education student, a living away from home student, or in establishing a second home so students can access education.
- Establishing allowances in each state, funded by State Governments.
- Establishing itinerant teaching services to assist in overcoming the tyranny of distance for distance education tutors and students.
- Supporting retired educators volunteering to assist families to educate their students in remote and isolated homesteads.
- Impetus behind the Country Areas Program (CAP), which has been replaced by similar State based programs.
- A leading role in improving telecommunication for isolated families, including current technologies used for delivering distance education.
- Youth Allowance changes, which saw the introduction of a Relocation Scholarship and the removal of Family Assets and Family Actual Means testing for rural students.
- Respect and credibility across all political parties and government departments.

CURRENT ISSUES of ICPA:

- Advocating for early childhood programs to be available for all rural and remote families, including via an extension of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education Allowance to four year old students.
- Advocating for financial support for distance education tutors who are working with students in distance education classrooms.
- Advocating for adequate and affordable communications in rural and remote areas to ensure geographically isolated students have the resources they require for their educational needs.
- Advocating for an increase in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Boarding Allowance to enable access of education for rural and remote students.
- Advocating for a Drought Education Fund to assist families with the high education costs of their children in times of long-term drought and drought recovery.
- Advocating for a Tertiary Access Allowance for students who want to participate in tertiary education and must live away from home to do so, but do not receive any assistance to relocate.

Early Childhood Education **Extension to the AIC Allowance**

The Australian Government recognises the importance of ensuring that children are not disadvantaged in terms of their early physical, social and educational development. Researchers throughout the world report that the social and developmental gap in children's functioning and achievement can be significant by age six. These differences in the cognitive, non-cognitive and social skills are strong predictors of later academic, occupational and life achievement.

The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting school has never been better. This can be attributed to the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, ICPA remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions.

ICPA believes the impact of not being able to access affordable early learning for children living beyond the metropolitan boundaries is evident in the gap between educational outcomes for rural and remote students when compared to those living in large centres. Much of this is due to learning difficulties going undiagnosed in the early years and having very limited opportunities to socialise and interact with other children.

All States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education and this is the *only* avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, approximately 280 children access recognised 4 year old programs in their homes through distance education, which today includes a mixture of hands on play-based learning and teacher-led structured lessons which involve the use of technology for communication.

As with every other early childhood program for four year olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task, to use the technology required for distance education, to appropriately interact with their peers and teacher and to understand the formal concept of school.

It is 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 to attend school functions which provide an opportunity for the children to participate in group activities, such as sport, practise conversation skills and socialise with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

Families undertaking distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children's Scheme, (AIC), Distance Education Allowance as 4 year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through Child Care Rebates (CCR) or Child Care Benefits (CCB) as these children are still in their parents' care.

Based on projected 4 year old distance education enrolments, approximately 280 families Australia - wide would benefit from the extension of the AIC Distance Education Allowance which is intended to assist with out of pocket costs. Why are these 280 four year olds ignored?

ICPA requests that the Federal Government address the financial inequity facing rural and remote families needing to access an early childhood program through distance education. Equity can be achieved by extending the AIC Scheme to include four year old students taking part in distance education early childhood learning programs.

Distance Education

Distance Education Teaching Allowance

For many young people living in remote regions, their only access to education is to study by distance education. While distance education services are well structured and distance education centres ably staffed, it is clear that distance education provision is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated classroom. 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.

The distance education tutor is a person who frequently is the mother of the students, and must be present to commit between six and eight hours each day to the geographically isolated classroom to teach the distance education program, in addition to necessary preparation time. The role of distance education tutor requires dedication and is a commitment that frequently lasts many years. A distance education tutor must be capable and confident in delivering the distance education program, thus allowing rural and remote students to achieve educational parity with their urban peers who have face-to-face access to professionally trained teachers and support staff on a daily basis.

Tasks required of the distance education tutor include setting up a classroom, keeping students engaged in the curriculum, dealing with disciplinary issues, ensuring students link in via the internet or telephone for their formal instructions and a variety of extra-curricular activities, receiving and returning completed lessons to distance education centres, marking school work before it is returned, as well as dealing with family commitments and the everyday running of a business in a remote area. Distance education tutors spend similar time to a teacher in a mainstream school preparing daily lessons and teaching their students, with no remuneration or recognition for the work they do. The delivery of distance education is not possible without the commitment of distance education tutors who are accountable for the face-to-face delivery of educational support, supervision and educational evaluation of their students.

The roles women undertake in the operation of family agricultural businesses have changed and multiplied over the years. With the responsibility of the distance education tutor position often falling on the mother, fulfilling this position further compounds her workload. This can place increased pressure on other family members and may necessitate the employment of additional staff.

Due consideration must be given to the encumbrance on approximately 1500 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate children. The vital role of the distance education tutor should be recognised through the payment of an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform.

ICPA requests that the Federal Government introduce a Distance Education Teaching Allowance in financial recognition of the essential work distance education tutors perform.

This Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) should be:

- for families who qualify for the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme – Distance Education Allowance
- paid per family (approx. 1,500 nationally)
- an annual payment of \$6,000.00, indexed to the CPI.

Compulsory Education **Increase to the AIC Boarding Allowance**

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Boarding Allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate government school. Much has changed since the AIC scheme was first introduced; the duration of compulsory education has increased and accessing regional term hostels has decreased due to continual closures. Changes are needed to ensure this allowance meets the needs of families in the twenty-first century.

For many children living in remote regions of Australia, accessing appropriate schooling requires relocating great distances to attend boarding school. In the pursuit of education, families must find accommodation and suitable pastoral care for their children. In most cases, there is little option other than accessing private boarding schools in large cities, as they are often the only schools that offer boarding facilities. Attending these boarding schools comes with the additional high tuition fee attached to the school. One cannot be had without the other- it is a package, and an added cost to rural families. Boarding school is a necessity for many rural families rather than a luxury. Our members have indicated that the out of pocket costs range anywhere from \$10 000 to \$30 000 per child, per year depending on where students live or allowance/scholarship that are available.

Rural and remote families are expressing a growing concern about the affordability of accessing and utilising boarding schools to educate their children during their compulsory years of school. Boarding school costs have increased significantly and the financial impact for these families is enormous. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating. This is evidenced by the substantial increases in AIC second home allowance claims. This is a drastic measure by families to reduce educational expenses and negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

ICPA believes the misconception that farming families are able to draw down on a high asset base for the purpose of meeting education costs must be addressed. Businesses in rural and remote areas, particularly family farming ones, operate in an asset-rich but income-poor environment. The assets that form a vital part of the operation of these primary production businesses are generally not disposable, nor likely to be considered by a financier as acceptable to draw down on to fund the education needs of children. Employees in remote areas find it difficult to provide an education for their children as they too need to access boarding school where there are no local high schools. Rural families often have several children attending boarding school at once, requiring them to fund the high out-of-pocket education costs which would not be necessary if they could access a school from home on a daily basis.

There is a growing disparity between the AIC allowance and the costs of students attending boarding school. The consistent increase in the gap between the AIC Boarding Allowance and the cost of boarding school fees is widening exponentially demonstrating it is no longer achieving the aim of assisting with affordable, equitable access to education for geographically isolated families. Rural and remote families are being asked to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education.

It is in the National interest to ensure isolated children are not disadvantaged in terms of educational and social development and to ensure their educational outcomes are not compromised. These students need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs which allows them to achieve educational parity with their urban peers. It is imperative for rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions.

ICPA requests the Federal Government to address the widening gap between the costs of attending boarding school and the current assistance available through the AIC Scheme.

4 150 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015.

Drought Education Fund

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

Despite the introduction of many drought reform packages including subsidising fodder and water for stock, and assisting families to put food on the table, the huge cost of educating children at boarding school is largely ignored!

Financial assistance to assist with educational costs must be established urgently as rural families are struggling to keep their children at school. Approximately 4,150 students are currently receiving the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Boarding Allowance right across Australia, so the numbers living in drought affected areas would be significantly less.

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, nor is this allowance, if it is received, designed to assist with children's education.

Drought continues to severely affect many rural families in several states, in particular Qld and NSW. A Drought 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. 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 and drought recovery periods (previously referred to as Exceptional Circumstances), 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. 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 \$10,000 to \$30 000 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 the cost of schooling.

There is precedence for government assistance in previous droughts through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme. In 2005 there was a major increase in the AIC basic Boarding Allowance. And 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 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 remains as relevant now as it was previously.

ICPA (Aust) calls for the immediate creation of a Drought Education Fund to assist rural families with the cost of their children's education in times of long-term drought, and periods of recovery. There may be provision for inclusion of such a fund under the current Federal Drought Package or a special circumstances criteria 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. 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 4 150 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015, the number impacted by long-term drought at any one time would be considerably less.

Tertiary Education Tertiary Access Allowance

Engaging in tertiary education should be an option for all Australian students. Ability to access education is one of the key considerations in determining whether a student can take up this option. Equity of educational access for rural and remote students is restricted and they continue to be under-represented in tertiary education.

ICPA's Tertiary Access Research (May 2013) found that travel distance and the huge financial cost of relocation were the major hurdles in a student's ability to access tertiary education. Fifty-three per cent of young people from rural and remote areas live between 501 to 2000 kms from the nearest university offering their required course. These students residing in rural and remote Australia require financial assistance to access their place of study. This assistance should not be dependent upon being a recipient of student income support payments such as Youth Allowance (YA). While the costs associated with relocating have been recognised through the provision of Relocation Scholarships, only students receiving dependent Youth Allowance have benefited from this change.

The logistics for rural and remote students to journey to an institution offering tertiary studies involve expenditure often beyond their financial means. The high up-front costs of accessing and paying for accommodation, travel to access their place of study, along with the cost of living away from home, all impact on rural and remote student access. ICPA considers it vital for the Federal Government to create an allowance that will enable these students to have the equivalent access to tertiary education that is available to most students living in the urban areas of Australia.

To further their education rural students must, by definition, leave home to access tertiary studies. The support mechanisms of Youth Allowance, and part-time work that many students undertake, contribute to supplementing the living costs of students once they can actually access their chosen tertiary institution. The greatest barrier rural students face when accessing higher education is the lack of adequate financial means to fund this access. The current measures for student income support, (Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy), do not adequately recognise the extra costs incurred by all rural and remote students attempting to access tertiary education.

Students, who wish to commence tertiary studies immediately following completion of their secondary education, invariably require assistance to get to their chosen tertiary institution. They have limited funds to assist in accessing their place of study and some students cannot defer their studies in order to meet the workforce criteria for gaining independent Youth Allowance and hence receive financial support for day-to-day living. Students receiving independent Youth Allowance, who must relocate from the family home, still require financial assistance with the relocation needed to access their tertiary establishment.

ICPA requests that the Federal Government introduce a Tertiary Access Allowance as financial assistance to rural and remote students who must live away from home to access tertiary education.

The tertiary access allowance advocated by ICPA will enable rural and remote students to access their place of study including securing their place of accommodation, assisting with relocation expenses, travelling to their institution for enrolment to commence study and facilitating travel home during the year.

This allowance should:

- Not be reliant on students receiving income support payments such as Youth Allowance.
- Be an annual payment for the duration of the student's full time course.
- Will be \$4,269 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2,135 in the second or third year, \$1,067 in the fourth or subsequent year.
- Not be received in addition to a Relocation Scholarship.

Please note the figures quoted are the figures for 2015.