

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

into the

**Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young
Australians**

from the

Federal Council

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.
ICPA (Aust)**

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Q1. *What are your expectations of a national aspirational declaration on Australian education?*

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), expects that the national aspiration declaration on Australian Education will consider all groups of students and their educational needs, regardless of where they live or how difficult it may be for them to access an education due to factors such as geographic isolation.

Q4. *What do you consider are the three most important economic, social and technological changes that will shape the future of education in Australia?*

1. COST OF ACCESSING AN EDUCATION - for geographically isolated children, schooling often comes at a cost. The costs associated with seeking education for children living in rural and remote areas where there are limited education choices can be prohibitive for families and can sometimes be a determining factor as to whether or not the family remains living in an area. Students living outside of regional and city centres may have access to a small local school, sometimes only going to Year 6, and often they have no school facility within a reasonable distance from their home. Some of the ways these children are educated can include through Distance Education or Schools of the Air, attending local small rural schools, boarding away from home or one parent/relative moving to a second home with the children in order to attend school. These options for the most part come at an additional financial cost for the families.

Early Childhood learning- The delivery and accessibility of early learning programs for children in the year prior to starting formal schooling has never been better. This can be attributed to the Federal Government's commitment to the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program. Despite this, ICPA remains concerned about the affordability of accessing programs for those living in rural and remote regions. The issue of accessing affordable early childhood learning and care for families living in rural and remote regions has never been more concerning and is proving beyond the reach of many due to either: No services being available; no staff available to fill positions; no flexibility within programs to allow for individual family's needs; high out-of-pocket costs exceeding the family budget and the concern of future funding for previously Budget Based Funded Mobile Early Childhood Services.

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

All States and Territories offer early learning programs delivered by distance education and this is the only avenue available for many families living in rural and remote areas. Families wanting to access these programs are bearing the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons. Across Australia, less than 200 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.

Accessing these early childhood programs and activities comes at a significant cost to rural and remote families. However, geographically isolated families undertaking preschool distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (AIC), Distance Education allowance which other distance education students receive because 4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Federal Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care.

Mobile Early Childhood Services in Rural and Remote Areas - For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, playgroups and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face-to-face interaction for children of similar ages in rural and remote areas. Flexibility and surety of funding for these services is vital in providing the much needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities. ICPA (Aust) has concerns with the changes from the Budget Based Funding model to the new package, where, Mobile Playgroups in particular, have only been provided with funding for 12-18 months and need to access future funding through the Department of Social Services or the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). There is also no funding available for existing Mobile Playgroups such as the Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS) in the NT to expand and provide a much needed similar service to surrounding pastoral properties and communities around Alice Springs.

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.

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

In General

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

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

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

Distance Education

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. 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 readily 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 Distance Education Allowance assists distance education families with some of these necessary expenses in order to educate their children when living in geographic isolation, however this does not include covering the cost of someone to teach the children in the home schoolroom. 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, often the mother who has had to come out of the workforce in order to supervise schooling, should be recognised through the payment of an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform.

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 after State and Commonwealth assistance allowances range from \$17,000 to \$35,000 per child, which is unsustainable for most rural families. Many families often have multiple students boarding away at once and costs can reach \$100,000 per year out of pocket for all of the students in some of these families. Some families are splitting the family and moving to town to access affordable schooling, or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all of their children in boarding school. This is negatively impacting the family unit, small communities and rural schools. It is important to remember that these rural students board away from home as there is no school which offers the age appropriate schooling needed within a reasonable distance. There are very few government run boarding facilities that offer 24/7 care 7 days a week for students to access a government school and the few that are available cannot accommodate the number of students who board away from home due to distance (approximately 4500 students receive the AIC boarding allowance). In Queensland for example, there are eight local government shires that do not have a Secondary School and a further two that only offer up to Year 10. Several other shires may contain a high school but it may be

hundreds of kilometres from where some of the students live, these students need to board away from home for reasonable access to school.

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

Second Home

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

Tertiary Study

Unlike the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme which is available to assist geographically isolated students with primary and secondary schooling, no specific tertiary assistance exists for rural and remote students wishing to pursue post-compulsory studies. Tertiary study facilities and training are usually even further away from rural and remote areas and it can be even more difficult for geographically isolated students to find the means to undertake further study due to these extra costs.

The costs associated with accessing education, particularly compulsory education by families of rural and remote students are prohibitive and the financial needs of these students in order to access an equitable education must be met.

1. ENSURING RURAL AND REMOTE FAMILIES AND THEIR STUDENTS ARE VALUED AND CONTINUED TO BE SUPPORTED.

Viability of rural and remote schools is essential. Rural schools are the centre of their communities and ensuring that these schools are well supported, resourced and staffed is vital to the children's learning in these towns. Good schools have the ability to retain and even attract families out into the regions, but families will quickly move away if they have concerns regarding their children's education. The National Curriculum needs to present an accurate account of primary production in the Australian Curriculum. ICPA members have called for the inclusion of unbiased units which specifically teach how Australian food and fibre is produced, so that all students will have a better understanding of this essential industry and how the food they eat comes about.

Drought and other impacts on rural families have serious effects on their income which severely limits the ability of families to pay for their rural and remote students' education. There is currently no government funding or package that exists that can assist rural students to access a compulsory education if their family cannot meet educational costs.

2. ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS. The Discussion paper comments "Digital literacy has become critically important to all Australians, with greater access via mobile devices to more information than ever before. This means our education system has an increasing role to help

students use technology in a way that enhances their social and civic participation”. Rural and remote students have limited access to communications and therefore are in danger of being left behind as their metropolitan counterparts leap ahead. Mobile service is minimal if it exists at all in many rural and remote areas and a number of small rural schools are still outside the mobile footprint as well. Rural students are impacted by data limits (many distance education students only have satellite internet available to them and this service incurs a Fair Use Policy and data limits), students using broadband to access schooling have cost to overcome and there are also technology constraints. Technology and communications has the ability to assist in bridging the gap in some ways for geographically isolated students, but data limits, cost and ability to use and access the technology are currently barriers for these students.

Q6. *How could the concepts of equity, excellence and the attributes for young Australians in the Melbourne Declaration be updated to ensure they are still contemporary over the next decade?*

The Discussion paper states under EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR YOUNG AUSTRALIANS “Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence” – ensuring equity in education continues to be paramount so that all Australian children are able to participate in an education that will provide them the necessary learning essentials and allow them opportunity for their chosen pathway in the future. It is in the national interest to ensure geographically 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. Updates undertaken of the Declaration should take into consideration different student types and the challenges of limited schooling opportunities, lack of choice and difficulty accessing an education that rural and remote students face.

Conclusion

The Isolated Children’s Parents’ Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), appreciates the opportunity to offer comment in the Review of the Melbourne Declaration. ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body, dedicated to ensuring all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The majority of member families of the Association reside in geographically isolated areas of Australia and all share a common goal of access to an appropriate education for their children and the provision of services required in achieving this. Children may be educated in small rural schools, by distance education, attend boarding schools or school term hostels and only sometimes have access to early childhood services as well as tertiary students whose family reside in rural and remote Australia frequently requiring they live away from home to access further education. More information regarding the challenges faced in accessing education can be found in the ICPA (Aust) Briefing Papers. See: <https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1197/federal-current-issues/briefing-papers-april-2019.pdf> and ICPA (Aust)’s submission to the Department of Education and Training’s Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education: <https://www.icpa.com.au/documents/download/1094/federal-submissions/federal-submissions-2017/submission-independent-review-into-regional-rural-and-remote-education-2017.pdf>