

# 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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**Contact:**

(Mrs) Jane Morton  
Federal Secretary  
ICPA (Aust)  
505 Ryeford-Pratten Road, MS 422  
CLIFTON QLD 4361  
[FedSecretary@icpa.com.au](mailto:FedSecretary@icpa.com.au)  
Phone: (07) 4695 8513

**Contact:**

(Mrs) Wendy Hick  
Federal President  
ICPA (Aust)  
Thorntonia Station  
CAMOOWEAL QLD 4828  
[FedPresident@icpa.com.au](mailto:FedPresident@icpa.com.au)  
Phone: Ph 07 4995 3266

## **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.
- Provision of an education port with the introduction of the new **nbn** SkyMuster internet satellite service.
- Respect and credibility across all political parties and government departments.

## **CURRENT ISSUES of ICPA:**

- Advocating for early childhood programs and child care 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 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.
- Advocating for financial assistance and adequate support for students with specific learning needs.
- 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.

## Executive Summary

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 placed on a separate register when delivering and funding education for these students.

Looking at the education sector and through this lens, ICPA (Aust) would identify the following as some of the major problems with the current arrangements:

### **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.

**Distance Education for four year old students need to be recognised when undertaking a transition to school program and the AIC scheme extended to them as no other service is available to this group.**

**Funding required ≈ \$1 million dollars per annum.**

### **Accessing appropriate and affordable child care:**

ICPA Australia has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the Jobs for Families Early Childhood Package, specifically in relation to Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas. As many of these mobile playgroups do not provide child care, nor can they be licensed, it appears they would not be funded under the new Community Child Care Fund.

**Facilitation is specifically required to ensure that Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas, are included in the Jobs for Families Early Childhood Package, so that funding for these services is secure beyond 2018.**

At the inception of the Nanny Pilot Programme it was touted as the solution to the problems that rural and remote families were having in accessing child care. To date ICPA Australia has no knowledge of any of its members that have actually continued with the program citing it as unaffordable in its current design.

**The guidelines for the Nanny Pilot Programme, need to be reviewed immediately in relation to rural and remote families, so they can be assessed, charged lower rates and placed in a category consistent with their location and level of disadvantage.**

For families living in rural and remote Australia, who are able to provide accommodation for staff, the In Home Care scheme is an affordable option when it comes to accessing child care, however there are 3 main concerns:

**a) The criteria in the guidelines needs to be broadened to meet the needs of these families, particularly for those undertaking distance education schooling.**

**b) In rural and remote Australia it is very difficult 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, backpackers are a solution to this problem but they are currently constrained by their visa stipulations. A broadening of the criteria for working visas would solve this problem.**

c) We are hearing of incidents where families are not able to access In Home Care, even though they meet all of the guidelines. The Department of Education and Training maintains that this program is undersubscribed, further limiting rural and remote families in accessing affordable child care.

**Accessing 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.**

**Accessing adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services for rural and remote education:**

Rural and Remote Communications – ICPA has strong and clear views on 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 similar to metropolitan areas, to the rural and remote population, is far more expensive and time consuming to deploy. Therefore, it is essential that the **nbn** Long Term Satellite Service (now Sky Muster Service) capacity is sufficient for both current and future demand. Existing usage is limited by the inadequacy of the current systems and policies.

**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). 4 572 students received the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance in 2015. Of those students, 1140 also received the Additional Boarding Allowance. 2016 figures for these allowances are \$8 015 Basic Boarding and \$1 533 Additional Boarding.

**Rural and remote families require a significant increase in the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance. Some boarding families also need a large increase in the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance, with consideration given to the allowance covering the full educational cost for these students as they have shown appropriate financial need. After the adjustment increase, the AIC allowance to be annually indexed at the CPI education sub-index.**

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

Rural Hardship Education Fund – ICPA requests the immediate establishment of a Rural Hardship 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, the drought recovery period and other times of rural hardship. 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 or other agricultural industry impacts that bring about rural hardship.

**While 4 572 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015, the number impacted by drought at any one time would be considerably less.**

**Appropriate financial assistance and support required for students with specific learning needs:**

Children with specific education needs necessitate access to educational opportunities that are appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Access to such opportunities should not be disadvantaged by living in a rural or remote location. Distance limits the choice of schools to students in rural and remote areas, but for students with specific learning needs, this choice can be further limited.

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

**Additional resources need to be provided to facilities, including boarding schools, where student requirements have been clearly identified on the NCCD database.**

**Teachers in rural and remote schools, including distance education teachers and distance education supervisors, need to be provided with training to recognise and cater for specific learning needs, including dyslexia.**

**Affordable pathways required to accessing tertiary studies:**

Tertiary Access Allowance- despite the welcomed changes that saw multiple asset testing removed from Youth Allowance, ICPA continues to lobby for a Tertiary Access Allowance (TAA) equal to the relocation scholarship (1<sup>st</sup> year- \$4 333, 2<sup>nd</sup> year- \$2 167, 3<sup>rd</sup> and subsequent years - \$1 083). 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 the ICPA Federal Secretary, Mrs Jane Morton for more information.

## **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.**

## Early Childhood Education and Care

### Extension to the AIC Allowance

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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.

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**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.**

### Mobile Playgroups 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, play 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 Australia has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the

Jobs for Families Early Childhood Package, specifically in relation to Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas. As many of these mobile playgroups do not provide child care, nor can they be licensed, it appears they would not be funded under the new Community Child Care Fund.

**Recommendation:**

**That the Federal Government facilitate specifically that Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas, be included in the Jobs for Families Early Childhood Package, so that funding for these services is secure beyond 2018.**

**Nanny Pilot Programme**

Accommodating the needs of families who cannot access mainstream child care services (shift workers and rural and remote families) was continually raised throughout the Productivity Commissions enquiry into child care. ICPA was pleased when government announced that a new program would be trialled for such families. At the inception of the Nanny Pilot Programme it was touted as the solution to the problems that rural and remote families were having in accessing child care. To date ICPA Australia has no knowledge of any of its members that have actually continued with the program citing it as unaffordable in its current design. The high cost of accessing the program can be credited to service providers requiring that the Nannies are Cert III accredited (although it is not a requirement of the program) and high administration charges. Even with the increase of the subsidy from \$5.50 to \$8.00, families are still experiencing high out of pocket costs.

**Recommendation:**

**ICPA Federal Council recommends that the Federal Government immediately reviews the guidelines for the Nanny Pilot Programme, in relation to rural and remote families, so they can be assessed, charged lower rates and placed in a category consistent with their location and level of disadvantage.**

**In Home Care**

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

Firstly, that the criteria needs to be broadened to meets the needs of these families, particularly for those undertaking distance education schooling. The Federal Government must introduce greater flexibility in the IHC guidelines to include an educator role. Currently, the guidelines only allow for carers for under school age children or out of school hours care for older children. In remote areas parents cannot 'go to work' while their children are taking part in distance education school lessons as they are required to deliver the program. This carer is a live-in position and it would seem sensible that if they continue as the educator through the day into school time, there would be no need to have a second person to supervise the school work.

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 families residing in rural and remote Australia who must be educated by distance education. Frequently the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are 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 are not eligible for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year visa, as working with children is not an acceptable employable occupation. Lastly, all too often we are hearing of incidents where families are not able to access In Home Care, even though they meet all of the guidelines. There are cases where In Home Care Service Providers are not travelling to remote areas to assess families for child care, yet the Department of Education maintains that this program is undersubscribed, further limiting rural and remote families in accessing affordable child care.

**Recommendations:**

- 1) ICPA Federal Council recommends that the Federal Government review the guidelines for In Home Care in relation to rural and remote families so that carers can deliver the distance education program as well as caring for the children.**
  
- 2) A solution to this employment problem is to extend the current list of occupations qualifying as rural work for people entering Australia on the 1263 Working Holiday visa verification form. ICPA (Aust) would like to see this list revised and In Home Care and governess work included as accepted employable occupations for rural families.**



## 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.

## **Rural and Remote Communications**

### **Access to adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services**

ICPA (Aust) has more than forty years' experience of lobbying on 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 and affordable communication is imperative for the delivery of education, accessing government services and for enabling enterprises to conduct their business.

**Satellite Services:** the **nbn** introduced the Interim Satellite Service (ISS) to provide an improved service to regional and rural Australians, before the launch and subsequent rollout of the **nbn** Long Term Satellite Service (LTSS). The oversubscription due to demand exceeding the capacity of the ISS, led to a dramatic decline in the speed of this service, which seriously eroded the professed 'improved service' to somewhere close to dial up speeds in some cases.

Changes introduced such as the "Fair Use Policy" (FUP) have further compromised the delivery of distance education programs, which rely on adequate internet speeds and large usage to participate in live video streaming. Using current satellite internet services, it is proving impossible to download resources or essential software updates. When the FUP is enforced and the internet is slowed or suspended, it becomes impossible to operate a distance education schoolroom, especially when the curriculum is delivered 100% online. The reality is that **no** lessons are taking place at all and children are experiencing huge gaps in their education.

To say that the current experiences being felt by families in distance education classrooms (often it is the mother who is delivering the program) using the ISS and trying to educate their children is frustrating, would be understating the situation and government must rectify it as a matter of urgency, if isolated children are to be educated.

ICPA (Aust) has strong and clear views on 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 similar to metropolitan areas, to the rural and remote population, is far more expensive and time consuming to deploy. Therefore, it is essential that the **nbn** Long Term Satellite Service (now Sky Muster) capacity is sufficient for both current and future demand. Existing usage is limited by the inadequacy of the current systems and policies.

**ICPA supports a special classification within the nbn ISS and the LTSS for students of distance education schools. This classification would also include priority of access to the LTSS for any existing services that deliver distance education to rural and remote students.**

**If a Fair Use Policy is to continue to be employed, education related internet usage must be allowed for, in addition to any capped plan allowance. This additional educational allowance should be calculated on a per student basis. ICPA (Aust) supports the recently announced distance education port and requests a priority installation service for families educating their children via distance education due to geographic isolation.**

**In order to reduce the congestion on satellite services, effort should be made to increase the mobile phone service coverage in rural and remote areas to fill the void of telephony services. 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 satellite congestion.**

## 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 \$35 000 per child, per year depending on where students live or allowances/scholarships 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 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 that the Federal Government provide a significant increase in the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance for rural and remote families. Some boarding families also require a large increase in the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance, with consideration given to the allowance covering the full educational cost for these students as they have shown appropriate financial need. After these adjustments, the AIC allowance to be annually indexed to the CPI education sub-index.**

## **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 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 an 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 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. 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 \$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 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 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 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 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 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 4 572 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015, the number impacted by long-term drought at any one time would be considerably less.**

## **Specific Learning Needs**

Children with specific education needs necessitate access to educational opportunities that are appropriate and specific to their learning requirements. Access to such opportunities should not be disadvantaged by living in a rural or remote location. Distance limits the choice of schools to students in rural and remote areas, but for students with specific learning needs, this choice can be further limited. 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 geographical position.

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 residing in rural and remote Australia with specific learning needs.

### **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 geographical location. Different types of specialist consultations can be satisfactorily performed in locations where the technology is available, which is providing improved and more equitable 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.**

### **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.**

### **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. 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.

#### **Recommendation:**

**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.**

## 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 \$4,333 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2,167 in the second or third year, \$1,083 in the fourth or subsequent year.
- Not be received in addition to a Relocation Scholarship.