



Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (Inc)
"Access to Education"

Submission

to the

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

on the

**Social Services Legislation Amendment (Family Payments
Structural Reform and Participation Measures) Bill 2015**

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 of Australia, ICPA (Aust), appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Family Payments Structural Reform and Participation Measures) Bill 2015. ICPA has concerns about the changes being proposed to the Family Tax Benefit payment that may negatively impact the families we represent who generally have higher educational costs than families living in urban centres.

ICPA represents families who live in rural and remote Australia. Our goal is to achieve equity of educational opportunity for all geographically isolated children and thus ensure they have access to a continuing and appropriate education determined by their aspirations rather than their location. ICPA seeks to have all elements of education, i.e. academic systems, cultural experiences, social contacts, participation in sport and enrichment activities, available to children regardless of the location of their home. Due consideration must be given to factors which affect the delivery of and access to education for these children, factors which do not necessarily need to be considered within the context of metropolitan education.

ICPA appreciates the government's assurance, to deliver on their commitment to support families by making child care simpler, more affordable, accessible and flexible. Our organisation supports the Commonwealth Government's declaration, signifying the future prosperity of working families depends on Australia responding to the changing demographics of our population and the economic challenges we all face. However, any changes must not impact on families who do not have access to mainstream child care and education services due to geographical isolation.

ICPA would like to raise two issues that are of concern to our families. The first relates to families educating their children by distance education and the second pertains to families who must board their children away from home at boarding school for their secondary education.

Both issues are advocated strongly by ICPA, with many families reliant on this allowance to assist with meeting the costs of educating children in the rural and remote regions of Australia.

Schooling via Distance Education

In 2015, 2400 geographically isolated children (mainly primary schooling) are being educated through distance education programs. A recent survey of our members indicated that 80% of mothers teach their children in the isolated classroom. This role takes them out of the workforce and often lasts many years.

ICPA acknowledges and appreciates the increase of \$10.08 per fortnight proposed for each FTB child in the family up to 19 years of age. However the increase should not be less than any supplements received through FTB B. Our organisation would also like to see the role of the distance education tutor recognised through an allowance. We encourage the Senate Committee to investigate the possibility of this allowance being paid through the FTB scheme.

More information relating to the Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) is attached (**Appendix 1**).

Secondary Boarding School

The cost of boarding children away for their secondary education, is rising at an alarming rate. Boarding is often the only choice available for families living in rural and remote areas to educate their children for secondary education and is coupled with ever increasing costs of boarding and tuition fees. Many families rely on both FTB A and B to assist with meeting the out of pocket costs of boarding.

In the event that payments to rural families are reduced, the committee must take into consideration the inequalities between rural, remote and urban students who contribute to the overall family income through casual, out-of-school hours' jobs, which assists with boosting their family's total income.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for students living in isolated areas and attending boarding school, to partake in part-time work and employment opportunities while at home in the school holidays; jobs (or work opportunities) are very limited due to the areas in which rural students live and public transport is non-existent.

Additional information relating our concerns about the rising cost of boarding school is attached (**Appendix 2**).

ICPA would be pleased to provide the Senate Committee with additional information, should it be required.

Appendix 1

Distance Education **Distance Education Teaching Allowance**

For many young people living in remote regions, their only access to education is to study by distance education. While distance education services are well structured and distance education centres ably staffed, it is clear that distance education provision is founded on the assumption that all children have ready access to a person able to teach the program in the geographically isolated classroom. This person is the distance education tutor who must be available and able to provide the practical, day-to-day supervision and support required for the effective delivery of a distance education program.

The distance education tutor is a person who frequently is the mother of the students, and must be present to commit between six and eight hours each day to the geographically isolated classroom to teach the distance education program, in addition to necessary preparation time. The role of distance education tutor requires dedication and is a commitment that frequently lasts many years. A distance education tutor must be capable and confident in delivering the distance education program, thus allowing rural and remote students to achieve educational parity with their urban peers who have face-to-face access to professionally trained teachers and support staff on a daily basis.

Tasks required of the distance education tutor include setting up a classroom, keeping students engaged in the curriculum, dealing with disciplinary issues, ensuring students link in via the internet or telephone for their formal instructions and a variety of extra-curricular activities, receiving and returning completed lessons to distance education centres, marking school work before it is returned, as well as dealing with family commitments and the everyday running of a business in a remote area. Distance education tutors spend similar time to a teacher in a mainstream school preparing daily lessons and teaching their students, with no remuneration or recognition for the work they do. The delivery of distance education is not possible without the commitment of distance education tutors who are accountable for the face-to-face delivery of educational support, supervision and educational evaluation of their students.

The roles women undertake in the operation of family agricultural businesses have changed and multiplied over the years. With the responsibility of the distance education tutor position often falling on the mother, fulfilling this position further compounds her workload. This can place increased pressure on other family members and may necessitate the employment of additional staff.

Due consideration must be given to the encumbrance on approximately 1500 families in geographically isolated areas for whom distance education is the only means to educate children. The vital role of the distance education tutor should be recognised through the payment of an allowance, which acknowledges the essential work they perform.

ICPA requests that the Federal Government introduce a Distance Education Teaching Allowance in financial recognition of the essential work distance education tutors perform.

This Distance Education Teaching Allowance (DETA) should be:

- for families who qualify for the Assistance for Isolated Children scheme – Distance Education Allowance
- paid per family (approx. 1,500 nationally)
- an annual payment of \$6,000.00, indexed to the CPI.

Appendix 2

Compulsory Education **Increase to the AIC Boarding Allowance**

Since 1973, successive Australian Governments have provided financial support through the Assistance for Isolated Children's (AIC) Boarding Allowance to families with children who do not have reasonable daily access to an appropriate government school. Much has changed since the AIC scheme was first introduced; the duration of compulsory education has increased and accessing regional term hostels has decreased due to continual closures. Changes are needed to ensure this allowance meets the needs of families in the twenty-first century.

For many children living in remote regions of Australia, accessing appropriate schooling requires relocating great distances to attend boarding school. In the pursuit of education, families must find accommodation and suitable pastoral care for their children. In most cases, there is little option other than accessing private boarding schools in large cities, as they are often the only schools that offer boarding facilities. Attending these boarding schools comes with the additional high tuition fee attached to the school. One cannot be had without the other- it is a package, and a double cost to rural families. Boarding school is a necessity for many rural families rather than a luxury. Our members are reporting out of pocket costs in the vicinity of \$30 000 per year, per child.

Rural and remote families are expressing a growing concern about the affordability of accessing and utilising boarding schools to educate their children during their compulsory years of school. Boarding school costs have increased significantly and the financial impact for these families is enormous. An increasing number of rural and remote families are separating, with the mother and children relocating. This is evidenced by the substantial increases in AIC second home allowance claims. This is a drastic measure by families to reduce educational expenses and negatively impacts the family unit, small communities and rural schools.

ICPA believes the misconception that farming families are able to draw down on a high asset base for the purpose of meeting education costs must be addressed. Businesses in rural and remote areas, particularly family farming ones, operate in an asset-rich but income-poor environment. The assets that form a vital part of the operation of these primary production businesses are generally not disposable, nor likely to be considered by a financier as acceptable to draw down on to fund the education needs of children. Employees in remote areas find it difficult to provide an education for their children as they too need to access boarding school where there are no local high schools. Rural families often have several children away attending boarding school at once, causing them to have multiple students to find means of paying for the gap in their education costs.

There is a growing disparity between the AIC allowance and the costs of students attending boarding school. The consistent increase in the gap between the AIC Boarding Allowance and the cost of boarding school fees is widening exponentially demonstrating it is no longer achieving the aim of assisting with affordable, equitable access to education for geographically isolated families. Rural and remote families are being asked to contribute significantly more towards the cost of their children's compulsory education.

It is in the National interest to ensure isolated children are not disadvantaged in terms of educational and social development and to ensure their educational outcomes are not compromised. These students need the opportunity to attend a school that is commensurate to their needs which allows them to achieve educational parity with their urban peers. It is imperative for rural and remote families to be able to provide an education for their children while continuing to reside and work in rural and remote regions.

ICPA requests the Federal Government to address the widening gap between the costs of attending boarding school and the current assistance available through the AIC Scheme.