

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

"Access to Education"



## 2018-2019 Pre-Budget Submission

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

December 2017

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), is pleased to provide a number of recommendations for consideration in the 2018-19 budget to contribute to achieving equity of educational opportunity for children and students living in rural and remote regions, thus ensuring they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations rather than their location.

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

**ICPA (Aust) acknowledges and is grateful for the commitment made by the Coalition government which saw \$44.7 million pledged to geographically isolated children. However, despite receiving assurances that these funds have been allocated to rural and remote students they have not been included in the budget yet. ICPA (Aust) is anxious to see these funds appear in the 2018-19 budget.**

The first proposal also outlined in the ICPA (Aust) IRRRRE submission, Part 2 to deliver the promised funds through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme, is the most proficient means of allocating financial support for geographically isolated families. For many years ICPA members who benefit from this allowance have voiced their concerns about the high out-of-pocket costs they must meet if their children are to be educated. This allowance is not keeping up with the real costs associated with educating children who cannot access face-to-face schooling due to geographical isolation. Distributing the promised funding through the AIC Scheme will achieve maximum benefit in assisting the greatest number of students in most need to access education.

### **Election Commitment**

In the lead-up to the 2016 federal election, the former Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon Barnaby Joyce MP, announced on June 22, 2016 during a televised Press Club address that the Coalition would commit to, among other things, *"\$44.7 million towards isolated children, which includes an increase of 50 per cent to the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Additional Boarding Allowance to bring this assistance more in line with the costs of education for isolated families."*

ICPA (Aust) welcomed the former Deputy Prime Minister's election commitment where he stated, *"We cannot put a university in every regional town. We cannot put a high school in every corner of our nation. Therefore, we must have the policy settings right so that people get greater access to that ticket to their own future."*

As a key stakeholder in rural and remote education, ICPA (Aust) was asked to consider how to best allocate the remaining portion of the funding to maximise the benefit to geographically isolated families in accessing education. ICPA (Aust) made several trips to Canberra in 2016 and 2017 to discuss various expenditure models with government representatives. It was suggested at the time of the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education announcement, that ICPA (Aust) include their proposals regarding the election funding commitment for geographically isolated families in our submission for the review.

### **Proposal One:**

#### **Assistance for Geographically Isolated Families**

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 access to 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 and is sighted as one of the main reasons for families leaving rural areas. The Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme 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.

**ICPA (Aust) is proposing the promised funds are distributed in a way that supports current policy to better support families who do not have access to face-to-face schooling.** The Federal Government recently committed funding for geographically isolated children which included an increase to the Additional Boarding Allowance. ICPA (Aust) 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. This will go a long way in assisting rural and remote families being able to give their children a quality education. While the promised election funding is considered to be 'non-recurrent', ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that significant increase in the levels of AIC is long overdue and that this solution is the most practical way to assist rural and remote families to access compulsory schooling that is not available to them on a daily, face-to-face basis where they live.

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 and
- **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 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.

### **Distance Education Allowance increase of \$750 per annum**

4050 students receive Distance Education Allowance @ \$4007 per year

- Increase of \$750 per annum = \$3,037,500
- Total funding allocation over forward estimate = \$12,150,000

## **BOARDING**

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must move away from home to attend school. Accessing compulsory schooling through boarding comes at a considerable cost to families. Annual out-of-pocket boarding expenses range from \$10,000 to \$35,000 per child, depending on where families live. This expense is unsustainable for most. 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 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.

### **Additional Boarding Allowance increase of \$1000 per annum**

1100 students - 2016 rate \$1533 per annum

- \$1000 per annum = \$1,100,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$4,400,000

### **Basic Boarding Allowance increase of \$1000**

4572 students receiving Basic Boarding Allowance @ \$8015 per annum (or cost of boarding, whichever is lower).

- \$1000 per annum = \$4,572,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$18,288,000

## **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 was not available, more families would move their entire family permanently to an area where appropriate schooling was available. ICPA (Aust) 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.

### **Second Home Allowance - in line with Basic Boarding Allowance - \$1500 per annum**

Less than 1000 students receive \$234.84 per fortnight (\$6053).

- Increase of \$1500 per annum = \$1,500,000
- Total funding allocation over forward estimates = \$6,000,000

### **Evidence Base**

ICPA (Aust) conducted a Boarding School Research Survey for Geographically Isolated Students in April 2016 which supports this information and contains many comments from families towards the end of the booklet: <http://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1021/federal-icpa-portfolios/federal-boarding-portfolio/boarding-school-survey-results-april-2016.pdf>

### **Calculations for Proposal One - Assistance for Geographically Isolated Families**

#### **\$44.7 million to increase Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme**

Calculations are based on - \$11,175,000 per annum x 4 years

#### **Additional Boarding Allowance increase of \$1000 per annum**

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- Increase of \$750 per annum = \$3,037,500
- Total funding allocation over forward estimate = \$12,150,000

Total funding promised - \$44,700,000

#### **Total funding assigned through this proposal - \$40,838,000**

\*student numbers are based on the 2016 figures provided by the Department of Human Services.

Any remaining funds to be used to establish the Assistance for Isolated Children for students undertaking an approved 4-year-old early learning program through distance education similar to the AIC Distance Education component.

### **Additional Information**

- The AIC is not 'capped' funding and is paid to all eligible students in geographically isolated areas. The number of students receiving AIC has been declining over the years, possibly a result of smaller families and rural-urban drift.
- The Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Scheme has previously been dealt with by the Department of Education and administered by Centrelink. The AIC is NOT a welfare payment but addresses equity of access to a quality education for rural and remote students. For this reason, the allowance is different to many other allowances. The AIC does not provide assistance to address multiple or long term social and welfare issues and has no correlation to providing a pathway to long-term dependence; rather, the AIC is provided to assist with accessing education during the compulsory years of schooling and must be returned to the Department of Education and Training.

**ICPA (Aust) recommends this first proposal appears in the coming budget because the proposal:**

- **provides the most effective means of distributing the promised funding to geographically isolated families**
- **uses existing funding mechanisms**
- **will achieve the maximum benefit in assisting students**
- **will maximise the number of rural and remote *students in need* to access to education.**

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

### **Accessing affordable early childhood learning**

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

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

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

Distance Education Teaching Allowance. For around 1500 families living in isolated regions of Australia, the only means of accessing an education for their children is via distance education programs. While the AIC allowance assists with the setup of the classroom and ongoing costs associated with this method of education, it is not possible without a tutor present in the home schoolroom. Families are required to provide and fund the entire costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) must sacrifice an income, often for many years, in order to fill the role. ICPA (Aust) 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.**

### **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.

Attending boarding school is a necessity for many children in rural and remote areas due to the distance they are from available schooling. Rural and remote families are expressing a growing concern about the affordability of accessing and utilising boarding schools to educate their children during the compulsory years of schooling. Boarding school costs have increased significantly and the financial impact for these families is enormous. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating. This is evidenced by the substantial

increases in AIC Second Home Allowance claims. This is a drastic measure by families to reduce educational expenses and negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools (due to the younger siblings being removed from primary schooling). A significant increase in the AIC Boarding Allowance is required as a matter of urgency.

**4572 students received the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance in 2015.**

**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.**

**Financial assistance required to help with education costs during periods of long-term drought and other hardships: Rural Hardship Fund.** ICPA (Aust) requests the immediate establishment of a Rural Hardship Fund, to assist families with the enormous out-of-pocket costs associated with educating children at boarding school in times of long-term drought and the drought recovery period. The fund could be established as part of the Federal Government's current Drought Relief Package, possibly being administered and accessed through bodies such as the Rural Adjustment Authorities or as a special circumstances criterion, within the AIC Scheme. The benefits would be far-reaching for rural families when under financial duress when unable to generate an income. Geographically isolated students should not be disadvantaged or unable to complete their schooling due to the exceptional circumstances of long-term drought.

**While 4572 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015, the number impacted by drought at any one time would be considerably less.**

**Affordable pathways to accessing tertiary studies**

Tertiary Access Allowance. While the removal of multiple asset testing from Youth Allowance has been welcomed, ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate for a Tertiary Access Allowance (TAA) equal to the relocation scholarship if the family home is in a rural or remote area (1<sup>st</sup> year - \$4376, 2<sup>nd</sup> year - \$2189, 3<sup>rd</sup> and subsequent years - \$1094). ICPA (Aust) considers all students who need to relocate to undertake tertiary study, require financial support to assist them in accessing their place of study. At the very least, 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 2016, independent Youth Allowance recipients living in regional areas totalled approximately 4260 students. Students living in these areas, who are not receiving any form of income support, must have equitable access 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. Please do not hesitate to contact ICPA (Aust) Federal President, Mrs Wendy Hick for further information as required.

## **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 46 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. Most 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 services 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** 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 continue 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.
- Financial assistance and adequate support for 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.

## **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* early learning program 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 4-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.

Young children must 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. Four-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 4-year-old students taking part in distance education early childhood learning programs.**

## Distance Education

### Distance Education Teaching Allowance

For many young people living in remote regions, their only access to education is to study by distance education. While distance education services are well structured and distance education centres ably staffed, it is clear that distance education provision is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated classroom. This person is the distance education tutor who must be available and able to provide the practical, day-to-day supervision and support required for the effective delivery of a distance education program.

The distance education tutor is a person who frequently is the mother of the students, and must commit six to eight hours each day to the geographically isolated classroom to teach the distance education program, *plus* preparation time. The role of distance education tutor requires dedication and is a commitment frequently lasting 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 formal instruction and 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 expanded 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 often necessitates 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. 1500 nationally) an annual payment of \$6000.00, indexed to the CPI

As a DETA does not yet exist, ICPA members seek an urgent increase in the AIC Distance education (DE) component to address the true expenses for those families whose only option of schooling is Distance Education.

## 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) 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.

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- **Distance Education Allowance** for students living at home and undertaking distance education
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- **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 \$10,000 to \$35,000 per child, which is unsustainable for most. 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 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 than ever before.

### **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 commensurate to their needs which allows them to achieve educational parity with their urban peers. Rural and remote families must 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 the balance of this funding be used to assist geographically isolated children through the AIC Distance Education, Basic Boarding and Second Home Allowances.**

## Rural Hardship 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 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 would be significantly less.

Serious implications of drought on children's education include but are not limited to:

- Unsustainable out-of-pocket costs of boarding school for rural families
- 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 all of their children in boarding school
- Mental health of both parents and students, already affected by the continuing drought, exacerbated by the stress of finding money for schooling.

Many rural families do not qualify for the Farm Household Allowance, nor is this allowance, if received, designed to assist with children's education.

Drought continues to severely affect many rural families in several states, particularly Qld and NSW. Dairy farmers in Victoria and other states are facing a financial crisis. Families can also suffer catastrophic losses from cyclones and floods. A Rural Hardship Education Fund would ensure 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 but the effects can last much longer. 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 out-of-pocket costs range anywhere from \$10,000 to \$35,000 per child, per year depending on where students live or allowances/scholarships available.

Boarding schools have been supportive of rural students during the current drought, but ultimately, they are 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. Removal of a child from boarding school 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 very long. Once the event 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 times of drought and rural hardship through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme. In 2005 the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance increased significantly. 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 areas 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 4572 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2015 the number impacted by long-term drought and needing Rural Hardship Educational Assistance at any one time would be considerably less.**

## Tertiary Education Tertiary Access Allowance

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

ICPA's Tertiary Access Research (May 2013) found that travel distance and the huge financial cost of relocation were the major hurdles in a student's ability to access tertiary education. Fifty-three per cent of young people from rural and remote areas live between 501 and 2000 km 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 Relocation Scholarships, *only students receiving Dependent Youth Allowance can access this provision.*

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 costs 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 to enable these students to have the equivalent access to tertiary education available to most students living in 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 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 their rural area still require financial assistance with relocation to access their tertiary institution.

**ICPA requests that the Federal Government introduce a Tertiary Access Allowance to assist rural and remote students who must move and 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 students' full-time course
- Be \$4376 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2189 in the second or third year, \$1094 in the fourth or subsequent year
- Not be received in addition to a Relocation Scholarship.

Please note the dollar values quoted are for 2017.