

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

"Access to Education"



Submission

to the

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee Inquiry

into the

**Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to
ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019**

from the

Federal Council

of the

Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.

ICPA (Aust)

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019.

ICPA (Aust) is a voluntary parent body dedicated to ensuring all geographically isolated students have equity of access to a continuing and appropriate education. This encompasses the education of children from early childhood through to tertiary. The member families of the association reside and work in rural and remote Australia and all share a common goal of achieving access to education for their children and the provision of services required to achieve this. Many of our families live on isolated stations, great distances from their nearest community with their only access to education, including early childhood education, being via distance education programs.

As a stakeholder group focused on gaining equity for families accessing education while living and working in rural and remote Australia, ICPA (Aust) supports any initiatives which may improve educational access and outcomes for rural and remote students. Many of our member families reside in locations where there are limited or no secondary schooling options available to them, which means that boarding school is often the only reasonable option for students from these areas to attend secondary school. This comes at a significant cost to rural and remote families and ICPA (Aust) advocates on behalf of these families for adequate assistance to be available for geographically isolated students to have equitable access to secondary education opportunities similar to their urban counterparts.

With this in mind, ICPA (Aust) supports the proposed expansion of the Family Tax Benefit Part B to families whose student is 16-19 years of age and receiving ABSTUDY as it means an improved situation for these rural and remote students to address the anomaly in the current legislation which has meant this has not been the case. ICPA (Aust) recognises this is an important change to ensure these students have equity in access to educational opportunities, regardless of their location, social or economic circumstances. ICPA (Aust) welcomes and supports any expansion of assistance for these students to help them receive a quality education.

These changes are a positive step forward and acknowledge the need to support students who do not have equitable access to educational opportunities within a reasonable distance and therefore need to board away from home. ICPA (Aust) would encourage further expansion of support and assistance made available to all geographically isolated students for whom boarding is the only practical option for face-to-face secondary schooling. As highlighted in Minister Fletcher's reading of this Bill, "Many remote communities have no local secondary school, so boarding is frequently the only option for children to attend secondary school." ICPA (Aust) research supports this.

Many children living in remote regions of Australia must move away from home to attend school. It is important to remember that these rural students board away from home as there is no school which offers the age appropriate schooling needed within a reasonable distance. There are very few government-run boarding facilities that offer 24/7 care for students to access a government school and the few that are available cannot nearly accommodate the number of students who board away from home due to distance (approximately 4500 students receive the AIC boarding allowance, and approximately 3900 students receive the ABSTUDY allowance). In Queensland for example, eight local government shires do not have a Secondary School and a further two only offer up to Year 10. Several other shires may contain a high school, but it may be hundreds of kilometres from where some of the students live, so these students need to board away from home for reasonable access to school.

Boarding away from home for schooling comes at a considerable cost to rural and remote families and the disparity between current financial assistance and the actual cost of boarding is significant and continues to widen. Annual out-of-pocket boarding expenses after State and Commonwealth assistance allowances range from \$17,000 to \$35,000 per child, which is unsustainable for most rural families. Many families have multiple students boarding away at once and so out-of-pocket costs can reach \$100,000 per year for these families. Some families are splitting the family and moving to town to access affordable schooling, or in some cases choosing between siblings as they cannot afford to keep all of their children in boarding school. This is negatively impacting the family unit, small communities and rural schools. In 2015, ICPA (Aust) surveyed its members in relation to boarding fees, the link to the paper can be found here: <https://www.icpa.com.au/page/attachment/94/final-boarding-school-survey-icpa-aust-with-comments-2016>. It was found that average out-of-pocket costs for families (AFTER Commonwealth and any state allowances available were deducted) were between \$17,000-\$35,000 per student per year.

ICPA (Aust) is encouraged by the government's commitment to bridge the gap for rural and remote students to ensure positive and equitable education opportunities. An increase to the allowances currently available to all rural and remote students for whom boarding is the only practical option for their secondary education would ensure that geographically isolated students would be adequately supported in their educational aspirations. ICPA (Aust) would also support consideration of payments being paid directly to students aged 16-19 years who request receiving the payment themselves, to ensure that the students receive the assistance if they require it to continue with educational needs. It would also further support the goal of the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee inquiry into the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019 outlined in the explanatory memoranda to support the right of everyone to education.

ICPA (Aust) commends and supports the proposed Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Extend Family Assistance to ABSTUDY Secondary School Boarding Students Aged 16 and Over) Bill 2019. We appreciate the acknowledgement of the unique needs of those students who must board in order to complete their secondary school education and welcome any assistance to improve equity of access to education for rural and remote students.