

BOARDING SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL TERM HOSTELS REPORT

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Access to an equitable and affordable education has continued to be the prevailing concern for families struggling to educate their children in rural and remote locations throughout Australia. The greatest disadvantage faced by these families is the lack of access to an appropriate education compared to urban families who can access a wide variety of educational alternatives, sometimes at little or no cost. It comes as no surprise that a significant number of motions presented at our Federal conferences continue to request that this disparity is addressed as a matter of urgency.

AIC Increase:

Last year's election brought about the largest financial commitment to rural families with the Federal Government committing to "ensuring that families and students living in rural and remote communities have the same access to education as those living in urban Australia."

To date, funding has included a 50% increase to the means tested component of the boarding school allowance to \$ 2 322 per student, for a period of 4 years. ICPA has welcomed the timely implementation of this increase to coincide with the beginning of the 2017 school year. Families should be aware that the Upper Income Limit or parental income cut-off has also increased.

This is a small step towards bridging the divide in affordability of access to a compulsory education. There is much more to do. The majority of families who qualify for the basic boarding allowance are not eligible for the Additional Boarding Allowance. The increases implemented to date have not reached most AIC families. The disparity between the AIC boarding allowance and the actual cost of boarding school continues. Rural and remote families contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education than their city counterparts. Federal councillors have continued to represent ICPA families and lobby for increases to the AIC basic boarding allowance at every opportunity – in delegations and submissions - which will include the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education.

AIC Applications:

ICPA would like to thank members for the provision of case studies that have identified concerns with recent approvals of AIC applications and some delays in the processing of AIC payments to boarding schools. ICPA has an excellent working relationship with the Department of Human Services, and we are happy to report that all issues that have been brought to our attention by members have been resolved immediately. I would like to personally acknowledge Guy Mathews for his prompt and diligent responses to all queries made on behalf of our members.

It is recommended that you do check the rules for geographic isolation which determine eligibility for AIC allowances. These can be found on the Department of Human Services web page. Information about these geographic isolation rules will also be feature in future publications of our Branch Bulletin and Pedals magazine.

Drought Education Fund:

ICPA has continued to raise awareness of the obstacles encountered by families who are impacted by the ramifications of drought. We have called for safeguards to be put in place as a matter of urgency to ensure

educational continuity for families. To support this lobby, ICPA (Aust) has prepared a Rural Hardship Education Fund Issues paper.

FBT:

The removal of unfair taxes that are adding to the high costs of educating students from rural and remote areas is an initiative that will potentially encourage families to stay in the bush, and inspire employers to contribute towards boarding school fees. The Fringe Benefits Tax, (FBT) that is applied to essential boarding staff in large cities and to the financial contributions of employers to staff for educational expenses has been raised with government representatives, and is an issue that has been shared with similarly focused organisations.

Living Away from Home Allowances:

ICPA (Aust) has approached the Education Council to consider a national, unified approach towards the financial support provided by states, for families of students who must live away from home to access an education. Inconsistencies amongst states and territories for funding eligibility and the impact that this has upon the small number of students whose most accessible school is interstate, has been raised. The Education Council reiterated that this is a state issue, and that the states determine how their funding is allocated.

I would like to acknowledge Councillors Nikki Macqueen and Kate Thompson who are an integral part of the Boarding Schools Portfolio. Their contributions and support have been greatly appreciated.