

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Briefing Papers

of the
Federal Council

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

ICPA (Aust)

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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 47 years as a volunteer organisation, ICPA has achieved much for families and children who are isolated from access to educational services. ICPA continues 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 only sometimes have access to early childhood services. Tertiary students whose family reside 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 services for isolated families, including current technologies used for delivering distance education.
- Youth Allowance changes, which saw the introduction of a Relocation Scholarship, removal of Family Assets and Family Actual Means Tests and the gap year reduced from 18 to 14 months if a certain amount of income is earned by rural and remote students after leaving school.
- Provision of an education port with the introduction of the new **nbn** Sky Muster satellite internet service.
- Respect and credibility across all political parties and government departments.

CURRENT ADVOCACY of ICPA:

- Early childhood programs and child care to be available for all rural and remote families, including an extension of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education allowance to four-year-old students and ensuring that early years' mobile services are continued to be supported.
- Financial support for distance education tutors who are working with students in distance education classrooms.
- Adequate and affordable communications in rural and remote areas to ensure geographically isolated students have the resources they require for their educational needs.
- An increase in the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme payments to enable access of education for rural and remote students.
- A Rural Hardship Education Fund to assist families with the high education costs of their children in times of long-term drought, drought recovery and instances of rural hardship.
- Adequate support for rural and remote students with specific learning needs.
- 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.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FACING GEOGRAPHICALLY ISOLATED FAMILIES

Since 1971 the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), has represented families living in rural and remote regions of Australia. Our goal is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all geographically isolated children and thus ensure they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations and abilities rather than the location of their home. Due consideration must be given to factors which affect the delivery of and access to education by these children, factors which do not necessarily need to be considered within the context of metropolitan education.

Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote students requires a national 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. There is a strong need for rural and remote education to be considered on a separate register when delivering and funding education for these students.

Early Childhood Education and Care

CHILD CARE:

The new In Home Care model should address our members' concerns of accessibility and affordability of the service gathered from the recent In Home Care Review and Nanny Pilot Program Evaluation. ICPA (Aust) hopes the new model with its increase to a maximum of 3000 In Home Care educators allocated to appropriate areas by the In Home Care Support Agencies will meet the needs of rural and remote families from 2 July 2018.

- In rural and remote Australia, it can be very difficult for our members to find suitable people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children who must be educated by distance education. Visiting overseas workers could also be a solution to this problem, but they are currently constrained by their visa stipulations. A broadening of the criteria for working visas to include nannying and distance education tutoring would help resolve this.
- The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC would remedy the situation.

ACCESSIBILITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING:

- **Universal Access to Early Childhood Education:**
Flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural towns to include preschoolers and more facilitators are required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. Facilitators should include qualified teachers and diploma qualified educators where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access. Rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very start if preschool has not been experienced in their early years.
- **Mobile Early Childhood Services:**
Continued transition support is specifically required to ensure that Mobile Early Childhood Services in rural and remote areas can access funding to ensure these services are secure beyond 2 July 2018
- **Assistance for Isolated 4yo Children:**
Four-year-old students enrolled in Distance Education need to be supported while participating in their essential transition to formal schooling programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme should be extended to include these children as no other service is available for this cohort.
- **Working Holiday Maker Visas and the shortage of nannies and distance education tutors in rural areas.**

Distance Education Teaching Allowance

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

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 often forgo an income, for many years in order to fill the role. ICPA is seeking the introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6,000 per family, per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a tutor performs.

Rural and Remote Communications

- The nbn Education port should be available for all rural and remote students on Sky Muster internet services at home (including students at rural schools, those home from boarding school needing to complete assignments and tertiary students).
- Rural and remote telecommunications help-resource centres are required to assist with the many specific problems encountered by isolated families.
- Continued provision and maintenance of landlines in rural and remote areas are essential, especially where mobile coverage is not available.

Access to Compulsory Schooling

Accessing compulsory education is a significant financial burden for rural families.

- The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance needs to adequately address the out-of-pocket costs incurred by rural families whether their children need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling. Rural and remote families require a significant increase in the AIC allowances: Basic Boarding Allowance, Additional Boarding Allowance, Distance Education Allowance and Second Home Allowance. After the adjustment increase, the AIC allowances to be annually indexed at the CPI education sub-index.
- **Election Commitment:**
ICPA (Aust) has put forward several proposals to allocate funding (\$44.7 mil) that was promised in the lead up to the 2016 federal election. Information on these proposals can be found in the attached paper.
- **Fringe Benefits Tax:**
In an effort to attract and retain staff in rural and remote locations, some employers offer their staff a financial contribution towards educational expenses of their children. However, these payments incur a fringe benefits tax which negatively impacts the intent of the contribution.

Rural Hardship Education Fund

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.

Specific Education Needs

Children with specific education needs require access to educational opportunities appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Learning difficulties can also be diagnosed and early intervention given if teachers are equipped with a Rural and Remote Major which includes the recognition of Spectrum Disorders, for example.

- Need for Medicare rebates for Telehealth Services such as Speech Therapy and other allied health services.

School Travel

Student concessions for airfares should be available for necessary boarding school travel and specific education appointments not covered by Patient Assisted Travel Schemes or the state equivalent available for medical specialist appointments.

- Compensation for plane cancellations, unexpected delays causing missed connections, particularly for boarding students from rural and remote areas, which is very distressing for younger students travelling alone.
- Fares Allowance can be accessed through Youth Allowance or ABSTUDY but is not available through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme.

Tertiary Education

Affordable pathways are required in accessing tertiary studies for rural and remote students. ICPA continues to lobby for a Tertiary Access Allowance (TAA), equal to the Relocation Scholarship (1st year - \$4459, 2nd and 3rd years- \$2231, and subsequent years - \$1115).

- Dependent Youth Allowance (YA) parental income limit needs revisiting- \$52,706 (2016-17 tax year - value used for current year).
- Independent YA parental income limit for rural and remote students is \$150,000. If rural and remote students are classified independent, their parental income should not be taken into account.

Early Childhood Education and Care

The issue of accessing affordable early childhood learning and care for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to either:

- No services being available.
- No staff available to fill positions.
- No flexibility within programs to allow for individual family's needs.
- High out of pocket costs exceeding the family budget.
- The impact on Budget Based Funded Mobile Services which do not fit under the New Child Care Package.

Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

The flexibility of use of school buildings in small rural towns to include preschoolers, more preschool distance education places and more facilitators are required to ensure that all students have access to the required 15 hours per week preschool education. Facilitators should include qualified teachers and diploma qualified educators where Early Childhood teachers are difficult to access. Students commencing formal schooling need to be school-ready, especially as Early Learning Languages Australia (ELLA) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects have also been introduced to the preschool curriculum. Rural and remote students will lag behind their urban peers from the very start if preschool has not been experienced in their early years.

In Home Care

For families living in rural and remote Australia, who are able to provide accommodation, find the In Home Care scheme an affordable option when it comes to accessing child care. However, there are three main concerns continually raised by our members:

- Firstly, that the In Home Care scheme needs to remain accessible for rural and remote families who have no other child care options. ICPA (Aust) hopes that the new maximum of 3000 places is adequate for members' needs.
- Secondly, members continually raise concerns about the difficulty of finding suitable people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children of rural and remote families who must be educated by distance education. Frequently the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travelers such as backpackers. While they are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas, they can only stay maximum of 6 months with one employer and they are not eligible for a second-year visa, as working with children is not an acceptable employable occupation. See the Working Visa Paper on the following page.
- Lastly, the process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would remedy the situation.

Mobile Early Childhood Services in rural and remote areas

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, playgroups and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face to face interaction for children of similar ages. Flexibility and surety of funding for these services is vital in providing the much needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. ICPA (Aust) has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the new package, where, Mobile Playgroups in particular, will not fit and need to access funding through the Department of Social Services or their state.

Recommendation:

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Federal Government ensures that Mobile Early Childhood Services in rural and remote areas continue to be supported in their transition so that funding for these services is secure beyond July 2018.

Early Childhood Education Extension to the AIC Allowance for 4 year olds

The Assistance for Isolated Children Distance Education (AIC) DE allowance must be extended to the 4-year-old cohort when undertaking a transition to school program.

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 formal schooling 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 which are 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, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (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?

Recommendation:

ICPA recommends 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.

Working Holiday Maker Program

Working Holiday Maker Visas and the Shortage of Distance Education Tutors and Nannies in Rural and Remote Australia

Due to geographical isolation, there is a distinct lack of Australian workers, including qualified child care and educational workers, who are willing to undertake work where remoteness is an issue. It is extremely difficult to attract and retain Australian child carers, home tutors (distance education tutors) and teachers to rural and remote areas. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travellers looking for a cultural exchange experience and our rural and remote members rely on the employment of overseas workers to fill these positions. While these workers are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas, they can only stay a maximum of 6 months with one employer and are not eligible for a second-year visa. Plant and animal cultivation, fishing and pearling, tree farming and felling, mining and construction are currently the specific fields of work that qualify an applicant for a second-year visa. Measures including extending the eligibility for a second-year visa to include child care and education provision under rural work are incentives for backpackers to holiday and work in rural and remote Australia.

Teachers, Distance Education Tutors and Nannies should be added to the current “Specified Work” list for Working Holiday Visas, so that they can help deliver Distance Education on rural and remote properties. The 2nd year working holiday visas 417 and 462, are not available for distance education tutors/teachers or nannies from overseas in rural and remote areas, despite being rural work. However, with recent developments in Northern Australia, second-year visa applicants could be accepted there, on the 462 Working Holiday visa, if having worked for 3 months in agriculture, tourism or hospitality the previous year. Also, in Northern Australia, if working for 6 months for one employer on a working holiday maker visa 417, permission can now be granted to stay another 6 months with that employer. If child care or distance education supervision were eligible as specified work, this would help provide workplaces for distance education tutors in other rural and remote areas if the same conditions apply as for other 2nd year visa seekers. In the distance education schoolroom, 12 months’ support would be more beneficial than just 6 months to support the importance of continuity and consistency.

At times, overseas couples wish to work on a rural or remote property; both would enjoy the cultural experience and one partner is able to work with the livestock, orchards etc., however the other partner may wish for a less physical type of work. She is unable to work in the distance education schoolroom or assist with child care on the property to gain eligibility for a second-year visa as this is not on the ‘specified work’ list.

Another consideration is also extending the Northern Australia (Working holiday visa 462 and 417) rules¹ to other rural and remote areas of Australia, allowing overseas workers to continue with an employer for 12 months in rural region of Australia resulting in the same benefits across rural Australia as those initiated under the Northern Australia ruling.

Making the second-year visa accessible to nannies and distance education tutors under agriculture, as well as an extension of the 6 months to 12 months working with one employer, would provide a better solution for rural families seeking to employ staff and a better experience for overseas workers who wish to remain with one employer.

Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa (subclass 457)²

As mentioned in the reference below, this visa will be abolished and replaced with the completely new Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa by March 2018 which will support businesses in addressing genuine skill shortages and particularly in rural and remote areas. Visa applicants for this will need to be sponsored by a business up to 2 or 4 years as per specified skill. Skilled Early Childhood teachers, Primary and Middle School teachers, Private Tutors and Child Care Centre managers are all on the approved occupation list. There is a real shortage of people willing to fulfil distance education supervisor/tutoring roles. If qualified teachers were happy to work with distance education students in remote classrooms, it would be an excellent option, however more often it is a skilled worker such as a nanny or governess who is willing to accept distant education opportunities. It would be extremely beneficial if nannies

¹[http://www.aph.gov.au/About Parliament/Parliamentary Departments/Parliamentary Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/Quick Guides/WorkingHoliday](http://www.aph.gov.au/About%20Parliament/Parliamentary%20Departments/Parliamentary%20Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/Quick%20Guides/WorkingHoliday)

² <http://www.border.gov.au/Trav/Visa-1/457->

and governesses could be added to the TSS Occupations List and Private Tutors and Teachers could also be approved for distance education classrooms.

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the lack of distance education tutors and nannies be addressed by the provision of Working Visa changes allowing for governesses, nannies and distance education supervision to be included in the list of TSS approved occupations.

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 1 500 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. 1500 nationally)
- an annual payment of \$6,000.00, indexed to the CPI.
- As there is yet to be the creation of a DETA, ICPA members have asked that an increase in the AIC Distance education (DE) component be urgently sought to address the true expenses for those families whose only option of schooling is Distance Education.

Rural and Remote Communications

ICPA (Aust) has more than forty years' experience of advocating for educational issues on behalf of families living in rural and remote Australia. Our organisation is well positioned to contribute to the discussion on **rural communications** from a user's point of view. The majority of our membership falls into the category of the approximate seven per cent of premises in Australia that will be serviced by either fixed wireless or satellite.

Families living in rural and remote locations frequently use their homes as the base for their businesses with the home often doubling as the classroom for distance education students. For our members, access to adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services is vital for the delivery of education, accessing government services and for enabling enterprises to conduct their business.

ICPA (Aust) has strong and clear views on the communication requirements for the non-urban population, which have come about due to the inequalities experienced over the last decade or so in comparison to available metropolitan services. We are aware that delivering services to the rural and remote population similar to what is available in metropolitan areas, is far more expensive and time consuming to deploy. Therefore, it is essential that the capacity of the **nbn** Sky Muster service is sufficient for both current and future demand. The roll out of **nbn**[™] Sky Muster service has been welcomed but not without problems. Service provider call centres and volunteer groups have been overwhelmed at times with requests for assistance with problems that they often have no control over. A dedicated rural and remote **nbn** call centre with trained staff that understand rural and remote needs would assist immensely with these issues. While nbn Local has recently been announced, it is not accessible to the average customer without an organization or contact relaying the information. Volunteer groups such as Better Internet for Regional, Rural and Remote Australia (BIRRR) provide a tremendous advisory and support service, however, they cannot continue to deal with the amount of cases they are presented with, nor should they be required to. A system where rural and remote customers can deal directly with one specific support centre for assistance with faults or guidance on appropriate services and products for both internet and telephony is needed.

ICPA (Aust) supports the nbn Sky Muster Education Service (i.e. education port) and requests a priority installation and repair service for families educating their children via distance education due to geographic isolation. ICPA members would also like to see the education port availability extended to geographically isolated tertiary students studying both externally and on campus so that they may complete assessments and assignments while in areas covered by Sky Muster internet. Rural students studying at small rural schools should also be able to benefit from the education port to assist with data usage when they are at home sharing one Sky Muster connection for the family's needs including personal, business and schooling.

Efforts should be made to increase the **mobile phone service coverage** in rural and remote areas to fill the void of telephony services. ICPA (Aust) requests that all mobile black spot areas containing a rural school be considered as a priority under future Mobile Black Spot Program rounds. In addition, ICPA (Aust) encourages all governments and service providers, to investigate the utilisation of existing communications infrastructure and resources, (particularly in rural and remote areas) to provide alternatives to satellite internet delivery. This would allow more customers to access fixed wireless internet services and reduce the number of people dependent on satellite internet, further reducing the risk of future satellite congestion.

The Productivity Commission's Report on the Universal Service Obligation, caused great concern among ICPA members that landlines, which geographically isolated families depend on for voice services, will cease to exist and Sky Muster customers moved to VoIP services as their only means of telephony. ICPA reiterates that families living outside of city centres, due to the nature of where they live, require two separate forms of communications (ie phone/voice and internet/data as separate services and not relying on the same mode of delivery) so that if one fails, the other is still available. VoIP through Sky Muster at present is far from a reliable service and even nbn itself recommends that customers "Consider keeping your copper service active in nbn[™] Fixed Wireless and Sky Muster[™] satellite areas if you rely on landline phone services in emergency situations". Sky Muster service can be affected by weather events and power outages.

ICPA (Aust) requests assurance that rural and remote students experiencing phone or internet outages and faults will be attended to as a matter of urgency.

ICPA (Aust) requests the government to investigate a rural and remote dedicated call centre for landline and data needs of rural and remote users.

ICPA (Aust) requests that the Education Port Service be expanded to include tertiary students, students at rural schools and boarding students who use the Sky Muster service for assignments, assessments, research and education when at home.

ICPA (Aust) requests that the USO remain on landline telephony services for those living outside of mobile coverage areas and that these landline services are maintained and upgraded as necessary.

Access to Compulsory Education Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily face to face 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.

Accessing compulsory education is a significant financial burden for rural families. The Assistance for Isolated Children allowance needs to adequately address the out of pocket costs incurred by rural and remote families whether their children need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling.

The AIC allowance consists of three main categories for geographically isolated students:

- **Distance Education Allowance** for students living at home and undertaking distance education
- **Boarding and Additional Boarding Allowance** for students boarding away from home at a school hostel or private arrangement
- **Second Home Allowance** for students living in the family's second home so they can attend school daily

Distance Education

Families who educate their children via distance education are required to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting, provide extra learning materials and resources, print necessary learning materials all of which are supplied to students at mainstream schools. In addition, 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 distance education families with some of these necessary expenses in order to educate their children when living in geographic isolation.

Boarding

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must move away from home to attend school. This comes at a considerable cost to families. Annual out-of-pocket boarding expenses range from \$17,000 to \$35,000 per child, which is unsustainable for most rural families. Some families are splitting the family and moving to town to access affordable schooling, or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all of their children in boarding school. This is negatively impacting the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

The disparity between the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC) Boarding Allowance and the actual cost of boarding schools across Australia continues to grow. This growth in disparity is impacting the intent and effectiveness of the allowance. Rural and remote families are required to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education.

Second Home

The AIC Second Home Allowance assists families with the cost of setting up a second home away from their main place of residence where a family member lives with the children so that they can attend a school on a day to day basis. The option of establishing a second home while children are of school age, is paramount in efforts to retain 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 schooling, but also maintain their connection and support with their rural community as well as work and live in a rural area. If the Second Home Allowance were not available, more families would move their entire family permanently to an area where appropriate schooling was available. ICPA advocates for the Second Home Allowance component of the AIC to be paid at the same rate as the Boarding AIC.

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.

The Federal Government has recently committed funding for geographically isolated children which includes an increase to the Additional Boarding Allowance. ICPA recommends that utilisation of the balance of this funding includes assisting geographically isolated children through the AIC Distance Education, Basic Boarding and Second Home Allowances.

Fringe Benefits Tax

Exemption from Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) - Employers Assisting with Educational Costs for Employees

In an effort to attract and retain staff in rural and remote locations, some employers offer their staff a financial contribution towards educational expenses of their children. However, these payments incur a fringe benefits tax which negatively impacts the employer and the intent of the contribution.

In some cases, the employer chooses to pay a higher wage/salary to the employee rather than incur the FBT on the education assistance. This is also problematic for families as a higher income bracket could affect eligibility for income-tested assistance such as the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance or Youth Allowance.

The Australian Tax Office states some benefits, for example, living away from home allowance, receive concessional treatment in relation to Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT). ICPA (Aust) recommends that benefits paid by an employer to assist an employee with the costs of having their child 'living away from home' for education could be treated in a similar way.

The removal of Fringe Benefits Tax on contributions to employees' children's education expenses will potentially encourage families to stay in the bush, improve recruitment and retention of families and inspire employers to contribute towards the increasingly high costs of boarding school. These outcomes would be consistent with 'Developing the North' aspirations.

Exemption from Fringe Benefits Tax – Schools/boarding facilities providing accommodation for staff

For many years ICPA (Aust) has urged the Federal Government to change policy on Fringe Benefits Tax (FBT) as it applies to essential boarding school staff required to "live in" to perform their duty of care of residential students in metropolitan boarding institutions. This tax negatively impacts on the cost of an equitable education for isolated students.

The burden of these taxes is especially onerous given that they are levied on the day-to-day living and employment expenses that boarding schools incur and come on top of already significant costs that families must meet. In addition, the taxes appear to be levied across sectors in a most inequitable and inconsistent manner. For example, FBT on boarding supervisors' accommodation adds an estimated \$1000 per year to the cost of school fees, yet it is not levied on aged care facilities or military establishments. As another example, GST is levied on boarding school food, yet not on the food provided in aged care facilities.

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.

Specific Education Needs

Children with specific education needs require access to educational opportunities appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Access to such opportunities should not be compromised by living in a rural or remote location. Distance limits the choice of schools available to students in rural and remote areas, but for students with specific learning needs, this choice can be further limited. The challenges of having both geographic isolation and learning challenges can be seen as a “double disability”. All students have a right to participate in education on the same basis as their peers through rigorous, meaningful and dignified learning programs, regardless of their geographical location.

ICPA members have highlighted issues impacting access to an equitable education for students with specific learning needs. These have been summarised below, together with recommendations for implementation that will improve educational opportunities and learning outcomes for children with specific learning needs who reside in rural and remote Australia.

Provision of Medicare Rebate for Telehealth Services

Utilisation of telehealth services can be of great benefit to families in geographically isolated locations who would otherwise have to travel considerable distances or encounter lengthy delays to access face-to-face consultations with relevant health professionals. Students with developmental difficulties require frequent and timely consultations, and these can be enabled via telehealth services for many families otherwise unable to access allied health professionals due to living in rural and remote areas. Some specialist consultations, such as speech pathology, can be satisfactorily delivered using telehealth services where the technology is available. These services are already providing improved access to health services for some children in geographically isolated areas. The cost to families to access such services should also be equitable.

Recommendation:

That an equivalent Medicare rebate be provided to families in rural and remote locations who need to use telehealth clinicians for children with development difficulties under the 'Chronic Diseases Management Scheme' and similar item numbers, to those who have in-person consultations.

Improved Staff Training for Teachers in Rural and Remote Locations

For distance education students, who have no daily face to face access to appropriately qualified teachers and are reliant on often untrained distance education tutors, it is essential that professional development and support opportunities are provided to ensure that specific learning needs are catered for. Similarly, teachers and support staff in small schools in geographically isolated locations require training and support for students with specific learning needs such as dyslexia and autism spectrum disorders. ICPA (Aust) acknowledges the “*Good to Great Schools*” initiative which will benefit the 33 remote schools located in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. However, funding for this initiative does not extend to students studying via distance education, or to the many other rural and remote schools in Australia.

Recommendations:

That teachers in rural and remote schools, including distance education teachers and distance education supervisors are provided training to recognise and cater for specific learning needs, including dyslexia.

That universities that provide teacher training include modules such as Autistic Spectrum Disorders and Dyslexia in their curriculum.

Workshops for rural and remote parents of gifted students

Two Federal Senate Select Committees (1988 and 2001) identified gifted students as being the most educationally disadvantaged students in the nation; disadvantage magnified in rural and remote areas. Ten years ago, with (then) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training funding, a series of highly successful and well-attended workshops for parents of gifted students were held across rural and remote Australia. In small communities, teachers often attended as well. Now a new generation of students, parents and teachers need access to the personal and educational needs of gifted children.

Recommendation:

That the Federal Government provide funding for the delivery of workshops for parents of gifted students living in rural and remote areas.

Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties

The knowledge to diagnose 4-year-olds at the risk of learning difficulties is readily available. In their first term of compulsory schooling, screening for phonological awareness by teachers would identify students 'at risk' of having learning difficulties. Students in rural and remote areas have little or no access to screening and early intervention services, setting some children up for a school life of frustration and failures.

Recommendation:

That the Federal Government ensures all rural and remote students have access to early identification and intervention for learning difficulties.

Provision of Additional Resources to Boarding Schools for Students with Disability

The question of whether boarding facilities are well enough equipped to be able to cater for boarding students with special needs due to a lack of resources has been raised by ICPA (Aust) members. The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) provides all Australian schools, education authorities and the community with a clear picture of the number of students with disability in schools and the adjustments they require to enable them to partake in education on the same basis as other students. When the significant role of boarding schools is taken into consideration, it is reasonable to expect that additional resources are provided to facilities where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.

Recommendation:

That additional resources are provided to facilities, including boarding schools, where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.

School Travel

Regional airfares

Due to geographic isolation, many rural and remote families need to travel large distances in order to access not only education and learning experiences, but also specialist assistance. Families also need to travel at times to support their students who can be attending schooling hundreds if not thousands of kilometres away. The availability of Air Travel in regional areas allows families to cover the distance necessary to travel to get to schooling or specialist services (such as speech language pathologists) much more quickly and directly, however this travel often comes at a huge cost. In addition, many families have to drive significant distances just to get to a regional airport before they begin their journey by air.

Air travel also offers the chance to access learning experiences that are not available in the regions where many of these students live, school excursions and camps for example.

People also travel into regional areas such as specialist coaches, music teachers, artists and many others to work with children who live outside of city centres at various times of the year. The cost of bringing in these people with specialised skills can be very difficult to meet for rural and regional schools and school communities.

ICPA is not aware of any “Student Concession” fares available for air travel. Bus services and railways often offer student concession fares to make student travel less expensive, but not airlines. Airlines also tend to have higher airfares for school holiday times, which are the times that many students who live in rural and remote areas need to travel to and from their place of schooling to their home.

Furthermore, there are inequities in Commonwealth Student Travel Allowances. While the Federal Government has in place Fares Allowances to assist with student travel under the ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance Schemes, there is no provision for travel in the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme which is the assistance a large number of geographically isolated children fall under.

ICPA (Aust) recommends:

- Governments consider further subsidisation of rural/remote/regional routes that show a demonstrated need
- National student concessions be available for air travel
- Airlines retain a number of seats at “normal” pricing for a certain block of dates leading up to School terms beginning and ending.
- Commonwealth Fares Allowances to be more uniform across assistance programs
- Airlines should be encouraged to work together for the benefit of customers in forming partnerships and make connecting to destinations more seamless.
- Programs such as the Remote Air Services Subsidy Scheme (RASS) be supported, and expansion provided for.

Roads

Some roads in rural and remote Australia are federally funded, particularly in the Northern Territory. Poor condition and deterioration of remote roads has become a major concern for remote residents that have no choice but to travel on roads that are clearly not safe and are indeed impassable for weeks at a time.

Roads are vital and play an integral part of the safe delivery of students to face to face functions, correspondence materials delivery and the safe passage of Distance Education Staff to students’ home visits and for all Department of Education and Community Services staff visiting communities as well as health workers and child care services.

ICPA seeks the Federal Government’s urgent commitment to a long-term maintenance strategy with adequate funding to bring national roads back to all weather and safe trafficable surface. Families and teaching staff have no option other than travelling on roads with extremely undesirable driving conditions which not only affects a safe environment but is also having a detrimental effect on education, and the business operations which sustain the lives of those in the bush.

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 2 000 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 \$4459 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2231 in the second and third years and \$1115 in the fourth or subsequent years.
- Not be received in addition to a Relocation Scholarship.

The dependent Youth Allowance (YA) parental income limit also needs revisiting- \$52,706 (2016-17 tax year-value used for current year).

The independent YA parental income limit for rural and remote students is \$150,000. If rural and remote students are classified independent, their parental income should not be taken into account.