

CURRENT ADVOCACY OF ICPA (AUST)

Below are details of the current advocacy of the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, which has been set following motions brought to ICPA Federal Conferences by our members. This is not an exhaustive list of ICPA (Aust) policy, however, outlines a broad range of and frequently raised topics across the various portfolios which we advocate for. If you are unsure whether or not a motion/issue is already part of ICPA (Aust) policy or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact a Federal Council.

COVID-19

ICPA Australia have been dealing with issues related to the COVID-19 crisis/situation as they have arisen, especially with regards to In Home Care, AIC, Communications and Boarding and will continue to work on these topics as they come in, along with the other advocacy as listed below.

ALLOWANCES – Distance Education, Boarding, Second Home

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

Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC)

- **Increase in the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance** - 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.
- **AIC Second Home Allowance should be paid at same rate as AIC Boarding**
- AIC criteria expanded to allow more rural and remote students to be eligible for assistance.
 - Address the inequities faced by families who live in or near rural and remote communities, where secondary schools are not able to meet the educational needs of individual students by allowing them to access the Assistance for Isolated Children's Boarding Allowance or the Second Home allowance.
 - Expansion of the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) (Boarding Allowance and Second Home Allowance) to include consideration of the socio-economic and Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of a school
 - Allow rural and remote students who are accepted into specialised programs not offered at their local school, and who need to board away from home, be eligible for the AIC

Review of the AIC Scheme - With the gap between the amount 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) requests 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. ICPA (Aust) is grateful for the Assistance for Isolated Children Allowance (AIC) to assist with the costs associated with educating children from geographically isolated areas.

- **Separate Category for Geographically Isolated Students under AIC** - 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, for geographically isolated Distance Education and Boarding students.
- **Improvements to AIC Application/Renewal Process** - Prompt, efficient, streamlined process of application and renewal; online application and renewal; improved customer service/helpline.

- **Unified Approach to Support** – ICPA (Aust) requests all state and territory governments adopt a unified approach that supports students who must live away from home to access appropriate schooling regardless of whether or not those students receive education in the state in which they live.

BOARDING/SCHOOL TERM HOSTELS/SECOND HOME

- Resources for mental Health programs in boarding schools
- School funding model/s and impacts on regional and rural boarding schools
- Provision of resources for mental health programs in boarding schools with drought affected students, to help children navigate through times of hardship.
- Boarding Allowance - see “Assistance for Isolated Children”.

Fringe Benefits Tax

- 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 AND REMOTE COMMUNICATIONS

- Rural and remote students require equity of access to internet and telephony for the purpose of education
- The Sky Muster 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.
- Universal Service Obligation (updating to Universal Service Guarantee) conditions be met, penalties enforced and include data and voice services.
- Areas containing a rural school be prioritized in expansion of Mobile Black Spot Program and continuation of Mobile Black Spot Program supported
- 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.

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.

- Safe driving practices to be added to curriculum
- NAPLAN – considerations for rural and remote students
- Any changes to the content of the National Curriculum be accompanied by funding to the states, to enable the development of independent specialised learning course materials for distance education students.

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.

Appropriate Learning Resources for Distance Education Students

- Learning materials for Distance Education students need to be available in a variety of formats, including print.

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.
- ICPA (Aust) includes geographically isolated non-government distance education students as well as geographically isolated government distance education students when addressing equity in education issues for rural and remote students.

Support for Volunteer Remote Educational Support for Rural and Remote Students (currently AHVISE)

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. ICPA (Aust) also seeks continuation of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education funding (already announced \$452.3 million for 2021).
- 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 the family, despite increases in Child Care Subsidy for IHC in January and July 2019.
 - Educators unwilling to go to rural and remote areas – more needs to be done to ensure educators take up remote placements.
 - The remote and very remote Transitional Provisions exclude some geographically isolated (GI) families, all GI families should qualify where no other child care is available.
 - IHC should be available for children up to 15 years especially in drought affected areas where both parents are required to work to keep the family financial.
 - If an individual is working towards their Cert III ECEC – there needs to be 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.
 - Lack of Exemption for distance education families to allow IHC to supervise distance education where no face-to-face schooling is available.
- **Mobile Playgroups** - that adequate funding continues for mobile playgroups and early education programs for rural and remote children as well as funds and support be available for the creation of new services in geographically isolated areas where early childhood services do not exist.
 - Mobile playgroups - no longer funded under Budget Based Funding (BBF)
 - 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.
 - **Visas** - 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.
 - **National Working with Children Check** - 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 for families and adequate funding for Early Childhood services in rural and remote areas
- Expansion of early childhood programs into rural and remote areas
- 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.

RURAL SCHOOLS

- Implementation of the recommendation made by Professor Dr John Halsey in the 'Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE) – Final Report' to "reduce the impact of administration on workloads to create more time for teaching and leading learning" (Halsey, 2018, p.37)"
- Seek production of a booklet containing all the information associated with eligibility and entitlements for rural students for secondary and tertiary education, including apprenticeships and traineeships, to be provided to all rural high schools and final year primary students.

SCHOOL TRAVEL

Student concessions for airfares and other nationwide travel 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.
- Residents Fares Scheme, Bush to Boarding and others rural student travel schemes to continue and be expanded
- 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.

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.

- Ensure all rural and remote students have access to early identification and intervention for learning difficulties
- Need for Medicare rebates for Telehealth Services such as paediatrician appointments, Speech Therapy and other allied health services.
- Uniform travel allowances to assist families to access face-to-face specialist sessions when required
- Provision of adequate funding to schools for students with additional needs regardless of the schools funding allocation based upon the new Federal school funding model.
- Seeking the provision of training in the identification and management of specific learning needs and disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder and dyslexia in any teacher preparation to build the teacher's capacity to identify and assist children with special needs or learning difficulties and for support and ongoing professional development be given to rural and remote teachers to ensure that multi-sensory programs and strategies are included in daily teaching practices to better support students with specific learning needs.
- Funding be provided for the delivery of workshops for parents of gifted students living in rural and remote areas of Australia

Mental Health resources

- Establishment of mental health resources specifically for rural and remote families, particularly around the issue of bullying

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 - \$4626, 2nd and 3rd years - \$2314, and subsequent years - \$1156).

Youth Allowance

- Increase Youth Allowance (YA) parental income limit for dependent students - \$54677 (2018-19) tax year - value used for current year).
- Remove YA parental income limit for independent rural and remote students - \$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.

- Criteria for gaining independent Youth Allowance so that rural and remote students who are ineligible for dependent Youth Allowance and who have to leave home to study at tertiary level, are eligible for independent Youth Allowance
- Rural and Remote students, who are not eligible for Youth Allowance as an independent should be eligible for Youth Allowance as an independent once commences tertiary study

Rural and Regional Enterprise Scholarships

- Eligibility criteria and payment

Centrelink

- Staff training in Youth Allowance
- Waiting times on the Youth and Students line,
- Call back service
- JP signed ID documents accepted as proof of ID for rural and remote students

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.

Closures of Ag Colleges

- Support States in efforts to stop closures and sustain Ag Colleges.

MISCELLANEOUS

Other issues within ICPA (Aust)'s advocacy

- **National Rural and Remote Education Alliance** - lobby the federal government to form and manage a National Rural and Remote Education Alliance similar to that of the National Rural Health Alliance
- **Category of Educational Disadvantage** - That rural and remote students, along with Indigenous students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, be recognised as a category of disadvantage for the purpose of accessing funding to address the educational deficits that exist in rural and remote Australia.
- **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.