

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) Suzanne Wilson
Federal Secretary
ICPA (Aust)
122/8 Gardiner St
DARWIN NT 0800
FedSecretary@icpa.com.au
Phone: 0418 830 214

Contact:
(Mrs) Alana Moller
Federal President
ICPA (Aust)
Star of Hope Station, 5090 Pioneer Rd
CLERMONT QLD 4721
FedPresident@icpa.com.au
Phone: (07) 4983 5353

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OVERVIEW OF THE ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION

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 that meeting, an amazing organisation grew, with branches of ICPA springing up all over Australia. We have State Councils in most states along with Federal Council otherwise known as ICPA (Aust) representing members at a national level. In its 48 years as a volunteer organisation, ICPA has achieved much for families and children who are isolated from access to educational services. ICPA continues to strive for equity of access to an appropriate education for these children.

OBJECTIVE of ICPA

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary, non-profit, apolitical parent body, dedicated to ensuring all rural and remote students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. It encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. 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 only sometimes have access to early childhood services. Our representation also includes tertiary students whose family reside in rural and remote Australia and who frequently must live away from home to access further education. ICPA (Aust) aims 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.

ACHIEVEMENTS of ICPA:

- Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme (AIC). This is a Federal Government allowance, established in 1973 to help support geographically isolated students access an education through distance education living away from home, or in establishing a second home.
- 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 and rural education.
- Youth Allowance changes, which saw the introduction of a Relocation Scholarship, removal of the Family Assets and Family Actual Means Tests for Youth Allowance dependent students, changes to the Family Pool arrangements, the reduction of time, 18 months to 14 months rural and remote students need to be employed under the self-supporting criteria to qualify for Youth Allowance as an independent and the increase to parental income limits for rural and remote students applying for Youth Allowance as an independent.
- Provision of an education port with the introduction of the new **nbn** Sky Muster satellite internet service.

CURRENT ADVOCACY OF ICPA (AUST)

Improving the educational outcomes for rural and remote children requires a national approach that ensures national consistency, no matter where education is provided. The financial cost to families educating children in geographically isolated locations continues to rise and results in many leaving these areas to access an equitable education. There is a strong need for rural and remote education to be considered discretely when delivering and funding education for these students as too often their unique needs are not catered for in current education policy. Following on from our Federal Conference in August, members have asked the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), to advocate on their behalf for the following issues currently faced by families across rural and remote Australia.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Assistance for Isolated 3-4-year-old Children studying by distance education

- The Federal Government is committed to "Universal Access to Early Childhood Education" and recognises that early learning is vitally important however, accessibility and affordability is a barrier for some geographically isolated families for whom distance education is the only option.
- Three to four-year-old students enrolled in a pre-compulsory distance education program need to be supported while participating in their essential transition to formal schooling programs. The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education allowance should be extended to include these children as no other financial assistance is available for this cohort.

Child Care

- It is difficult to access In Home Care (IHC) educators due to:
 - Cost especially if there are more than 2 children in family, despite increases in Child Care Subsidy for IHC in January and July 2019.
 - Lack of qualified staff- the Transitional Provisions need to be extended for 2 more years like Early Childhood Teachers or a 'grace period' given after Jan 2020 to counter 'false starts' by educators.
 - The remote and very remote Transitional Provisions exclude some geographically isolated (GI) families, all GI families should qualify where no other child care available.
 - IHC should be available for children up to 15 years especially in drought where both parents need to go to work to keep the family financial.
 - If working towards Cert III ECEC- need more flexibility e.g. extension of practical hours within IHC family instead of travelling to a regulated child care service far away for several weeks to complete the necessary experience.
 - Exemption for distance education families to allow IHC to supervise distance education where no face-to-face schooling is available.
- Visiting overseas workers could also be a solution to the problem of sourcing suitably qualified educators, but they are currently constrained by their visa stipulations. A broadening of the criteria for working visas to include qualified nannying and distance education tutoring would help address this.
- The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC would remedy the situation.

Overcoming barriers to early childhood education in rural and remote areas

- A flexible approach to the required qualifications for rural and remote teachers/educators
- Financial assistance families and adequate funding for Early Childhood services in rural and remote areas
- Expansion of early childhood programs into rural and remote areas

- Mobile playgroups- no longer funded under Budget Based Funding
 - Most transitioned but no provision for new mobile playgroups.
 - Funding concerns e.g. Katherine Isolated Children Service (KICS) which runs out of funding in Dec 2019 but new ex-BBF agreement not till June 2020.
- Standalone rural and remote Early Childhood section/branch encompassing all early childhood education and care such as preschools/kindergartens, mobile playgroups, Long Day Care and IHC is required to help provide for rural and remote families' particular needs.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Many rural and remote families must access distance education programs for their children due to geographical isolation. This mode of education entails unique challenges and significant commitment for the families of these children.

Distance Education Teaching Allowance

- **Recognition of the financial impact on families who must provide a distance education tutor**
For around 1500 families living in isolated regions of Australia, the only means of accessing an education for their children is via distance education programs. While the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance assists with the expense of setting up a home classroom and ongoing costs associated with this method of education, distance education is not possible without a tutor present in the home schoolroom. Families are required to provide and fund all costs associated with providing a tutor, which necessitates the employment of additional staff or a family member (often the mother) who may forgo an income for many years, in order to fulfil this role. ICPA (Aust) is seeking the introduction of a Distance Education Teaching Allowance (\$6,000 per family, per annum), as financial recognition of the essential work a distance education tutor performs.

Schools of the Air/Schools of Distance Education

- It is critical that Schools of the Air and Schools of Distance Education who offer education to geographically isolated students, are based in rural and regional areas to best meet their students' needs.

RURAL AND REMOTE COMMUNICATIONS

- The nbn Education port should be available for all rural and remote students on Sky Muster internet services at home (including students attending rural schools, those home from boarding school needing to continue assignments/assessments and tertiary students).
- Continued provision and maintenance of landlines in rural and remote areas are essential, especially where mobile coverage is not available.
- Data allowances need to be able to address the needs of all aspects of education, including special needs (e.g. speech therapy), music and other services which are more easily accessed by urban student counterparts.
- Consideration should be made for unmetering educational and health sites that need to be accessed for educational purposes and required by the curriculum.
- Fault reporting and repairs need to be prioritised (both internet and phone) for rural and remote students as their schooling is dependent on these services being available.
- Establishment of an independent Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Help/Service Hub to assist with troubleshooting, identifying suitable products for situations/areas and providing technology upskilling to enable those living in rural and remote areas to fully utilise available communications.

ACCESS TO COMPULSORY SCHOOLING

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

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC)

- The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance needs to adequately address the out-of-pocket costs incurred by rural families whether their children need to study via distance education, board away from home or the family sets up a second home in order to access schooling. Rural and remote families require a significant increase in the AIC allowances: Basic Boarding Allowance, Additional Boarding Allowance, Distance Education Allowance and Second Home Allowance. After the adjustment increase, the AIC allowances to be annually indexed at the CPI education sub-index.
- With the gap between the amount of the Assistance for Isolated Children allowance covers and the actual cost of educating geographically isolated children widening, a review of the AIC Scheme is called for to ensure the allowance is meeting the needs of those it was established to help.
- ICPA (Aust) request that the unique needs of geographically isolated students are recognised by categorising them separately under the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) allowance.
- ICPA (Aust) request that the Government conducts a thorough review into the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme. While ICPA (Aust) would certainly not like to see any of the current eligibility criteria for the Assistance for Isolated Children removed or diminished, we would like to see a review conducted to ensure it is adequately meeting the needs of all geographically isolated students.

Fringe Benefits Tax

- In an effort to attract and retain staff in rural and remote locations, some employers offer staff a financial contribution towards educational expenses of their children. However, these payments incur a fringe benefits tax which negatively impacts the intent of the contribution. By removing the Fringe Benefits Tax on the financial contributions of rural, remote and very remote employers to staff for children's compulsory education in geographically isolated areas, it will encourage families to stay in rural and remote Australia, improve recruitment and retention of staff and help sustain our small rural communities.

RURAL HARDSHIP EDUCATION FUND

Geographically isolated children should not be disadvantaged or unable to attend their studies at boarding school due to ongoing long-term droughts or times of rural hardship.

- A Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) needs to be permanently put in place to assist rural and remote students with the cost of education during times of rural hardship to ensure their schooling can continue unchanged.
- RHEF should include but not be limited to:
 - Supplementary payment made to the Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Children allowance (AIC) for families affected by hardship. The AIC consists of several components including Boarding, Distance Education and Second Home and is well designed to quickly get assistance to rural and remote families to use to access education.
 - Additional funding for Rural Schools located in affected areas which can be used at the schools' discretion for students' needs including school activities, camps, resources, uniforms, visiting coaches, specialised teachers and artists/musicians.
 - Additional "Itinerant Teachers" to be employed in the affected areas to support Distance Education students which will enable more "home visits" by trained teaching staff for these students.
 - Adjusted rate/additional subsidy to assist affected families to access In Home Care for young children.
 - Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students enrolled in university, training courses, or apprenticeships.
- Assistance should be aimed at geographically isolated students and consideration available for individual applications, not dependent on a state "declaration", as some states do not declare drought officially. Families' income can suffer and their ability to pay for school costs is hindered just as much in what their state may call a "rain depression" as if they were officially drought declared.

CURRICULUM

ICPA (Aust) seeks to ensure:

- that a broad range of subject matter specifically related to primary production be embedded in the Australian Curriculum and taught to all students in schools across Australia to create a better opportunity for understanding and awareness of the significance of agriculture in Australia, where food and fibre comes from and how it is produced.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS

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

- Need for Medicare rebates for Telehealth Services such as Speech Therapy and other allied health services.
- Uniform travel allowances to assist families to access face-to-face specialist sessions when required.

SCHOOL TRAVEL

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

- Compensation for plane cancellations, unexpected delays causing missed connections, particularly for boarding students from rural and remote areas, which is very distressing for younger students travelling alone.
- Fares Allowance to be included in the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme similar to that of ABSTUDY and Youth Allowance. A need for uniformity of all three schemes.
- Improving regional and remote road networks to a safe all-weather access standard as currently there are roads that have deteriorated and in appalling conditions which are not safe.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Tertiary Access Allowance

- Affordable pathways are required in accessing tertiary studies for rural and remote students. ICPA continues to lobby for a Tertiary Access Allowance (TAA), equal to the Relocation Scholarship (1st year - \$4553, 2nd and 3rd years- \$2278, and subsequent years - \$1138).

Youth Allowance

- Youth Allowance (YA) parental income limit for dependent students' needs reviewing- \$53728 (2017-18 tax year - value used for current year).
- YA parental income limit for independent rural and remote students is \$160,000 plus \$10,000 for each eligible sibling. If rural and remote students are assessed as independent, their parental income should not be considered.

TRAINING

ICPA (Aust) continues to advocate on behalf of rural and remote students who wish to pursue vocational education or traineeships:

- Eligibility for relocation scholarship for vocational education and training courses.
- Increase in the living away from home allowance for Australian Apprentices.
- Financial support for blocks of training.

BRIEFING PAPERS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) advocates for geographically isolated families across Australia to achieve equitable educational opportunities for their children. Remote and isolated locations in Australia provide significant challenges for provision of education options and pathways for children and families. Improving the educational outcomes of rural and remote students requires a national approach that ensures equitable educational delivery regardless of where the education is provided. The difficulties associated with achieving this are far-reaching and span across all levels of education, from Early Childhood through to Tertiary learning.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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

- No services being available; no staff available to fill positions; no flexibility within programs to allow for individual family's needs; high out-of-pocket costs exceeding the family budget and the concern of securing future funding for previously Budget Based Funded Mobile Early Childhood Services.

Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

Extension to the AIC Allowance for 3-4-year-olds

The Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Distance Education allowance must be extended to the 3-4-year-old cohort when undertaking a pre-compulsory distance education program.

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

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

ICPA (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, around 200 children access recognised 3-4-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 three to four-year-olds, these distance education lessons are designed to help children transition from home to school. The children need a designated learning space in which to learn school behaviours, such as the ability to sit at a desk for enough time to complete a task, to use the technology required for distance education, to appropriately interact with their peers

and teacher and to understand the formal concept of school.

It is vital that young children have opportunities to socialise face-to-face with other children of their age. This often requires families to travel great distances to attend school functions which provide an opportunity for the children to participate in group activities, such as sport, practise conversation skills and socialise with their peers. These functions are also valuable in providing teachers and other professionals with both group and individual evaluation and diagnostic opportunities.

Families undertaking distance education programs are effectively blocked from any funding to assist with meeting the costs of program delivery, setting up their schoolroom and accessing school functions. These students are deemed ineligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children, (AIC), Distance Education allowance as 3-4-year olds taking part in these early learning programs are not recognised by the Australian Government and no payment is available through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) as these children are still in their parents' care.

Recommendation:

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Federal Government address the financial inequity facing rural and remote families needing to access an early childhood program through distance education. Equity can be achieved by extending the AIC Distance Education allowance to include three to four-year-old students taking part in pre-compulsory distance education early childhood learning programs.

More facilities for preschool education in rural and remote communities

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 primary school 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 in the form of Early Learning STEM Australia (ELSA) 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.

Child Care

In Home Care

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

- Firstly, that the In Home Care scheme needs to remain accessible for rural and remote families who have no other child care options. The new maximum of 3200 places seemed adequate for members' needs but due to its redistribution, some families in Queensland can no longer access any child care.
- Secondly, IHC educators should be allowed to supervise distance education where face-to-face schooling is not available as teachers are not present to look after the children.
- Thirdly, members continually raise concerns about the difficulty of finding suitably qualified people to employ in their homes to provide child care or to teach the children of rural and remote families who must be educated by distance education. The Transitional Provisions for remote and very remote families should be extended for a further two years and include geographically isolated families who are unable to access child care due to distance. Frequently, the only people prepared to travel and work in remote areas are overseas travellers such as backpackers. While they are a valuable resource, under the conditions of their visas they are not eligible for a second-year visa, as working with children is not an acceptable employable occupation in rural and remote areas.

- Lastly, the process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would remedy the situation.

Mobile Early Childhood Services in Rural and Remote Areas

For many years, various mobile children’s services have delivered the important services of being able to provide social contact, professional advice, playgroups and early childhood programs. They play a vital role in offering developmental opportunities for children and parents in small rural communities and outlying, often very isolated, areas. In many cases, these services provide the only face-to-face interaction for children of similar ages. Flexibility and surety of funding for these services is vital in providing the much needed socialisation component of early childhood programs for these communities.

Recommendation:

ICPA (Aust) recommends that the Federal Government ensures that Mobile Early Childhood Services, in particular Mobile Playgroups in rural and remote areas, continue to be supported with future funding for these services being secure.

Working Holiday Maker Program

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

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

Teachers, Distance Education Tutors and Nannies should be added to the current “Specified Work” list for Working Holiday Visas, so that they can help deliver Distance Education on rural and remote properties.

The Second Year Working Holiday visas 417¹ and 462², are not available for distance education tutors/teachers or nannies from overseas in rural and remote areas, despite being rural work. However, with recent developments in Northern Australia, second-year visa applicants could be accepted there, on the 462 Working Holiday visa, if having worked for 3 months in agriculture, tourism or hospitality the previous year. Also, in Northern Australia, if working for 6 months for one employer on a Working Holiday Maker visa 417, permission can now be granted to stay another 6 months with that employer. If child care or distance education supervision were eligible as specified work, this would help provide workplaces for distance education tutors in other rural and remote areas if the same conditions apply as for other second-year visa seekers. In the distance education schoolroom, 12 months’ support would be more beneficial than just 6 months to support the importance of continuity and consistency.

¹ <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-417/specified-work>

² <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/work-holiday-462/specified-462-work>

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

Making the second-year visa accessible to nannies and distance education tutors under agriculture would provide a better solution for rural families seeking to employ staff and a better experience for overseas workers who wish to remain with one employer.

Volunteer Work Activities

The removal of eligibility of volunteer work activities in application for a Second Year Working Holiday visa as of 1 December 2015, compounded the issue of shortage of work support in rural and remote areas. Families find it harder to find willing workers to assist in running the farm and managing their children's distance education. Many visitors to Australia appreciate 'real life experiences' on farm and are willing to volunteer their time in return for meals and accommodation e.g. 'WWOOF' program (Willing Workers on Organic Farms). If volunteer hours were once again reinstated as eligible for a Second-Year Visa, rural Australia's employment pool would expand relieving pressure on its families.

Temporary Work (Skilled) Visa (subclass 457)³

This visa was replaced with the completely new Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) (subclass 482) visa in March 2018 which supports businesses in addressing genuine skill shortages particularly in rural and remote areas. Visa applicants for this will need to be sponsored by a business up to 2 or 4 years as per specified skill. Skilled Early Childhood teachers, Primary and Middle School teachers, Private Tutors, Regional Education Managers and Child Care Centre managers are all on the approved occupation list. There is a real shortage of people willing to fulfil distance education supervisor/tutoring roles. If qualified teachers were happy to work with distance education students in remote classrooms, it would be an excellent option, however more often it is a skilled worker such as a nanny or governess who is willing to accept distant education opportunities. It would be extremely beneficial if nannies and governesses could be added to the TSS Occupations List and Private Tutors and Teachers could also be approved for distance education classrooms.

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

Working with Children Check

The process of obtaining the Working with Children Check (WWCC) in each state or territory is expensive, slow and impedes early childhood workers, tutors and teachers who wish to help various families interstate. A national WWCC certification would help resolve this and was recommended in the Royal Commission into Child Abuse Final Report⁴.

ICPA (Aust) supports all the Governments' efforts to progress a national WWCC certification soon to efficiently fulfil the staffing needs of rural and remote families.

³ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/trav/work/work/skills-assessment-and-assessing-authorities/skilled-occupations-lists/combined-stsol-mltss/>

⁴ https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_recommendations.pdf

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance Education Teaching Allowance

For many geographically isolated young people living in remote regions, the only access to education is 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 daily.

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. More information about the role of the home tutor can be found in the outcomes of a Distance Education survey conducted by ICPA in 2015 <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/156/deta-survey-research-final-nov-2015-> .

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

This Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) should be:

- for families who qualify for the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme – Distance Education Allowance
- paid per family (approx. 1500 nationally)
- an annual payment of \$6,000, indexed to the CPI.
- As there is yet to be the creation of a DETA, ICPA members have asked that an increase in the AIC Distance education (DE) component be urgently sought to address the true expenses for those families whose only option of schooling is Distance Education.

RURAL AND REMOTE COMMUNICATIONS

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

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 as well. For our members, access to adequate, affordable and reliable internet and telephone services is vital for the delivery of education, accessing government services and for enabling enterprises to conduct their business.

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

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

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

The Productivity Commission's Report on the Universal Service Obligation caused great concern among ICPA members that landlines, which geographically isolated families depend on for voice services, will cease to exist and Sky Muster customers moved to VoIP services as their only means of telephony. ICPA reiterates that families living outside of city centres, due to the nature of where they live, require two

separate forms of communications (i.e. phone/voice and internet/data as separate services and not relying on the same mode of delivery) so that if one fails, the other is still available. VoIP through Sky Muster at present is far from a reliable service and even nbn itself recommends that customers “Consider keeping your copper service active in nbn™ Fixed Wireless and Sky Muster™ satellite areas if you rely on landline phone services in emergency situations”. Sky Muster service can be affected by weather events and power outages.

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

ICPA (Aust) is grateful for the recent government announcement of the Stronger Regional Digital Connectivity Package including a digital tech hub which should provide assistance for landline and data needs of rural and remote users.

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

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

ICPA (Aust) supports the establishment of an independent Regional, Rural and Remote Communications Help/Service Hub to assist with troubleshooting, identifying suitable products for situations/areas and providing technology upskilling to enable those living in rural and remote areas to fully utilise available communications.

ACCESS TO COMPULSORY EDUCATION

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily face-to-face access to an appropriate government school. Much has changed since the AIC Scheme was first introduced; the duration of compulsory education has increased and accessing regional term hostels has decreased due to continual closures. Changes are needed to ensure this allowance meets the needs of families in the twenty-first century. ICPA (Aust) are calling on the Government to conduct a thorough review into the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme. While ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that the effectiveness of the current eligibility criteria for the Assistance for Isolated Children should neither be removed nor diminished, a review conducted to ensure the AIC is adequately meeting the needs of geographically isolated students is required.

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

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

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

Distance Education

Families who educate their children via distance education are required to establish and maintain a schoolroom setting, provide extra learning materials and resources, print necessary learning materials all of which are supplied to students at mainstream schools. In addition, distance education families often travel significant distances to participate in school activities that offer interaction and socialisation for their children. The AIC Distance Education 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. Information gathered from families in the ICPA (Aust) Boarding School Access Research for Geographically Isolated Students showed annual out-of-pocket boarding expenses range from \$17,000 to \$35,000 per child, which is unsustainable for most rural families. This research can be viewed at <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/94/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016> .

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 their children in boarding school. This is negatively impacting the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

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

Second Home

The AIC Second Home Allowance assists families with the cost of setting up a second home away from their main place of residence where a family member lives with the children so that they can attend a school on a day-to-day basis. The option of establishing a second home while children are of school age, is paramount in efforts to retain families in rural and remote areas of Australia. Boarding school is not a suitable environment for every student and in many cases, the mother and children live in a second home during school times returning 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. AIC Second Home Allowance is paid at a substantially lower rate than the AIC Boarding Allowances and ICPA advocates for the Second Home Allowance to be paid at the same rate as the Boarding AIC.

AIC Criteria Extension

ICPA (Aust) have concerns about the scope of assistance for families educating geographically isolated children and believe that the current criteria could be expanded to assist more rural and remote students. Options are extremely limited for rural and remote students who live in or near communities without access to specially designed programs which are needed to optimise their education. Due to the nature of the educational facilities in remote towns, students face limited subject choice and reduced educational opportunities. A remoteness index applied to facilitate AIC eligibility would address the educational disadvantage these students face. Rural and remote students who are accepted into specialised programs not offered at their local school, and who need to board away from home to access these programs should be eligible to receive Assistance for Isolated Children.

AIC Applications

Currently when applying for the AIC allowance, forms need to be downloaded from the Human Services website or collected from the nearest service centre. Applications must be submitted by post, fax or delivered in person which delays the processing of the application considerably. Major errors with the distribution of AIC correspondence have occurred in recent years which has resulted in ICPA (Aust) needing to speak directly with personnel in the Department of Human Services to resolve these issues on behalf of our members. ICPA (Aust) requests the Department of Human Services implement an online and phone option for applications and renewals for the AIC allowance as an adjunct to the current paper-based system.

ICPA (Aust) encourage any extra assistance for our families to ensure the expenses they endure for their children's compulsory education are reduced. This might include special consideration for schools with a regional cohort when applying the Socio-Economic Status Score Methodology and setting up low interest loans for expenses not covered by current allowances for families enduring hardships.

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 (Aust) recommends that a review of the AIC Scheme be conducted to ensure the allowance is meeting the needs of the geographically isolated students it was established to help.

Fringe Benefits Tax

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

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

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

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

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

RURAL HARDSHIP EDUCATION FUND

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

Despite the introduction of many drought reform packages including subsidising the freight on fodder and water for stock, and assisting families to put food on the table, the huge cost of educating children who must live away from home in order to access a compulsory education is largely ignored.

Financial assistance to lessen the burden of educational costs must be established urgently as rural families are struggling to keep their children at school. Approximately 5,200 students are currently receiving the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Boarding Allowance right across Australia, so the number of geographically isolated students living in drought affected areas at any one time are estimated to be significantly less than the total number of AIC Boarding Allowance recipients.

The implications of educating children from drought-stricken areas are causing serious side-effects, including but not limited to:

- Unsustainable out-of-pocket costs of boarding school for rural families, particularly in times of drought.
- Families removing children from boarding school, splitting the family and moving to town in order to access schooling or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all 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.

ICPA (Aust) appreciates that the Farm Household Allowance (FHA) has been created to assist some eligible families with household expenses and financial circumstances. Some rural families do not qualify for the Farm Household Allowance, despite the new eligibility criteria announced in August 2018 and further announcements in September 2019. A person must be a farmer or the partner of a farmer to apply for the Farm Household Allowance. There are numerous families living in rural and remote areas who are not farmers but whose children go away to boarding school as there is no secondary school available to them in their area. These families include truck drivers, contractors, and local business owners in and around the towns who also have their ability to earn an income severely impacted during drought. The Farm Household Allowance, even if it is received, for the most part is not designed specifically to assist with children's education. Families in receipt of the Farm Household Allowance do become automatically eligible for the Assistance for Isolated Children Additional Boarding Allowance, however many of these families may already be receiving this allowance anyway. While ICPA (Aust) recognises that the Farm Household Allowance may be used towards off-setting educational costs if a family is eligible and chooses to use it for these expenses, there is no additional loading per child in the FHA, or in particular a loading for those children attending school. A family that is paid the "Family Rate" of Farm Household Allowance receives no more funding if they have 4 or 5 school-age children than a family that may have one or two non-school-age children.

Drought continues to severely affect many rural families in several states, in particular Qld and NSW. Rural hardship is not limited to drought. Some rural families are facing financial crisis through no fault of their own or their ability to run a viable business, including dairy farmers in Victoria and communities affected by the catastrophic monsoon event in Northwest Queensland. A Rural Hardship Education Fund would ensure that assistance could be made available for children from these families who are not able to access mainstream schooling while living at home, and those who study by distance education or at a small rural school. The need for assisting rural families with educational costs in times of drought and

rural hardship has been addressed in the past and remains as relevant now as it was previously when instances of Exceptional Circumstance were recognised. The Exceptional Circumstances Program, which no longer exists, did offer a supplementary payment to the Assistance to Isolated Children scheme (AIC) during the years 2008-2011, and in March 2019 an additional \$1000 per student was provided to those in flood affected areas, which families were extremely grateful to receive. Some form of educational assistance program needs to exist on a permanent basis.

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. While 5,211 students received the AIC Boarding Allowance in 2017, the number impacted by long-term drought and needing Rural Hardship Educational Assistance at any one time would be considerably less.

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 bans, dairy and strawberry crises) also adversely affect rural families at times. The cost of boarding school continues to rise and the federal and state allowances which assist families with the cost of accessing education, are not keeping up with the actual cost of boarding and tuition. Our members have indicated that the out-of-pocket costs range anywhere from \$17,000 to \$35,000 per child, per year depending on where students live or allowance/scholarship that may be available.

Boarding schools have been supportive of rural students during the current drought, but at the end of the day, they must run as a business and many are finding it difficult to continue to carry multiple students whose families cannot pay the required fees over such a long period.

Members of ICPA Federal Council are hearing heartbreaking stories of families who cannot meet the costs of boarding and removing children from school or trying to decide which child will be educated and which child will not. No Australian parent should have to choose between their children when it comes to accessing compulsory schooling. Other families have made the decision to move to town in order to access state school education, effectively splitting the family home and often leaving the father at home to cope on his own in these tough times. When a child is removed from boarding school, this can mean the end of the education for this child, particularly if they have completed Year 10.

Mental health is a large concern in rural communities and struggling to pay educational fees exacerbates the pressure. Parents are agonising over not being able to fund this basic requirement for their children. The children themselves are well aware of the cost and financial sacrifice that their families are making in order for them to be educated. This places a huge amount of self-burden on these children, as they feel they should be at home helping when employee numbers have been reduced and their parents are trying to hold on to core breeding stock to generate income once the drought has broken, and at the same time knowing that educational expenses are driving the family further into debt. These feelings of guilt and helplessness are very difficult for children to handle and a burden a child should not have to bear when it comes to education.

When natural and non-natural catastrophic events occur in urban areas, as terrible as they are, they do not affect children's schooling for the most part - once the danger has passed, students still have access to their schooling and their families do not have to worry about whether or not they will be able to afford to keep their children in school. There is precedence for government assistance in previous droughts and times of rural hardship through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme. In 2005, during a period of drought, there was a major increase in the AIC Basic Boarding Allowance. Again, in the next drought, between 2008 and 2011 a small supplementary payment was added to the AIC Additional Boarding Allowance, before reverting back in 2012.

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. As 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.

Recommendation:

That a Rural Hardship Education Fund (RHEF) to be put permanently in place to assist rural and remote students, schools and early learning centres with the cost of education during times of rural hardship to ensure their schooling can continue unchanged.

Geographically isolated children should not be disadvantaged or unable to attend their studies at boarding school, distance education or at small rural schools 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 tough times.

A Rural Hardship Education Fund should include but not be limited to:

- Supplementary payment made to the Commonwealth Assistance for Isolated Children allowance (AIC) for families identified as living in areas affected by hardship. A significant increase to the AIC is required to address the shortfall between the existing allowance rates and the actual cost of attending education for rural and remote students. Previous droughts (e.g. 2008) and the 2019 monsoon event saw a supplementary payment given to students receiving the AIC, however no increase has occurred in the current drought. The AIC has been increased at times in order to reflect the assistance needed by geographically isolated families to maintain education for their children, particularly in times of disaster. The AIC consists of several components including Boarding, Distance Education and Second Home and is well designed to get assistance to rural and remote families to use in order to access education.
- Additional Funding for Rural Schools located in affected areas which can be used at the schools' discretion for students' needs including school activities, camps, resources, uniforms, visiting coaches, specialised teachers and artists/musicians. This type of funding has been given to rural schools previously in times of hardship/drought, (e.g. 2008), providing precedence for this type of assistance (although it has not been initiated in the current drought).
- Additional "Itinerant Teachers" to be employed in the affected areas to support Distance Education students which will enable more "home visits" by trained teaching staff for these students.
- Adjusted rate/additional subsidy to assist affected families to access In Home Care for young children.
- Tertiary Access Allowance for rural and remote students enrolled in university, training courses, or apprenticeships.

Assistance should be aimed at geographically isolated students and consideration available for individual applications and not dependent on a state "declaration" as some states do not declare drought officially. Families' income can suffer and their ability to pay for school costs be hindered just as much in what their state may call a "rain depression" as if they were officially drought declared.

SPECIFIC EDUCATION NEEDS

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

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

Provision of Medicare Rebate for Telehealth Services

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

Recommendation:

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

Improved Staff Training for Teachers in Rural and Remote Locations

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

Recommendations:

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

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

Workshops for rural and remote parents of gifted students

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

Recommendation:

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

Early identification and intervention for learning difficulties

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

Recommendation:

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

Provision of Additional Resources to Boarding Schools for Students with Disability

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

Recommendation:

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

SCHOOL TRAVEL

Regional airfares

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

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

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

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

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

ICPA (Aust) recommends:

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

Roads

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

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

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

RURAL SCHOOLS

ICPA (Aust) welcomes the news that the Australian Government is investing \$247 million over four years (2019-2022) to renew the National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP).

Students face a myriad of challenges in their day-to-day life that can impact on their education. School chaplains play an important role in the school communities assisting students who are struggling with issues of self-doubt, bullying, peer pressure, anxiety, family breakdown, impacts of family drug and alcohol use and more.

Due to the tyranny of distance, Guidance Officers are not as easily accessible for rural and remote schools and this is where the Chaplaincy Program is incredibly valuable.

With participating schools eligible to receive up to \$20,280 in metropolitan or regional areas and \$24,336 in remote or very remote areas, ICPA (Aust) welcomes this funding which will support approximately 3000 schools per year to access the services of a qualified chaplain. ICPA (Aust) requests a renewed focus and priority in providing access to these chaplaincy support services at our nation's most remote or very isolated areas.

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Tertiary Access Allowance

Engaging in tertiary education should be an option for all Australian students regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. The ability to access an equitable education is one of the key considerations in determining whether a rural and remote student can choose this expensive, restricted pathway. Geographically isolated students continue to be under-represented in tertiary education.

ICPA's Tertiary Access Research (May 2013) <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/85/tertiary-research-2013> found that the huge financial cost of relocation and travel distance were the major barriers in a rural and remote student's ability to access a tertiary education. Financial assistance is imperative to increase the engagement of rural and remote students at tertiary level.

To further their education rural and remote students must, by definition, leave home to access tertiary studies. The greatest barrier rural students face when accessing higher education is the lack of adequate financial means to fund this access. The logistics for rural and remote students to journey to an institution offering tertiary studies include: the high up-front costs of relocation from the family home including accessing and paying for accommodation, travel to access their place of study, along with the ongoing cost of living away from home and often involves expenditure often beyond their financial means. These all impact on rural and remote student access and contributes to the under-representation of this cohort at tertiary level. 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.

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 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 financial assistance to get to their chosen tertiary institution. Some students cannot defer their studies in order to meet the workforce criteria for gaining Youth Allowance as an independent. Students in receipt of Youth Allowance as an independent, receive financial support for day-to-day living but all rural and remote students who must relocate from the family home, still require financial assistance with the relocation needed to access their tertiary establishment.

While the costs associated with relocating have been recognised through the provision of Relocation Scholarships, only students receiving Youth Allowance as a dependent, have benefited from this payment.

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.

- Be equivalent to the Relocation Scholarship (\$4553 in the first year in which you are required to live away from home to undertake full time study in an approved scholarship course, \$2278 in the second and third years and \$1138 in the fourth or subsequent years).
- Not be received in addition to a Relocation Scholarship.

The Youth Allowance (YA) parental income limit for dependent students (\$53,728 for the 2017-18 tax year - value used for current year) needs reviewing and an immediate increase given to reflect the cost of funding/supporting a dependent student at a tertiary institution, especially when there are other dependent students still in the compulsory education system to support.

The YA Parental Income Test for independent students should be removed from eligibility criteria for rural and remote students qualifying under the independent YA workforce participation criteria to recognise that the student has proved their independence from their parents.

Students isolated from tertiary education due to location, must be recognised as a separate disadvantaged group when assessing for Youth Allowance to address the distinctly unique requirements of rural and remote students. Those students, who must relocate to access a tertiary education should be able to access income support in their own right and must be considered independent of their parents for the purpose of accessing financial assistance once they commence their tertiary studies.

TRAINING

Engaging in the vocational education and training (VET) sector should be an option for all young Australians who have the ability and desire to complete a training vocation or an apprenticeship, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location.

For many rural and remote students, who, in most cases must relocate from home to complete their apprenticeship or traineeship, the cost of relocation is beyond their financial means. The high up-front costs of relocation: accessing and paying for accommodation, travel to access their place of study and set-up costs, along with the cost of living away from home, all impact on rural and remote student access.

Furthermore, rural and remote students who must relocate for blocks of training at TAFE or other institutions find it difficult to access any financial support.

ICPA (Aust) requests the Government to broaden the Relocation Scholarship criteria to include vocational education and training courses.

ICPA (Aust) requests the Government to consider rural and remote students who are completing an apprenticeship or traineeship by increasing the Living Away from Home Allowance (LAFHA) for Australian Apprentices.