



Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia

FEDERAL COUNCIL
"Access to Education"

Mrs Jane Morton
Federal Secretary ICPA (Aust)
505 Ryeford-Pratten Rd
MS 422, CLIFTON QLD 4361
Ph 07 46958513 Mobile 0400 074 174
FedSecretary@icpa.com.au

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, (ICPA Aust), welcomes the opportunity to provide information and recommendations around issues relevant to families living in rural and remote Australia, to the Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning.

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 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.

Accessibility, flexibility and affordability of child care and early childhood learning experiences are among the most concerning issues for our members. This is particularly so now, with greater emphases being placed on school readiness and the need to undertake and engage in early childhood programs given their demonstrated benefits, along with the growing demands being placed on distance education families with the roll out of the National Curriculum. Like all Australians, our members desire equity of access as a basic requirement in the area of child care and early learning services. By virtue of where they reside, many of our member families are disadvantaged in terms of access to education. They are generally located beyond the boundaries of a town and not able to utilise mainstream education or regular child care/early learning services for their children.

The intention of ICPA (Aust) in making this submission is to highlight a number of issues limiting the participation of rural and remote based children in early childhood programs

and the difficulty our members have in accessing child care services. Major concerns remain around the lack of equity being granted by government to the families who have no choice other than to teach their children via distance education. The affordability of access to early childhood programs being delivered through distance education centres is an on-going issue.

Our organisation supports the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. It is vital in assisting the educational development of children in the year prior to them beginning full-time schooling. 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 including centre-based and mobile services. For many rural and remote families, the only way an appropriate and effective early childhood education can be implemented is via distance education, which is delivered at home, usually by the mother.

Early Childhood Learning

Early childhood learning is encouraged with various forms of funding available for services and families but all of these are effectively blocked from those children who are undertaking a distance education program, the year before starting school. ICPA (Aust) believes funds need to go directly to geographically isolated families enrolled in approved distance education programs if we are to see satisfactory increases in participation rates from this recognised disadvantaged group.

Some funding for early childhood education services operating in rural and remote areas is provided through the Budget Based Funding (BBF) Programme. The aim of the BBF Programme is to provide a contribution to the operational costs of *services* which deliver flexible early childhood education and care services that endeavour to meet the developmental and cultural requirements of all families in the community. No funding is available for rural and remote *families* who, to participate in an early childhood program, due to no access to a service in their local area, need to enrol in a distance education program. This results in the family having to set up and supply a schoolroom along with consumables, play equipment and a play area for their child's education.

While states and territories have provided early childhood programs, families living in remote areas wishing to access these, are bearing the costs of administering them. For approximately 280 children across remote Australia, the only access to such programs is through distance education programs. Providing financial assistance to the small number of families who are unable to access any assistance, is considered vital by ICPA (Aust) if isolated children are to access programs which assist with development in the early years.

A scheme, the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme, exists to help families with school aged students undertaking a distance education program. One of the criteria to be eligible for the AIC Scheme, Distance Education Allowance, is that families applying are

geographically isolated and live further than 56 kilometres from the nearest school. This generally means that these families also live great distances from the nearest day care, kindergarten, crèche or other mainstream service – if they are indeed available in their area at all. They are therefore unlikely to be able to readily access any of the above services, much less claim a Child Care Benefit or Child Care Rebate to help alleviate access costs.

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, most of the costs associated with the delivery of this type of program must be borne by the family. Programs and infrastructure are implemented within a schoolroom which is provided and paid for by these geographically isolated families who also need to ensure someone is available to deliver the program. These costs they bear entirely.

The AIC DE allowance can be used to assist with meeting some of the costs associated with setting up and maintaining the distance education schoolroom, as well as accessing important educational related activities for these isolated students such as face to face activity days and camps. Currently eligibility for the AIC does not encompass these state education department approved, distance education four year old programs and hence no financial assistance for families undertaking these critical developmental programs is available.

For an educationally appropriate environment to be created and sustained in order to undertake a distance education four year old program, access to the internet and a phone link are required, along with it being desirable to control the temperature extremes within an inside work area. 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. To establish such a setting in order to undertake a recognised distance education program for four year olds is just as expensive as it is to set up a similar program for other years of schooling which are eligible for AIC assistance.

If AIC eligibility was extended to include students enrolled in recognised distance education early learning programs, they would commence receiving payments one year earlier than is the current situation. ICPA (Aust) believes a flow on effect would be created resulting in higher participation in early childhood learning programs, ensuring isolated children have the same opportunities as children in urban areas of Australia.

Flexibility of service delivery

Community based child care service providers require more flexible operating arrangements which allow them to meet the needs of the community and still qualify for government funding. Small communities make an effort to support available services but often in these communities, condensed opening times are required to meet both community needs due to small attendance numbers and for economic reasons, to meet considerable operating costs.

Lessened operating hours do not signify that a service is not needed. It means that greater flexibility of operational factors such as qualifying numbers of enrolled children and hours and days of operation over a certain period, as set down within the funding criteria, is required for these types of providers.

For many years, various mobile children's services have delivered the important services of professional advice, play, social contact, distance education early childhood education programs and growth and development 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. Most of the mobile services are heavily reliant on government funding for their successful operation. Costs of operation are continually on the rise. Freight, vehicles, resources, training and salaries costs have risen dramatically. The salary component of expenditure is very high.

Without changes to funding, in particular increased flexibility, it is feared that many providers will need to reduce services to communities due to not being able to afford to operate. These mobile services must be adequately funded to ensure they can continue to provide early childhood learning and other vital early childhood services to children who live in areas where daily access to an early childhood educational facility is not an option. Flexibility of funding models will assist in ensuring the continuation of these vital services.

The In Home Care Scheme (IHC) funded by the Federal Government and co-ordinated by approved service providers, offers a form of flexible child care to those living in remote areas, unable to access mainstream child care. It enables families living too far from a town to access child care or learning and educational assistance, with the scheme helping to find a live-in carer for children aged 0 - 16 years. In Home Care services are in great demand in isolated areas. Continual monitoring of the scheme to ensure adequate provision of places to meet the needs of rural and remote families is necessary. In various areas, wait lists for a carer can be long.

To assist with greater support to families who must educate children via distance education, the In Home Care services require greater flexibility than currently permitted under their operating guidelines when catering for school aged children. Children undertaking a distance education program remain in the care of their parents during school hours and these parents must provide a tutor to deliver the education program. Flexibility in the work undertaken by those employed under an In Home Care service to include an educator role, would assist rural families in meeting the educational needs of their children, particularly assisting in the delivery of a suitable early childhood learning program.

National Working with Children Check

The lack of a nationally recognised Working with Children check hinders the ease of travel movement and flexibility to change location at short notice, for people employed or volunteering to work with children and needing to move beyond state boundaries. A national check would greatly assist people engaged by organisations, such as Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education (VISE) and Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Students'

Education (REVISE), which provide assistance to families with children enrolled in distance education. These volunteers come from various states and obtaining a clearance on a state by state basis to enable the volunteer to work with families all over Australia, is time consuming and costly for both the organisations and volunteers.

ICPA (Aust) makes the following recommendations which the organisation believes would promote and encourage a greater number of children from rural and remote Australia, to take part in early childhood learning programs and assist families to access child care that is both flexible and affordable, while remaining fiscally sustainable for government.

Recommendations:

- Ensure equitable access to early childhood programs for isolated children studying through distance education by extending the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Scheme, Distance Education Allowance, to assist approximately 280 isolated children.
- Flexibility and surety of funding for service delivery models, such as mobile and In Home Care services, to ensure increased access by rural children to services providing child care and early learning experiences.
- Increase of places available under the In Home Care Scheme.
- Greater flexibility in the guidelines for the In Home Care Scheme for families educating children via distance education.
- Ability to access child care services at short notice in times of natural disasters or crises.
- National Working with Children check for increased ease of employment for those working across state boundaries.

ICPA (Aust) Federal Council are more than happy to provide additional information if required.