



## ISOLATED CHILDREN'S PARENTS' ASSOCIATION NORTHERN TERRITORY STATE COUNCIL INCORPORATED

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### **“Equality of access to education for all rural and remote children”**

The Northern Territory Isolated Children's Parents' Association Inc. (NT ICPA) objective is to ensure equity of access to education for all rural and remote children who live in the Northern Territory.

NT ICPA is a voluntary apolitical parent organisation representing over 140 families throughout the Northern Territory. NT ICPA is the only Territory-wide community parent group representing remote and geographically isolated families, with interests in all sectors and levels of education.

Accessing education is a challenge for remote and geographically isolated families in the Northern Territory, and indeed across Australia. For Territory students from remote regions who attend boarding or university facilities away from home, the challenges are increased by physically getting to these services, and the cost of doing so.

NT ICPA has several mandates to lobby both transport companies and government departments on behalf of members, for a travel allowance or concession for *‘students attending educational institutions within Australia who need to travel between their home residence and the educational establishment they attend’*.

NT ICPA welcomes the opportunity, on behalf of member families and students who live in rural and remote Northern Territory, to provide insight into the impacts and costs associated with physically accessing secondary and tertiary education facilities.

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Inquiry into the operation, regulation and funding of air route service delivery  
to rural, regional and remote communities.

**This submission gives particular reference to:**

- a) social and economic impacts of air route supply and airfare pricing; and**
- b) pricing determination, subsidisation and equity of airfares.**

To address the inequities of education faced by Northern Territory remote and geographically isolated families, we must first recognise that accessing education is interlinked with other aspects of rural communities, such as vast distances, limited services and additional costs associated with getting those services.

NT ICPA membership reaches from the Territory's northern tip down to the South Australian border, an area of some 1.421 million km<sup>2</sup>. Unless travelling from north to south, remote residents will often travel on unsealed (dirt) arterial roads when driving to a Territory town. The distance between the Territory's two main airports is 1500km, from Darwin in the north to Alice Springs in the south. Katherine and Tennant Creek have smaller regional airports, serviced by regional carriers.

The Northern Territory has limited secondary boarding and tertiary opportunities in comparison to other, more populated states. However some students travel between Darwin and Alice Springs (and vice versa) to attend university or boarding school; while others travel interstate for the same reason. All students, regardless of where they live, deserve the opportunity to attend a facility that is commensurate to their education and social needs, allowing them to reach their potential.

Due to the vastness of the Territory, cost and distance are the two main considerations in getting a student to their education facility. Depending on where you live, you may be closer to a town in another state than a town in the Territory.

Rural and remote families and especially those unable to access Abstudy (which is more comprehensive) must necessarily cover the broad range of costs related to educating their children, effectively from early childhood through to tertiary. These expenses are beyond the means of some rural and remote families and are most definitely above and beyond what most metropolitan families would ever pay to educate their children, even when compared to the best private school education.



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Road and air are the two (mainland) travel options. To catch a plane, the isolated family typically drives hundreds of kilometres to the nearest airport. For any air travel, airfares from or within the Territory are typically more expensive compared to other states, but when travelling for education purposes, airfare often exceed \$500 (to any capital city in Australia), because school term dates coincide with peak fare prices. See CASE STUDY A. Some members have paid in excess of \$1150 for a one way flight for their student to get back to school.

If, due to fare price or availability, flying is not an option, the alternative is to drive your student or use a coach service. Driving the student may involve several days on the road, and incur accommodation and other associated costs. Coach services are not supervised and usually include night travel, so has considerable safety and welfare risks, particularly for younger students. For these and other student & family considerations, remote and geographically isolated Territory families usually send their children by plane to secondary and tertiary education. See CASE STUDY B.

In addition, students in early high school ('middle') years may be too young, inexperienced or not confident in travelling alone, so require an adult to travel with them, doubling travel costs. See CASE STUDY C.

Peak travel prices are unavoidable simply because travel coincides with holiday periods or school starting; parents must choose between paying this exorbitant amount (the full, peak fare) or waiting until the peak price has reduced and therefore school has started – meaning the student arrives back to school days or even a week late. Conversely many parents fly their student's home from school early to avoid peak prices and the students by necessity miss school days and even exams.

Some spectacular peak prices have affected Territory families when the school holiday period coincides with major events or long weekends. Some families have tried to reduce the cost of airfares by booking 12 months in advance however this can be problematic as schools cannot provide dates for exams, award ceremonies or other events until closer to the time.

Over the course of a year, airfares will increase the cost of educating a remote or geographically isolated child conservatively by \$4000 per year. See CASE STUDY D. This is in addition to the other significant costs related to accessing an education which is equal to - not better than - what most metropolitan families can access with a public bus or train trip.

The impact of airfares goes well beyond education and also impedes the ability for a family to be involved in their child's interests, achievements and celebrations. Even though air travel from the Territory is not affordable, it is often the only conceivable option because of the length of time it takes to travel by road from anywhere in remote Northern Territory. For this reason, special functions, sports days and award ceremonies for these students are often not attended by their isolated families.



Addressing the economic impacts of airfare pricing will go some way to also addressing the inequities of education faced by Northern Territory remote and geographically isolated families; inequities which are intrinsically linked with other aspects of living in rural communities including vast distances, limited services and additional costs of getting to those services.

Specifically, the cost of fares for education-related air travel is prohibitive and adds to the inequities in education faced by Northern Territory remote and geographically isolated families.

Students travelling to boarding schools or tertiary education require at least 8 fares annually (four return fares). It is likely other family members will also travel to the place of education 2-4 times per year. The families of students requiring these services for such a fundamental right as education are loyal, repeat customers who should surely be respected and valued enough by airlines and government to be protected by an airfare price ceiling, at the very least.

## Recommendations

1. Enrolled students could be given a code that discounts a fare to 'average cost' – not peak price – for school related travel. Most students have a Student ID Card which might be used as proof of enrolment.
2. Airfares from regional Territory centres, including Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, could model The Local Fare Scheme by the Queensland Government, *"which is an airfare subsidy that aims to improve the standard of living of local residents in regional and remote ... communities by making air travel to more affordable"*.
3. Airlines could retain a certain number of seats for students and quarantine those fares within a price ceiling.

**Enclosed:** CASE STUDY A. CASE STUDY B. CASE STUDY C. CASE STUDY D.



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## CASE STUDY A.

Screen shot of flights available to student who attends boarding school in QLD. These are one way flights to Alice Springs ex Brisbane, on the last day of term 1, 2018.

|  | Red e-Deal | Flex    | Business | Economy<br>Classic Reward | Business<br>Classic Reward |
|--|------------|---------|----------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <p>Brisbane Sydney</p> <p>06:00 08:35</p> <p> QF501 0 stops 1h 35m</p> <p> </p> <p>Sydney Alice Springs</p> <p>09:30 11:20</p> <p> QF790 0 stops 3h 20m</p> <p> </p> <p>Total duration 5h 50m</p>  | \$562      | \$632   | \$1,651  | No seats                  |                            |
| <p>Brisbane Adelaide</p> <p>06:00 09:20</p> <p> QF1599 0 stops 2h 50m</p> <p>Flight QF1599 is operated by<br/>Qantaslink - National Jet Systems</p> <p> </p> <p>Adelaide Alice Springs</p> <p>10:35 11:45</p> <p> QF723 0 stops 2h 10m</p> <p> </p> <p>Total duration 6h 15m</p> | \$518      | \$638   | \$1,657  | No seats                  |                            |
| <p>Brisbane Melbourne</p> <p>05:00 08:25</p> <p> QF601 0 stops 2h 25m</p> <p> </p> <p>Melbourne Alice Springs</p> <p>09:30 10:55</p> <p> QF796 0 stops 2h 55m</p> <p> </p> <p>Total duration 6h 25m</p>  | No seats   | \$2,195 | \$2,660  | No seats                  |                            |

## CASE STUDY B.

Student attends boarding school in Alice Springs, 900km from home near Katherine, NT. Family will usually drive student 350km by road to Darwin, where student will fly from Darwin to Alice Springs (1500km by air). However, the Territory's regional airline is not running a flight the day before school starts, limiting the choice of service provision to Qantas. For travel from Darwin to Alice Springs (the day before school begins), Qantas fares start at \$485.

Due to the cost, parents have decided to send student by coach, meaning student leaves on Saturday, consequently having one less night at home and a night on the bus before school starts, leaving the student sleep deprived but on time for school, for the sake of finding a savings in fare cost.



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### CASE STUDY C.

STUDENT is in grade 7, but at age 11, has never travelled alone. Parents will accompany student to boarding school until student is older, more responsible and confident, which may take 2 years (when student is 13 years old). Student and family drive 400km to Alice Springs, and pay over \$400 per person to fly to Adelaide. Parents fly back to Alice Springs, and drive 400km home.

A trip such as this can cost one adult and one student \$2050 just to return student to boarding school, not considering return flight for the student (end of term), taxis or luxuries. This occurs 8 times per year; every time student comes home or goes back to boarding school.

### CASE STUDY D.

Average cost for family X to educate grade 8 student – boarding & travel

|                                |                        |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Boarding, tuition, fees        | \$30,900               |
| <b>Less #AIC (\$8,249)</b>     | <b>\$22,651</b>        |
| <b>Plus *travel (\$5,512)</b>  | <b>\$28,163</b>        |
| <b><u>COST TO FAMILY X</u></b> | <b><u>\$28,163</u></b> |

#Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme

\*Return airfares ex Alice Springs x 4



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