

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**"Access to Education"**



**Submission**

to the

**Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Inquiry**

into the

**Farm Household Support Amendment (Relief Measures) Bill (No. 1) 2019  
[Provisions]**

from the

**Federal Council**

of the

**Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc.**

**ICPA (Aust)**

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ICPA (Aust)**

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The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia, ICPA (Aust), welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Farm Household Support Amendment (Relief Measures) Bill (No. 1) 2019 [Provisions].

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.

As a stakeholder group focused on achieving equitable educational opportunities for rural and remote students, ICPA (Aust) supports any initiatives which may improve educational access and outcomes for these 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. Times such as the current drought being experienced by rural families across the country place immense pressure on families as their ability to earn an income is severely impacted. Besides struggling to pay for day to day expenses, these families also have difficulty in paying for educational costs associated with accessing schooling for their children. Droughts and rural hardship can last for many years, and can occur more than once in a lifetime.

With this in mind, ICPA (Aust) supports the proposed Farm Household Support Amendment (Relief Measures) Bill to expand and improve the Farm Household Allowance (FHA). These changes are a positive step forward and acknowledge the need to support rural and remote families as they deal with hardships. This is especially welcomed as many rural and remote families continue to battle the long-term drought at this time.

ICPA (Aust) would welcome further expansion of Farm Household Allowance, or the implementation of other measures, which would assist affected families with significant out-of-pocket educational expenses incurred due to where they live, which are even more challenging to cover in times of rural hardship. ICPA (Aust) is grateful for the Farm Household Allowance availability for those who are currently eligible and acknowledges that the FHA funds received may be used by families to help pay for educational costs. However, many rural families still do not qualify for FHA despite new eligibility changes. At this time, only farmers and their partners can receive the FHA. Families who live and work in rural areas but who are not farmers, do not qualify. This may include shop owners in the rural towns, truck drivers, contractors and other workers who may be affected by rural hardships however do not qualify for assistance, even though their income may be impacted as severely and their need for assistance as great as those who farm.

When raising the concern that additional assistance for rural students is required during drought and times of rural hardship, ICPA (Aust) has been told that the Farm Household Allowance can be used to help cover educational expenses. However, the FHA does not provide any loading for the number of children in a family. While it has now been clarified that families can use the FHA funds to pay for educational costs if they choose, a family with children does not receive an extra loading to account for this. A family who has one preschool aged child may receive the same rate as a family with four children who need to attend school.

ICPA (Aust) notes that a family receiving FHA qualifies automatically for the Additional Boarding Allowance (ABA) component of the AIC and appreciates this measure, but would like to raise that many of these families will already qualify for the ABA AIC due to low income, so it is not necessarily an additional education assistance for some of these families. 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. While the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) Allowance provides some assistance to meet the cost of boarding, parents are still out of pocket large amounts in order for their children to attend school away from home. In times of drought, when families' income can be severely impacted or even non-existent, trying to pay school fees and keeping their children in school is a huge concern for rural families.

The FHA is not currently specifically designed for educational purposes, so families may be faced with deciding whether to choose between putting food on the table and educating their children. ICPA (Aust) feels strongly that some form of assistance which directly encompasses assistance for education should be available. The out-of-pocket expenses associated with educating rural and remote children are extensive and any rural hardship assistance needs to include assistance for these students to ensure they have equitable and continuing access to educational opportunities.

ICPA (Aust) commends and supports the proposed the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Farm Household Support Amendment (Relief Measures) Bill (No. 1) 2019 [Provisions], particularly the adjustment of the FHA now being available to assist in 4 out of 10 years rather than over a person's lifetime. ICPA (Aust) understands this bill is the first piece of legislation to support implementation of the recommendations by the 2018 Review of the Farm Household Allowance *Rebuilding the FHA: a better way forward for supporting farmers in financial hardship*. To further support families, we would like the government to consider expanding the eligibility criteria to include non-farmers from rural areas affected by hardship. ICPA (Aust) also requests that the unique educational needs of the children of families affected by rural hardship be considered and assistance included to ensure these children have equitable access to educational opportunities.