



Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (Inc)

**FEDERAL COUNCIL
"Access to Education"**

SUBMISSION

to the

Review of the Budget Based Funding Program

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, (ICPA), is pleased to provide comments to address some of the discussion questions for the Review of the Budget Based Funding (BBF) Program and appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this important area of government decision making.

ICPA represents families who live in rural and remote Australia. The goal of the organisation is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all geographically isolated children and thus ensure they have access to a continuing and appropriate education. ICPA is focused on ensuring demography is not a marker of destiny for students from rural and remote Australia. We therefore advocate that this review examine methods of providing an appropriate level of funding for geographically isolated four year old children being educated via distance education.

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association supports the introduction of the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education Program as it is vital in assisting the educational development of children in the year prior to them beginning formal schooling. It is also an important tool in the early identification of children at risk. As the discussion paper states, evidence from Australian and overseas studies has indicated that the first five years are critical for a child's development, and in many cases, children from rural and remote regions are some of the more vulnerable children in Australia. In these areas, there is limited access to face to face services funded by the BBF Program, such as centre-based services and mobile child care services. For many rural and remote families the only way an appropriate and effective early childhood education can be implemented is via distance education.

For a geographically isolated four year old child, early childhood education must be delivered via distance education as this is the only means of access available. This type of schooling places a huge burden on families, as a school room needs to be set up and maintained which can cater for both play based and computer based activities. As no financial assistance is available to families to offset this outlay, many families do not participate in this early learning environment due to the prohibitive cost of access.

Currently the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme assists with meeting the costs associated with setting up and maintaining the distance education schoolroom, as well as accessing educational related activities; it does not, however, recognise four year old programs. While ICPA appreciates the government's commitment to the Universal Access Program, we ask that funding be allocated for the AIC Distance Education Allowance to be extended to cover four year olds who have no choice but to study by distance education. This will mean that this cohort will also be able to participate in and receive the developmental benefits associated with accessing the Universal Access Program.

Question 13

How could the design of the BBF Program be altered to encourage higher levels of participation of children and families?

- **The BBF Program must consider students who are not able to utilise mainstream education and are located beyond the boundaries of community and mobile child care services.**
- **A portion of this program's funding must be used to extend the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme Distance Education Allowance to assist approximately 250 isolated four year olds nationally, whose only access to early childhood programs is through distance education.**

Services funded by the BBF Program aim to meet the developmental and cultural requirements of children by providing flexible early childhood education services that endeavour to meet the needs of all families in the community. Rural and remote children who cannot access these services do not choose to do distance education; it is the only education available to them. For families who must access early childhood programs via distance education, it is implemented within a schoolroom which is provided and paid for by those geographically isolated families.

The current design of the BBF Program allocates funding to services which deliver flexible early childhood education and care services. No funding is available for rural and remote families who have to supply a schoolroom, appropriate consumables and other equipment and a play area for their child's education by which to deliver an early childhood program, as the AIC Distance Education Allowance does not extend to this cohort.

One of the criteria to be eligible for the AIC Distance Education Allowance is that families applying are geographically isolated and live further than 56 kilometres from the nearest school. This also normally means that the family lives at least 56 kilometres from the nearest day care, kindergarten, crèche or other mainstream or mobile care services. They are thus unlikely to be able to access any of the above services, much less claim a Child Care Benefit or Child Care Rebate to help alleviate access costs.

To establish an educational environment that is conducive to the implementation of early childhood programs in the distance education situation is just as expensive for a four year old as it is for a five year old, who is eligible for AIC assistance. Many families wishing to enrol their first child in an early childhood program find this cost prohibitive and therefore will be reluctant to embrace such a program. This can result in the child receiving no formal education until that child commences full time schooling via distance education and is then entitled to the AIC.

In the BBF Review discussion paper it indicates that rural and remote children are considered vulnerable; the BBF Program should be altered so these children can fully participate in an appropriate early childhood program. One way to improve the BBF Program design is to ensure some funding goes directly to families in situations

where no face to face contact with an approved ECEC service is possible due to distance. Lowering the eligibility age for the AIC Distance Education Allowance to include four year olds would ensure a higher participation of this cohort.

Question 14

How does the current allocation of BBF funding support good outcomes? How does the current method of funding influence the total impact that the BBF Program is able to make?

- BBF funding currently does not reach geographically isolated four year old children participating in the early childhood programs through distance education.

The current allocation of BBF funding does not support positive outcomes in rural and remote areas that are not serviced by distance education or mobile ECEC services. Many four year olds are missing out on access to an early childhood education due to their isolation and the prohibitive cost of setting up a distance education schoolroom and supplying the necessary materials to implement a four year old educational program. For an educationally favourable environment to be created and sustained, access to the internet and a phone link are required, along with it being desirable to control the temperature extremes. A school desk and chair, storage cupboard, bookshelf, whiteboard and display area are other basic needs. The same types of disposable items used in a classroom, such as paint, glue, art paper, scissors, paintbrushes, play dough, printer paper, ink, pencils and sports equipment are also required on a day to day basis. All of this is expensive.

The basic aim of the BBF Program is to play a vital role in ensuring families have access to an ECEC service where one would otherwise not be viable, such as in rural and remote communities. Our most remote distance education learners cannot access any funding to alleviate the cost to implement the early childhood programs. The impact of this essentially means the most vulnerable children are starting their education later than their peers, who can access BBF Program funded early childhood services.

The discussion paper states that quality early childhood education and care services can help children gain a positive start to life and set the foundation for social and intellectual development, transition to future schooling and life-long outcomes. Rural and remote children who do not have access to a BBF Program early childhood service should not be penalised because of where they live.

Question 15

How would you change the funding allocation to ensure it delivers quality outcomes for children with the program's aims?

- The BBF Program needs to be more flexible in its delivery.
- For rural and remote families who cannot reasonably access face to face BBF Program funded ECEC services, the funding allocation needs to be directed to the families and not the provider of the education program, so

asto offset the huge cost of implementing the program in a distance education schoolroom.

As discussed previously the funding allocation should be flexible when the rural and remote areas are considered, in order to ensure quality educational outcomes for children residing in these areas. For families who cannot reasonably access a BBF Program ECEC face to face service due to their geographic location, funds should be directed to ensure the distance education tutor can implement a program effectively for a four year old.

It can be very frustrating for the distance education tutor to have children try to complete activities without paints, paper, plasticine or chalk, and in the modern educational environment, a computer and reliable internet connection. Such consumables are used in large quantities and are of great importance in the development of children's fine motor skills. Of equal importance are gross motor skills, which are developed through physical activities, and require equipment such as large soft grip balls, witches hats and skipping ropes. These types of consumables and equipment involve significant costs.

The early childhood program material is delivered by the distance education school, either as a paper-based program via mail or as internet programs. To ensure the program is implemented effectively, distance education families are expected to supply additional materials, which they must do at their own cost. In this formative stage the majority of the educational program is play based and it is the cost associated with the provision of the necessary materials that many families find prohibitive. By extending the AIC Distance Education Allowance to cover a distance education student's participation in a four year old program, the setting up and implementation of a play based program would be within reach of remote families. Consequently, the BBF Program's desired outcomes will become more effective and its aims enhanced.

ICPA thanks the panel for the opportunity to comment on the Review of Budget Based Funding and looks forward to future opportunities for consultation. Should the panel require any further information, ICPA would be happy to provide it.